

FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

A Novel

Susan Heyboer O'keefe



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*For Steven Chudney,
for joining me in a leap of faith*

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PROLOGUE

*Near the Arctic Pole
October 13, 1828*

Captain Robert Walton. Private log.

Behind me, stiffened with frost, lie the remains of Victor Frankenstein.

It is so cold I expect ice and not ink from my pen. Hoar encrusts the inside of the porthole, icicles drop from the hinge, and over this page my breath hangs like a cloud. Should I turn, I might find even the corpse in my bed to be dusted wholly white.

I must write quickly, for my log may be all that survives me—but—O Margaret! How can I describe what has happened without appearing to be mad?

I said I would keep a true record for you of all events occurring during our separation. You imposed on me exile; I would have turned that exile into an occasion of grace. If I had succeeded in discovering the North Pole, I would have enlarged man's knowledge of our Lord's sovereign majesty—and you would have welcomed me home; for could I have been thus favored as God's servant unless He also deemed me worthy of forgiveness?

The answer is no. Now I have been exiled by God as well.

My hand trembles with more than cold, and these words, which only you have the power to comprehend, condemn me with their wavering letters and great blots of ink.

Some weeks ago, I rescued a man from the ice. Though half-dead, he should not have been alive at all. Resolve had fed him the scalding food of obsession, giving him a fiery strength to survive.

He said his name was Victor Frankenstein.

He said he had discovered the secret of creation.

Ever since I rescued that poor man, he told me over and over a story both fantastic and profane about a huge creature made by his own hands, which then rose up against him and destroyed all he loved. Realizing his folly, Frankenstein pursued the thing till he had tracked it to these desolate regions.

His words were those of a man driven mad by the elements, for, in truth, who could undertake what he had claimed, much less imagine an act of such presumption? Yet, despite his madness, there was between us a wild affinity that pulled at me as the North pulls at the needle and that made me listen day after day as he unfolded his tale. I finally understood that he was clearly my friend denied me all my life. You know how I have suffered in this regard, Margaret; how I have believed myself fated to solitude, alone but for you. Yet even knowing my anguish, you can only guess at my admiration for him and my hunger for his fellowship and love.

Already I envisioned the pleasure of your meeting, already grew jealous of your too-generous affection for each other.

But the evil that has isolated me still grips me in its jaws: my rescue came too late for Frankenstein to regain his health. The clear weather failed, and so did he. He died yesterday before

dawn as the icy wind keened in mourning. I do believe the sweetest part of me died with him.

It was strange to have found my twin in one whose desires were so blasphemous as to turn the natural into the unnatural. And then he died ... I became afraid to look in the mirror. Whose face would I see reflected? If I pulled back the blanket from the corpse, whose face would be there?

I have not truly repented.

Oh, Margaret, dare I put such thoughts onto this page you may yet read?

Frankenstein's last thoughts pursued his delusion to the end.

"Must I die," he asked, "and my persecutor live? Tell me, Captain Walton, that he shall not in the end escape."

I could not refuse comfort to one so disconsolate, and I said, thinking my words meaningless, "I will not."

"You shall take up my burden? O swear it! Swear you shall take it up—for the sake of all men for the sake of your dear sister, swear to me you shall hunt down the creature and destroy it."

"I give you my word."

He pressed my hand, then once more I was alone.

I lost all count of time standing watch over him, until at last the crew grew fearful at my grief and sent two men to bring me above deck.

Death followed me, matching my pace, tread for tread.

Later, a noise drew me back to the cabin. Hanging over the corpse stood a manlike form, gigantic in stature, distorted in proportions. Its face was concealed by long locks of ragged black hair, and one vast palm was extended toward the body. When the creature heard me, it turned, and I saw its face. Never have I seen a vision of such appalling hideousness. Involuntarily I flinched and shut my eyes. Then, all at once, I remembered, dear Sister. All at once, I believed.

Frankenstein, my dearest friend, had not lied. There truly lived a creature that had been created by man.

"I am a wretch," it said.

Its voice was soft, lovely, and beguiling, which made it all the more horrible to hear such evil words uttered by its black, scarred lips.

"I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I have strangled the innocent as they slept; I have grasped to death his throat who never injured me." He turned back to his creator. "He, too, is my victim. I both pursued him and enticed him to follow until he fell into irremediable ruin. Now there he lies, white and cold and unmoving."

"And finally free from your power to torment him!" I cried out.

"Am I free from his? Like any man, I desire fellowship and love. He has cursed me to a lifetime of hatred."

"Like any man?" I repeated. "Do you mock me? Do you mock him?"

