

A photograph of a narrow, cobblestone street in a city, likely London, shrouded in a thick, grey fog. The street is flanked by tall, dark stone buildings. A street lamp stands in the middle of the road. In the background, more buildings are visible through the haze. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

“There is inimitable craftsmanship within these pages...
Nick Holdstock has bred a rare and beautiful bird with
The Casualties. We need more writers like him.”

—JASON MOTT, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Returned

A Novel

THE CASUALTIES

Nick Holdstock



ookie in middle

Sonics open their season tonight
Mohamed Sene as starting post...

STORY, C2

WEDNESDAY
NOVEMBER 1, 2006
THE SPICELSMAN RE...

things to come

of throwing in a horse win over Oregon for his good measure. As a result, WSU is already ineligible and is playing not to create a December destination but to improve it. Head coach Bill Doba said he would have gladly taken the team's current record on Oct. 1.

"Honestly, that I probably be (good)," he said. "Of course, you'd like to win them all."

"It's just been fun. I don't know how we do it, to be honest with you. We're a bunch of kids coming off the bus or off the plane and they don't look like they're going to be the opposing team. That's the

portant thing to come out of the month for WSU, confidence has to rank a solid second.

After getting contributions from both key players (Alex Brink has completed nearly 80 percent of his passes in the last two games) and role players (Jed Colli stepped into the starting right end role and made a big splash), the Cougars clearly believe that October was a harbinger of their season. Here are a few things to come.

"The snowball's starting to get bigger," Collins said. "It's cold and the snow is in the air. It's the right time for us to get the right things to come out of the month for WSU, confidence has to rank a solid second."

The Casualties

NICK HOLDSTOCK

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
St. Martin's Press  New York

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For all our outcry and struggle, we shall be for the next generation not the massive dung fallen from the dinosaur, but the little speck left of a humming-bird.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Prologue

AS WE APPROACH THE ANNIVERSARY, let us try to think back. Back through the bright lights, then through the darkness, to the start of this century.

At that time there was a small city called Edinburgh, which was the capital of what was then Scotland. It was a small city of half a million built between seven hills, one of which was an old volcano that was believed to be safe. Though its best days were past, the city was still thought of fondly.

However, the place of which I wish to speak played little part in either the city's past or present. It was an old cobblestoned street known as Comely Bank. Though no battles were fought there, and no kings were crowned, it was still an exceptional place.

The shops of Comely Bank sold food, clothes, books, music, alcohol, and medicine, plus many other things we would be familiar with (after all, it has been only sixty years). There were larger shops that were cheaper and had more products to choose from, but to reach them you had to drive to the edge of town. On the way the buildings shrank from high apartment buildings that contained hundreds of people to small, squat houses built of stone where only one family dwelt. After that the houses stopped and you were driving through an area of such desolation it seemed like a place and time before civilisation. There were no buildings or streetlights, just rocks and twisted trees. You wondered what would happen if your car broke down. You'd set off to find a house or shop, and at first you'd walk at a normal pace, maybe even whistle. But soon that blasted landscape would make you nervous and your heart would beat faster; you would walk more quickly, looking left and right, sometimes looking behind, telling yourself you were being stupid and there was nothing to fear. You'd laugh at your foolishness, and then a black shape would flicker at the edge of your vision and you would just *run*.

And so the residents of Comely Bank bought from the local shops. It was easier, and they enjoyed the predictability of the different shopkeepers: Mr. Asham was unfailingly civil; Mr. Campbell was a snide. Sam was patient, always helpful; Caitlin avoided your eyes.

They were also familiar with their fellow shoppers, whom they smiled at, or even spoke to, while standing in a queue. This was far from common practice. If you did this in the supermarket at the edge of the world, people looked startled or scared. It is true that some of Comely Bank's customers did not enjoy this kind of familiarity, and on the contrary, found being addressed by a stranger so rude and invasive it was like the glint of a knife. But these were sour, unpleasant people; most enjoyed the meetings. They produced a sense of community absent elsewhere in the city. People recognised each other; they knew each other's names, where they lived, what they did for a living, if they were married, if they had children. This alone made Comely Bank an unusual place. However, what made it truly remarkable was not how its residents interacted. Whilst most of its people were wholly of the

time—in that they did not believe in God, had small families, took holidays to faraway places, enjoyed electrical consumer goods, believed in things like equality, democracy, and the worth of the individual—there were a few who stood out. This was partly due to the way they looked (their size, their face, the way they walked), but mostly because their ideas went against the grain. They worshipped God, wished for death, or were chaste. They refused to own property.

Yet for all their eccentricities, they had a place in Comely Bank. Most people saw them as quaint characters who added colour to daily life. They were the human equivalents of the commemorative plaques on the walls, the statues of great leaders, the dried-up wells into which people dropped coins in exchange for luck. They were relics of a long-past age that were worth preserving.

There have been many changes over the last sixty years. Our cities are cleaner; we commit less crime; we manage our desires. If there are no statues or plaques on our streets, it is because we prefer to look forward.

So if I speak of these characters fondly, it is not because I am nostalgic for that era. Quite the opposite. I just think we should remember the old world as it actually was. Not only the average, but also the exception.

Part I

1. A Curious Man

SAM (SHORT FOR “SAMUEL”) CLARK, born 1988, was the only child of William and Rebecca Clark. Like most murderers, he was unexceptional. There were richer men, more intelligent men, men with more appealing faces, men who could tell a joke or funny story better (the same was true for women). He definitely was not one of Comely Bank’s relics; no one thought him a “character.” But to get to know the more interesting residents of Comely Bank, we must begin with him.

In 2016 Sam was twenty-eight and single. He worked in a secondhand bookshop whose profits went to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This charity was founded in 1889, sixty years after the founding of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is not just the order in which these charities were founded that is revealing. That both needed to exist had led some to suggest that hurting defenceless creatures was a part of British culture.

There was certainly no shortage of people who wanted to support Sam’s charity by working in the shop for free. Without wishing to diminish the kindness and generosity of these volunteers, it must be said that most of them were deeply troubled. They were alcoholics, misfits, former criminals, or just very lonely, boring people who lived through their pets.

When these people told Sam their problems he listened closely and did not interrupt. He was flattered to be trusted with their secrets; it made him feel as if they shared a special bond. But he was mistaken. Their pain was so deep and abiding they would have told anyone.

It was from them that he learned about the jealousy, sadness, betrayal and longing that seethed beneath the visible life of the street. When Sam looked at the queue in the post office he did not just see strangers waiting. He saw a pulsing pink line of affection that jumped from the head of “Spooky” standing at the back; it leapfrogged the heads in front to reach the head of Indira, who never once turned round or gave any intimation that she felt herself being adored.

Sam’s volunteers were not his only source of information about the residents of Comely Bank. Every day people brought him bags and boxes of books they no longer wanted. From these he could deduce the person’s job, where they had been on holiday, their political views, what kind of food they liked, what their hobbies were, if they knew languages besides English (which was more the exception than the rule, English being a lingua franca at that time), if they had been learning to draw and paint, if they had physical or psychological problems, if they were interested in war, if they believed in God or gods or spiritual forces that lacked names and personalities but were still all-powerful.

Even the condition of the books was revealing. Their owners always left a trace of themselves on the pages. It is hard for most people today to understand how books could be so personal. What difference did it make that the texts of the past were written on pages? When people then read the works of Tagore or Lu Xun, their eyes were consuming the same words as those we see on our screens.

As for the books themselves, they were mass produced, identical.

This changed as soon as a person began reading. Then they folded page corners over, opened the book so wide its front and back covers touched, turned pages with food-smearred hands, underlined passages, scribbled comments in margins, wrote thoughts or a phone number on its blank pages, forced it into a coat pocket, tore strips from a page to write on, rested a cup or mug on its cover, left it lying in direct sunlight, spilt water on it, took it into the bath, sat or slept on it, highlighted significant passages with fluorescent pens, drew smiling faces next to parts they liked, drew frowning ones next to parts they hated, tore out pages they thought offensive, tore out pages they thought brilliant, sprayed perfume or cologne on its pages, substituted their name for one of the characters, unstitched the binding then reordered the pages, crossed out every word containing the letter *T*, crossed out every female name and wrote *the bitch* in their place.

Of course, a maltreated book was not proof of its owner's bad qualities. It was merely suggestive. Someone who bent a book's cover and pages till it was folded double might not have been a callous, thoughtless person. They could still have believed that every book contained the potential to inspire wonder, joy, sparks of enlightenment.