It tried to straighten but the small quarters prevented it from doing so.

"Is it mockery? There is no place, no one, for me—here, or anywhere—as he surely must have known. Now he is dead who called me into being."

Its expression grew decisive.

“I, too, shall be no more, for where else can I rest but in the death I was born from? Mayhap my spirit will find the peace that my body never had.”

Having said this, it rushed past me and up to the deck, leapt from the ship, and landed on an ice raft that lay close to my vessel. It was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance.

Can a man change so quickly, Margaret? We are promised that, by grace, salvation can come in an instant; I already knew condemnation could be as swift. Suddenly there was something at work in my soul that I did not understand.

What did the creature’s existence mean? What did it mean to me? I had pledged my word to destroy what I thought did not exist—a pledge empty of all intent save to comfort my dear brother.

Then I saw it, Margaret. Then I heard it speak.

In a single moment, my empty pledge became a solemn vow. Naught else mattered but its fulfillment.

I ordered the ship to change course away from the main passage to follow what I alone had seen. The creature had said it would destroy itself; it had said it would return to death. But what were lies to a murderer?

I had to see the vow fulfilled, Sister.

I had to see the thing dead.

Midmorning, as the passage ahead narrowed, the sails fell slack. No wind lifted the canvas, no cloud drifted by to be mirrored in the flat glassy water. The world was still, lifeless, and white, with only movement the subtle encroachment of ice both before and behind me, too slow to be seen, yet always present at the corner of my eye.

I set a watch to climb the rigging, to line the rails, to peer out over the ice, searching—for what? For anything that should not be, I told them. For hours, for days, the crew watched in silence. Boards creaked though no one walked the deck; ropes slapped though no wind stirred. In the distance, cracking ice roared. The men leaned forward and stared, so still for so long, their clothes and their very beards grew thick with frost. Even their eyes seemed glazed as they stared unblinkingly.

On the third day, on the third watch, all the crew cried out at once: in the near distance, a thick curl of smoke. Next to it stood a black blot against the white. It appeared all at once, as if our eyes had been enthralled until the thing wished to be seen.

I slipped a hunting knife into my belt and ordered the dinghy into the water. Two men rowed me to the large floe. I bade them to return to the ship and then walked toward the smoke until I reached the end of the ice, where it broke off in sheer angles to the black waves beyond. There, at the very edge, the creature had made its camp.

It sat amid a pile of strangely shaped, upward juts of ice, a king in a ceilingless cave, making a throne among stalagmites. Neither the sharpness nor the rawness of the ice seemed to bother it. Indeed, the fire that had attracted me burned several feet away—and the fuel that fed it was the thing’s outer garments. Clearly it had no need for warmth.

With indifference, the creature watched me approach, regarding me with that visage so horrible that I did not know how I might look on it and live.

Priests are advised not to address the Devil when they mean to exorcise it. Why did I speak? Why did I listen? I should have leapt upon it at once and slit its throat.

“You said you’d return to death.” My breath came hard and fast, my body spewing out the too frigid air. “Instead, you still live. You could have disappeared. I would not have known. You could have gone to the very pole and stolen my only other treasure—and I never would have known my loss.”

“Who are you?”

“Robert Walton, captain of the ship.”

“You’re angry.”

Its dispassion infuriated me.

“You murdered my dearest friend. Now he is gone. And you still live!”

“I spoke in unexpected grief. He was my father.”

“Father?”

Ripping off my gloves, I pulled the knife from my belt and threw myself at it. It was like throwing myself against stone. At once it seized my throat and shook me. In its giant fist, I was as small as a child. I slashed wildly; my blade raked its neck. With its dreadful features drawn up in rage, it threw me to the ground, kicked my arm, and sent the knife skidding toward the water. I scrambled after it. What power would I have without my knife?

The creature flung itself at me. For the first time I knew its full enormity, as if a mountain had fallen on my back, breaking every bone, crushing the meat of every muscle to pulp. I stretched out my arm but was able only to brush the tip of the knife; it spun like a compass needle gone wild, skittering closer to the water with every revolution.

The creature seized the knife and with its own huge hand stabbed downward at mine. The blade pierced both skin and bone and severed my middle finger. I screamed, Margaret. Even before my shock dissolved, I screamed at the sight, so much like a woman I am ashamed to remember it.

Blood sprayed across the ice. I dragged myself to my knees. Numbly I thought, how strange that my finger is so far away. And not only the finger, Margaret: the blade had wedged between the knuckle of the fist and the gold band you had given me years ago. Now both lay apart from me, the one still encircling the other.