But Sam's favourite aspect of the books was the ephemera they contained. He found airline tickets, bank statements, receipts, birthday cards—best of all, a postcard, photo, or letter. Sam put these in a battered tin chest the size of a bathtub that had belonged to his grandfather, who had spent thirty-five years in the merchant navy and appeared at Sam's house only once a year, usually without warning. Dinner would be a slow and gruelling event during which his parents struggled to pass the baton of conversation, usually by speaking of what had happened since his grandfather's last visit. Unfortunately this was an event in which the old man refused to compete. He sat quietly, listening with a slight smile, speaking only when directly addressed. His only burst of loquaciousness was telling Sam a bedtime story, or rather stories, because they jumped between places and people. They were tales of boats, typhoons, and beautiful women who could throw knives. Fortunes were found, friends betrayed; men were tied to masts. His grandfather often got characters' names confused, and used two different ones for the same person, but Sam didn't mind. It was part of the telling. Sometimes the stories were just memories of people his grandfather had known—those he had sailed with or met in a port—and these often had no end. These were the stories young Sam had liked best, the ones he could finish himself.

He had been almost eleven when his father came into his room early one morning. His father did not turn on the light, so Sam could barely see his face when he said, "I have some sad news." His father didn't sound sad. The funeral was well attended, mostly by old men with beards who ignored Sam and his parents. In the will Sam's grandfather left him two hundred pounds and the trunk.

In March 2016, the chest was almost full. By then Sam had been working in the shop for eight years, opening ten to fifteen bags a day, dealing with more than a thousand books a week. He didn't keep most of what he found, but it had still accumulated. The top layer was composed of the most recent additions, plus a few letters and diaries he often reread, hoping to find a phrase he had overlooked, some name or event that had meant nothing before, the way that every piece put into a jigsaw makes another possible. Amongst these favourites were sixteen letters from "George" to "Iris

all ending with the phrase *Forgive me*; a Christmas list scrawled in green crayon, with *NO* written below each item in an adult hand; and a black leather-bound notebook in which someone had recorded everything they bought, where they had bought it, and its price, between June 2008 and August 2009. The notebook was titled *Book 29* and smelt strongly of smoke.

As for the rest of the chest's contents—perhaps five thousand items—they were mostly forgotten. Sam was more interested in finding out new things. During the rare moments when he was not in the shop, he wandered the streets of Comely Bank, glancing in windows, loitering in shops, sitting on benches, observing people and listening to conversations in which he took no part. He was like a ghost that everyone could see. If you had asked him why he did this, he would have shrugged, smiled, and said something about being interested in people. A few thought him a little strange. Nobody, including him, thought he could do harm.

2. Lost

COMELY BANK HAD AN OLD stone bridge that crossed the Water of Leith. Whenever Sam went over it he always paused to look down, partly to see the swift, brown river, but also in hopes of catching a glimpse of the man who lived beneath. Alasdair was first seen in Comely Bank at the start of spring 2015, and after a few nights of sleeping in the park he installed himself under the bridge. Though it was dark, cold, wet, and uncomfortable, Alasdair thought it an excellent place. He put great stock in the powers of water. The best kind was fast and north flowing, because this made the air magnetic. Magnetic air was good for the blood, because it made the iron in the blood more active, and what was good for the blood was good for the brain, because it used blood, and so the water was good for memory and thinking, and also for vision, because the eyes were part of the brain. On fine days Alasdair liked to stand on the pavement above while looking upstream. He took slow, deep breaths and thought of how his brain was getting stronger. Soon he would be able to remember his second name, where he was from, and what he had done for the first forty years of his life.

The other reason Alasdair liked the spot was that many people went by. Each of these was interesting and contained a lesson. He could immediately tell why someone's complexion was poor, why they wore glasses, why they looked depressed. He was constantly surprised that people did not want to hear that their spots were caused by fear, that their poor eyesight stemmed from eating cheese, that they masturbated too much. This was vital information; it was about their *health*.

But although many found Alasdair's opinions unpleasant, often embarrassing, they didn't walk away. It was rude to ignore someone, however crazy they sounded. As the passersby reluctantly paused to listen, they faced the dilemma of where to rest their eyes. Not because Alasdair was ugly or disfigured: If viewed in isolation his features were those of a handsome man. The problem was that they seemed disarranged. His ears were too far back. Though his brown eyes were appealing, they were so misaligned that he squinted. As for the long and shapely nose, it seemed entirely supported by the upper lip. Only the mouth, with its crown of dark bristles, looked properly placed. This was where people glared when Alasdair told them how to be happier, taller, grow back some of their hair.

It was usually at this point, when the person was scowling, that Alasdair asked to come home with them. Though living under the bridge had many advantages, it was hard to cook or take a bath, activities that were both important for a person's health.

But the only person who let him stay was old Mrs. Maclean. That night Alasdair slept well, except for the fact he woke up crying. The next morning, before he left, Mrs. Maclean offered him a large cut-crystal bowl on which was inscribed: *To Eileen, in gratitude for forty years of service*. When he hesitated, she said, "Go on, take it," in so desperate a tone he fled from her house. This was the problem with owning too many things: It drove people mad. The only items he owned were his

bicycle, a penknife, a cigarette lighter, and a copper bracelet he wore for the good of his teeth.

He'd have taken the bowl if Mrs. Maclean had been less insistent. Not because he wanted it for himself, but so he could sell it. For Alasdair was something of an entrepreneur. His bicycle was always laden with things he found on the street. In addition to bags of books, clothes, ornaments, and plates, there would be a ripped lampshade, broken toys, electrical cables coiled round the frame like loving boa constrictors. His hunting grounds were the streets around Comely Bank, with the exception of a broad, tree-lined road at the edge of the park. The houses there were imposingly large and eerily deserted. There was too deep a hush, a sense of something awry. Even going near there made him so anxious he had to put his feet in the river and slowly count down from one hundred.

He sold the items he found in a small market that took place on weekends in the church car park. People brought their unwanted books, clothes, and household items and sold them for less than their usual cost. Alasdair saw most of the traders every week, but he had little contact with them. Although they were pleasant people, they made him sad. They came to get rid of their things, and usually succeeded—but then, often late in the day, some sort of panic began. They asked a friend, or their spouse, or a partner, to keep an eye on their stall so they could look round. Few came back empty-handed. They were excited, thrilled with discovery; they had finally solved the momentous question of what to put on the chest of drawers.

This was the problem with having a home: It asked to be filled. Each room had to be decorated, furnished, stocked with its proper objects. People spent all their time working to earn money to make their houses perfect. They thought that every lamp, rug, and cushion was a step towards peace. If they'd been told that it would be far better for them to sell their house and everything in it, and then to leave the country, they would just have laughed.

Even Alasdair was not immune to the lure of ownership. Although he sold most of the things he found, there were some he wanted to keep. One morning he found a set of place mats that had been spattered with paint. On each were sailing ships that looked so full of speed and grace they threatened to glide off the mat. He stared at their masts, rigging, and sails while a light breeze rustled his bag. His nose filled with a stinging sensation. He thought of the sea.

He spent the afternoon scratching the paint off the mats. First from a clipper, then a schooner, then a galleon. He was halfway through a barque when the knife cut into his hand. The wound was not deep and the river numbed it, but the interruption was enough. The mats were no good without a table, and once he had that he would need plates, cutlery, glasses, napkins, a tablecloth, chairs, a vase for beautiful flowers.

He broke the mats with a rock.

But he had more trouble getting rid of the photograph album he found in a stack of newspapers early March 2016. The album was covered in shiny, scaled skin; its pages were made of thick card. The photos showed three generations of a family and were labelled with place names and dates. The earliest was titled *Portobello, 1925*.



The final picture was labelled *Aberfeldy, 1938*.



There were perhaps thirty pages in the album, each with two photos. Although the pictures were from long ago, little seemed to have changed. People had houses, and these houses had things, and that made people unhappy.



He saw the same crowds of people, desperate to buy more.



But although these pictures seemed to confirm his worst fears—that the sickness of the present had its roots much further in the past—he could not stop looking. This was the danger of pictures: they contained so much. The more one looked, the less one knew. They raised too many questions. For example: What was the relationship between these women? Were they neighbours, friends, or sisters? Which of the men behind the women (if any) were married to them? Was it fashion or coincidence that made the women carry their coats on their left arms? Were there really, as the sign claimed, *Dances Every Evening*? However much one studies the image, there can be no answers. In its absence we supply it ourselves. We mistake a casual glance for devotion, think silence proof of a feud. As for Alasdair, when he looked at three of the pictures, he saw grounds for hope:



Whether dancing or posing by the edge of the field, these women were happy together. Their smiles stemmed from a love that did not depend on what they gave to each other, what they owned, what they hoped to acquire.