With a flick of the knife, the creature knocked my finger into the water. The pale, slim shape sank quickly—a flash of white, a glint of gold, then black. A howl tore from my chest.

Without speaking, the creature stood up and walked away, as heedless of the climate as it was of me. It could go where no man could, to the very pole if it wished.

Ignoring the fire that engulfed my arm, I pulled on my glove and tried to staunch the bleeding by pressing the cloth of the empty finger down into the wound. Cradling one hand with the other, I began to walk back to the ship. Both gloves were soon soaked with blood. I grew dizzy, reeled in circles, and collapsed. My men found me and cauterized the wound right there. One man brought out the tinder box he is never without, another tore his own gloves to threads in order to feed the feeble blaze, a third held a blade to the flames till it glowed.

I had not thought the pain could be worse till they pressed the red brand against my flesh.

On ship the surgeon had to reopen the wound to remove the splintered bone down to the joint then recauterize it.

Last night I tossed between a sleepless horror of all that had happened and feverish dreams which over and over a glint of gold was swallowed by darkness. This morning I shook pitifully with just the slight effort of pulling myself up through the hatch, my hand useless, throbbing with indescribable agony. On deck I was startled to see that the landscape had shifted dramatically. My first fury deadened my pain: while I had slept, the crew had mutinied and turned the ship from its northern course. Then I realized we had been hemmed in by peaks of ice. Inch by inch they crept closer. All day I waited on their slow dance of death. In the early afternoon, a fog lowered, plunging the world into madness, for within the misty white hid the more dreadful stony white that would kill us.

Then, Margaret, not two hours ago, the whole ship shuddered and jerked! Wood screamed as an iceberg ground against us. Men flew to the side to try to push away the ship; their desperation gained us an inch relief. Before coming to my cabin to write this, I inspected the damage and watched the line of men with buckets. It is not a bad leak, but more than can be bailed in the time needed to repair it. If we stay, we shall drown by teacups. I share the ship's humiliation: little by little it bows, forced into submission by Nature. The prow will be the first to dip, the lovely figurehead, which reminded me of you, the first to taste the waves.

I had thought to bury Frankenstein at sea, shrouded in canvas. He shall still be buried at sea, but now in the coffin of my ship. Water is his grave; ice, my keep. Eternal Justice has prepared the place for the rebellious; here my prison is ordained in utter whiteness, and my portion set, as if removed from God and the light of Heaven as from the center thrice to the utmost pole.

There is one chance left. The crew has begged me to give up my goal—only for now!—and try to make our way south on the ice till we reach either land and a settlement, or open water and a venturesome ship. I have ordered the line of bailers reduced by half to free up men to unload such supplies as can be carried. I will add this log to the pile. A pallet is being hastily built for me, but I must find the strength to walk. I would not burden my men. Only a quarter may survive the trip: Margaret, and those by God's grace alone.

God's grace ...

I no longer know what that means.

I still see, burned into my eyes as if I had stared too long into the sun, the dull glint of gold even beyond my reach.

PART ONE

Rome

April 15, 1838

I killed my father again last night.

It was the same dream as always, my father and myself pursuing and pursued till I no longer knew who he was, who I was; indeed, if there were any difference between us.

In the dream my father chases me over a stretch of the Arctic, as he did in the week before his death. Once more I flee from his wrath and at the same time lure him on. I drive the sled dogs wildly. As the dogs pant, their spittle freezes and is swept backward by the wind to hail needles against my face. Fog rises from the ice and clings thickly to the dogs: I am pulled along by white devils from Hell.

Devil. Was that not his very first word upon seeing me rise up? What had he wanted from his labors that I proved so poor a substitute?

In the dream, as in life, he chases me endlessly. As it cracks wide, the ice beneath us roars like a wounded behemoth. Huge white blocks are shoved upward in nightmare architecture. At last I abandon the sled and cross the broken ice on foot. Greater and greater are the blocks I must climb, the gaps I must leap. Black water laps at the edges of ice. My father is nearby. I hear him mutter “fiend” and “abomination.” His face appears, framed by white mist; it mirrors my own horror and hatred. I reach out. My fingers curl around his throat, as he reaches out to mine. He laughs. I wonder if my face shows the same delight. That is all I remember before waking. I know that I have killed him. I do not know if he has killed me.

It has taken me these ten years to be able to recognize that Victor Frankenstein was my father. If he had lived, might he have learned to call me his son?

April 16

Walton is coming. I feel it in my scarred flesh like an old rheumatic who aches at the coming of rain. He is close by, but not here in Rome, not yet. How much time do I have?

April 18

I have been here in Rome so long now I almost dare think of it as home. The dream is a warning that I must never grow comfortable. Rome must be like any other city, simply another place where Walton will track me down.