But although the album was important, Alasdair did not want to keep it. If he did, if it was *his*, then it would need a shelf. The shelf would need a wall, and thus a room, and then there would be carpets

chairs, pictures, curtains, a table, a rug. He would have a house, a home. It would be his tomb.

He knew he should destroy the album. Instead he placed it with the other things for sale. So long someone bought it, the end result would be the same. That Saturday he sold a record player, a walking stick, a lion made of china. Then Mr. Campbell, who owned an antique shop on the street, asked to look at the album. His version of what happened appeared in the local newspaper several days later.

MARCH 25, 2016

As both a long-time resident of Comely Bank and the proprietor of a successful business, I am extremely concerned about the rise in street crime.

After listing various minor acts of vandalism—broken glass outside his shop, damage to his car—he implied that this was connected to the homeless.

What no one seems willing to admit is that most of these unfortunate creatures need psychiatric care. Most are confused and angry, many prone to violence. Only yesterday I was threatened by a man selling things at the car-boot sale. Although they were of no great value, I was concerned that they might have been stolen. One of the items, a photograph album, clearly did not belong to him. Rather than confront him about his theft, I decided to purchase it then try to locate its rightful owner. Before I gave him the money I took a moment to check through it.

This was when Alasdair saw the greed on Mr. Campbell's face. There was something obscene about the way he moistened his lips as he turned the pages.

I was shocked when he snatched the album from me then said it was not for sale. When I tried to reason with him, he began making offensive remarks. He berated me for wearing glasses and said I had eye cancer.

During the following weeks Alasdair was frequently seen staring at the album, even under a streetlamp at night. The pictures made him content. For he must have had a mother and father, who must themselves have had parents. The fact that he couldn't remember their names or faces didn't change that they too had worked, gotten married, raised children, gaily danced in their garden.

From then on, when he stood on the bridge, the water flowing fast beneath him, the iron pulsing through his blood, he no longer called out people's diagnoses. Instead of telling them to eat more carrots or wash their faces with urine, he held out the album and said, "This is my family."

People who had previously ignored him now began to stop. They wanted to see where he had come from, whether what was wrong with him had started early on. When they realised the pictures were too old to be of his immediate family, most were not disappointed. They inspected the album as avidly as they did shop windows. They liked to see the past: It was proof of progress.

Alasdair no longer questioned having the album. It wasn't something he *owned*. He was just looking after it.

He took care of it for two months. Then, on a warm night in May 2016, four men came under the bridge. All of them wore black masks. They did not speak when they pushed him to the ground, nor while they kicked him. They offered no explanation. It was as if he didn't deserve to know why.

Consciousness, when it returned, was like being slammed into the ground. First came an instant numbness, then the impact of pain. He lay and listened to the river. He could open only one eye.

Light was bleeding into the dark by the time he could move. When he sat up he saw the wreck of his bicycle. The frame was buckled, the cables ripped; both its wheels were bent.

This was inconvenient, but it did not upset him. Unlike Sam, he didn't care about the history of things. A book's job was to give you knowledge. A knife was something you cut with. Objects were only a set of functions that could be replaced. If his bicycle could not be fixed, he would find another.

But the album was different. It was unique. It was a piece that had broken off the giant blank of his past.

And it was not on the path.

Not in the long grass.

Not further downstream.

Not in the rubbish bins on the street.

Not at the police station.

Not at the library.

Not in the paper recycling centre.

Not on the shelf of books in the pub.

Not in the rubbish bins by the park.

Still not at the police station.

Still not at the library.

Still taken from him.

3. The Lump

FOR A SMALL CITY, EDINBURGH was extremely cosmopolitan. There were people from every country and every ethnic group, either as residents or tourists. Edinburgh's citizens did not usually stare at someone merely because they looked different. Something exceptional was required, such as the old man with an elderly dog he carried in a harness strapped to his back. The dog's paws rested on the man's shoulders; its snout nuzzled his neck. The sight of them inspired delight. People liked petting the dog.

Another person who reliably attracted attention was the woman who always wore a bridal veil. For herself this was not strange; back then there were plenty of women who covered their faces for religious reasons. What made people stare was what they saw beneath the veil. The woman's face was thickly covered with white paint. Whatever this concealed—some terrible skin condition or scars—was not the reason she wore the veil. The cause was a lump on her left cheek the size of a human eyeball. The lump was also painted white, perhaps in the hope of disguise. Unfortunately this had no effect: the bulge was obvious.

Though there were many different theories about the woman—she had been bereaved or jilted or was performance art—no one knew for sure. Alasdair thought she needed to drink more water, but he never got a chance to tell her this, because she was rarely seen in Comely Bank. If she had spent more time there, someone would have learned who she was and why she kept the lump on her face when it could surely have been removed. As it was, she remained as elusive as a beast in a fable whose only function is to frighten a princess.

In this case, the princess was a young woman called Caitlin who worked in a charity clothes shop next to Sam's bookshop. Caitlin also hid her face, though not behind a veil. Hers was hidden under makeup applied so thickly it was like a mask. She did this because the skin on her face was constantly flaking; occasionally it sloughed off in sheets. She could wash only in tepid water. She dried her face by dabbing it with an especially soft towel. After this she applied thick ointment from a tub whose label warned that it should not be used for more than three months.

By spring 2016 she had been using the ointment for six years. Every morning her face drank it, but by evening it was thirsty again. Although the cream made her skin feel like wet paper, she couldn't stop using it. She had only done so once before, after losing the container while on holiday in which was then Spain. Within two days her cheeks had developed cracks no makeup could hide. She spent the next four days in her hotel room reading, then rereading *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. By the end of her third reading, Caitlin had no sympathy left for Tess. At least she was pretty.

Caitlin's skin was not her only source of unhappiness. Her job was low status and poorly paid, with no chance of promotion. Her main task was sorting through bags of dirty, unwanted clothes. The trouser crotches were spotted with urine, the shirt collars speckled with blood. Every time she

received a donation, she wondered who had died.

Her private life was no better. She had no boyfriend and never went on dates, but at least she was not a virgin. Her first sexual experience had been at university four years earlier. She had been at a party she hadn't wanted to go to because she saw no point. Most boys paid her no attention. She stood on her own and drank too fast, and there would be a boy she'd like, a boy who was handsome, friendly, funny, and nice, but even if they somehow got talking—at the kitchen sink, in the queue for the toilet—his eyes would soon skip from hers.

But she was no different from pretty, stupid Tess. She believed there had to be angels amongst the devils. And so when a girl from her tutorial group said she was having a party and Caitlin *had* to come, she could not resist. "I'd love to," she said, and two evenings later she was drinking cider in a hallway. The only person she knew was Emma, who'd squealed her name when she arrived and then forgot her quickly. Emma was too busy laughing and drinking with athletic boys who kept touching her arms. This was only to be expected. Good-looking people were like a fire at night. Caitlin wanted to stand on the edge of Emma's group, because if she was quiet and avoided eye contact, she might borrow their warmth. But she did not dare. She would laugh too loudly or, even worse, speak, and then they would fall silent. Their heads would turn; they'd coldly stare; she would be cast out.

Caitlin hated them for being shallow and stupid, but it wasn't entirely their fault. They had been taught to confuse beauty with virtue, as of course had she. For the rest of the evening she stood with groups of average-looking people, listening, sometimes risking a laugh, and nobody stared or looked disgusted, either because the lighting was dim or because they were too drunk to notice. One boy had terrible hair and crooked teeth and was certainly a virgin. His eyes followed the other girls. He didn't look at her.

By midnight he was drunk. By one o'clock, they were alone. Caitlin went up to him, and without speaking, kissed him on the mouth. This was a moment she often recalled. His half step back. His look of confusion. As his eyes focussed, his mouth got small. He was angry that someone so hideous had kissed him. He was going to push her away, spit in her face, hit her with a bottle.

Instead he kissed her back passionately, as if it was something he had been wanting for hours. Caitlin pulled him into a dark bedroom and there, atop a pile of coats, he pushed against her, and she pushed back, and in her mind this moment had always had more dialogue: the boy saying how much he liked her, she saying it was her first time.

They took off their trousers then pulled down their underwear. Soon he was moving and groaning and it was fine but she could not relax. If someone turned on the light, he would see her face.

But no one did, and soon, he finished. He put his arm round her. As they lay in the dark, she felt the slow rise of hope. They had done it. He seemed pleased. Perhaps this could continue.

The next day they went to the cinema and watched a film about a man who could hear women's thoughts. The lights in the auditorium seemed too bright. At no point did the boy take Caitlin's hand or even lean against her. Instead he stared at the giant women onscreen who were all without blemish. Afterwards he kissed her cheek and said, "I'll call you." They never spoke again. She only saw him once more. Six months later she glimpsed him sitting in a café next to a Japanese girl who was so petite she seemed like a doll. Then the girl threw back her head and laughed so hard she appeared

possessed. Perhaps the boy had told the story of how he'd been raped by a monster.

Caitlin didn't go to parties during her final year. When people asked her to the cinema, she said she had to study. As the final exams approached, she started noticing how her classmates had changed. Beautiful girls were now beautiful women; even the plainest, dullest girls had an air of maturity, confidence that they would find jobs and boyfriends or girlfriends that were perfect for them.

After graduation, she worked in a restaurant, then a bar. She got a job teaching French at an all-girls school. Though the girls were studious and called her Miss Matthews, she quit after a year. She hated their eyes on her face.

In July 2015 Caitlin began working in the charity shop. She was twenty-four. Soon after this her grandmother died and left her thirty thousand pounds. Though they had not been close—Caitlin had dismissed her grandmother as a racist when she was eighteen—the money made her feel bad for not trying harder. She used her inheritance to put a deposit on a small flat that was in poor condition. It would take a lot of time and effort, but it could be fixed.

For nine months she sanded, scrubbed, and painted. When she finished, in March 2016, everything was cleanly painted; the wooden floors were smooth. She was pleased, but it was only a start. She would read more, eat better food, take regular exercise. Having terrible skin was no excuse for having a terrible life.

She also changed the way she worked. If the person who donated clothes was badly dressed, she threw the bag away. This meant that on days when she had a volunteer, she could sit and read in the back room for hours while Dee (Mondays and Thursdays), Janet (Wednesdays), or Karen (Friday) watched the till. She finished the novels of Jane Austen, then those of the Brontë sisters. The prettiest girls in these books got married; the rest bore their lot with grace.

She bought her books from Sam's shop. Every time she went in he asked about the one she'd just finished. What did she think of Mr. Bennet? Had she enjoyed the scene at the ball? He listened to her answers with interest, but offered few of his own. He did not seem cool or aloof—just very contained. When he looked at her face he never seemed horrified.

When did she fall in love with him? Perhaps it began then, but only partially, because there was something asexual about him. When Sam spoke to other girls, even beautiful girls, she never saw him flirt. She was also distracted by a man known as Charming Robert. In addition to being charming, Robert was clever, funny, handsome, and the boyfriend of one of her volunteers. He usually came to pick up Karen on Fridays, so naturally he and Caitlin talked, but never for long. She could not imagine being in bed with him, his flawless face near hers. It was too incredible to even be a fantasy.

But on a warm afternoon in late April 2016 Charming Robert strolled into the back room and said hello although it wasn't Friday. She said, "You've got the wrong day."

He laughed. "That depends." He brought his hand to her face. His lips to her mouth. It was like being kissed by someone famous whom everyone wanted to kiss. But even as he locked the door, she knew he was not to be trusted. Three of his ex-girlfriends had attempted suicide. Karen believed that wasn't his fault, just a case of lightning striking three times in the same place. Caitlin did not blame her for being so deluded. She would have believed anything in order to stay with him.

And they were not going to have sex; that would be stretching what was already impossible. But he

hands were between her legs. He was pulling her trousers down.

He'd hurt her, or it was a trick, or Karen would walk in.

Charming Robert turned her round; then everything seemed to pause. He was no longer touching her. He did not seem to be there. Either he had regained his sanity, or he was stopped by disgust.

Then he was pushing hard into her without touching her anywhere else. This went on for several minutes, during which he made no sound. It was as if he had gone but left his penis to finish, and his body, for the first time in years, was not a lump of flesh. It permitted, it *enjoyed*. The sex was like falling—no, like *running*, the almost frantic heat that stopped her sounds from being words.

Caitlin came, then he pulled out of her. He made a sound of such relief it was at least part laugh.

When she turned and tried to kiss him, he was pulling up his trousers. "Sorry," he said, then kissed her cheek. "I've got to meet Karen."

Afterwards she sat on the floor and waited to wake up. The sex had felt so intense, it still seemed to be happening. And so what if it was just this once? Such are miracles. The rhythms of daily life make us forget that anything can happen. The world could end tomorrow. Skin that had been sick for years could heal in a night.

Caitlin needed to tell someone else so she could believe it. But it was hard to keep a secret at Comely Bank. There was so much gossip, so many eyes and ears. Even if you told only one person that person could easily get drunk and tell someone else. And so Caitlin went home and did not show her face and had incredible dreams. When Karen came into the shop next day, all she said was "Freak," and then broke Caitlin's jaw.

Obviously Robert had told her. While the doctor was cutting her face, inserting wires and pins, Caitlin had the distraction of wondering *why*. Had he done so from guilt or simply out of malice? Had Karen suspected it, then forced the truth from him?

For a week Caitlin lay in a haze of painkillers, remembering Robert's lips, the rage in Karen's face. She deserved this. She was worthless. Tears burnt her cheeks.

Perhaps she too would have drunk bleach, cut her wrists, placed a rope round her neck. But on the eighth day there was a knock at the door. She did not want to see anyone (or more accurately, did not want to be seen *by* anyone), so she did not get up to answer.

She lay very still, as if the person might hear her moving. There was a second knock. Then the letterbox flapped, and she heard something thump onto the mat. When she went to look she found a thick brown parcel that had barely fit through the slot. There was no postmark, only her name. The letters were careful, properly formed, not a scrawl of lust or revenge. She almost opened it with her finger. She stopped. She took it to the kitchen and slit it open with a knife. There was no cloud of poisonous gas. No snake or broken glass. Just a copy of *Middlemarch* with a note from Sam. *Get well*, it said.

* * *

BY MAY 2016 Caitlin was back on solids. She felt beaten and humiliated, but she would carry on. She went back to work. She got another volunteer to replace Karen. She started planning a holiday. There were two, three weeks when she felt she'd gotten back to where she'd been before. Then the first crack

appeared. It was a long thin cut to the left of her nose that was painfully deep. She did not know what had caused it. She had not been exposed to a cold wind or sat in a place that was too hot; all she had done was sit in bed and read *Netochka Nezvanova*.

That evening she settled on the sofa with a pile of clothes she had been meaning to mend. Some of the tears were probably too wide, but it didn't hurt to try. Slowly, patiently, she stitched till it was time for bed. She read for a while then turned out the light, hoping that, in the peace of sleep, healing might take place.

The next morning, the mirror showed a second crack on the other side of her nose. She gently smothered it in ointment. She tried not to worry.

After a week without improvement, she went to see her dermatologist. His practice was on the other side of the city, up the hill, then down grey streets where everyone looked sick. To get there she had to take a bus that left from near the bridge. She walked along the main street—past the bookshop where Sam was not working, past Mr. Asham's, then the French delicatessen—until she reached the river. There she saw Alasdair leaning against a wall. His face was one great purple bruise; an eye was swollen shut. He was muttering about killers and thieves, but she did not feel sorry for him. He often yelled that her bad skin was caused by perverse thoughts.

She boarded the bus that parted the traffic like a whale amongst fish. She read her book. The bus ascended. At the crest of the hill, it stopped. She raised her head and saw a veiled girl standing at the traffic light. Although many pedestrians were crossing, she stood motionless, head slightly raised, as if, just like the cars, she was waiting for a signal. She was wearing a pretty lace dress that Caitlin soon realised was not a dress but many petticoats. They were a beautiful cream colour, probably silk, and looked very old.

The traffic lights changed; the bus moved forwards. The veiled girl, as if suddenly waking, stepped towards the kerb. Either she did not see the bus—which now blocked the crossing—or thought it presented no obstacle, because she continued towards it. Caitlin was glad to see her approaching. She wanted to see the lace up close; the veil looked antique.

As the girl came closer Caitlin saw the white glow of her face. It was like glimpsing a full, bright moon through the fabric of a tent. She felt a pulse of sympathy; the poor girl must also have terrible skin.

The veiled girl came to the edge of the pavement, but did not stop there. She stepped off the kerb and then her face was an arm's length from Caitlin's. She could see her fellow passengers nudging each other, saying *What is that?*

Caitlin turned away. She stared out the windows on the other side of the bus. The girl would step either left or right, then go around the bus.

When she looked back the girl was standing so close the window seemed not to be there. Slowly she lifted her veil. Even Caitlin was appalled by the lump. It was more than disgusting; it was malevolent. For a few seconds she found this comforting. Someone looked worse than her. This gave way to a burning in her stomach, a tightness in her throat. It must be how she made others feel.

The lump was pressed against the glass; still the bus did not move. There was a brief flurry of phones, some satisfied clicks.

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