A city as magnificent as Rome reminds me more brutally than usual that I am only a distant witness to life, and I wonder if I should have done as I had said long ago and rid the world of my unnatural presence. Was it cowardice that stopped me? Can I be so human as to claim that defect? No matter. I did not do it. Although I be a created thing, an artificial man, I cling to my existence.

April 19

My premonition spoke true: Walton has found me again. I flee Rome tonight.

April 20

I am safe for the moment, having taken shelter in one of the catacombs just outside the city. Tonight I shall slip away and travel north. From there I will decide my next destination. For now, I sit watch among my dead brothers. The candlelight flickers over their noble skulls and is swallowed by the blackness of their eyes. If the ratlike scratching of my pen disturbs them, they voice not their complaint. Once I was like them, peaceful and still, the life that animated my bones long forgotten and blown to dust. Then my father, seeking a frame upon which to hang his evil art, claimed me as his own.

How many lives had I lived before being brought together as I am? As many lives as parts. Was I man, woman, animal? My two hands, my two feet, are so mismatched they clearly come from four separate people. My brain, my heart, each had separate hopes and ambitions. What had I seen? What did I know? Do I know it still even now?

How uncannily Boethius wrote:

*For neither doth he wholly know,
Nor neither doth he all forget.*

My father robbed me of more than he knew, orphaning each part of me of its past.

Enough! With Walton on my scent, I must make new plans.

I had foolishly thought myself safe in Rome and had settled among the dark alleys of the city within a city, the Vatican. My face was always covered with the hood of my cloak. To hide my true height, I remained at all times crouched, knees bent as I sat on my haunches and even walked thus, my body twisted and stooped like a hunchback's; the girth created by my shoulders and knees and elbows made it appear as if a head had been stuck on top of a boulder. My dead limbs could hold the position for hours. Only in Saint Peter's did I rise up to stand. My dimensions were more suited to the grandeur of the basilica than the dwarfish men who had constructed it. I spent my nights there; by day I sat on the steps out front and begged alms, a dented cup before me with a few coins in it.

For what? The coarseness of my body allows me to thrive on the meanest food: in the countryside, roots, nuts, berries, an occasional animal; in the city, the refuse of others. A slice of fresh warm bread rubbed with garlic and drizzled with olive oil, the taste of which the poorest Roman knows intimately, is to me ambrosia.

No, it was sustenance of another sort I found upon those steps: I gluttoned myself on the sight of Rome's women as they hurried to market or strolled to an assignation. How easily I was swept up by their beauty.

Just last week, while I was begging in St. Peter's Square, a woman ran by. Although she was clearly distressed, her face and form were so exquisite I had to gaze on her awhile.

longer. Her complexion was pale and her hair, fair; I imagined her not a native but a visitor from a Nordic clime, come here, perhaps, for the sake of true love. I wondered how a virtuous and refined lady came to be wandering the streets of Rome alone. What possible complaint was so ignoble as to sully those graceful features? I fancied that only I could alleviate her suffering, if she would but let me.

*Such is thy beauty, how
Should my heart know
To frame thy praise and taste thy godly pleasure?
Take not thy image hence.*

At a discreet distance I followed the blonde woman to a street where potted plants adorned windowsills and gave each house a cheerful air. At one such place she stopped and rapped sharply on the door. A servant answered. Immediately my beautiful lady accused the girl of stealing a plum when she had accompanied her mistress to the blonde woman's house yesterday. Bright spots of anger mottled her queenly face, her eyes grew ugly, and, as with a rabid dog, foam gathered in the corners of her lips. She struck the servant forcefully; the girl would have fallen if she had not held on to the door frame.

"No!" I cried, rushing forward.

I felt as if I had been in a museum, staring rapturously at a portrait of ineffable beauty, only to have a stranger slash it with a razor. I drew a coin from my cup.

"Replace the plum with this," I said. "It was only a little thing, and the girl may have been hungry. Only do not frown so."

The woman turned to me. Her expression changed from fury at the girl, to haughtiness at a beggar's impudence, to astonishment and fear. Her eyes fixed on my hand. I looked down, thinking the coin had been transformed into a spider. I saw what she saw: I had reached so far from under my cloak that I had bared my wrist and thus exposed the ugly network of scars where my huge hand had been attached to my arm. Would that my father had been a neater surgeon!

At that moment the mistress of the house came from within to inquire about the disturbance. Terrified, the blonde woman ran into her friend's house and bolted the door behind her. But before I could slip into the alley, even before she told her friend about me, she had regained her shrill tongue and continued to berate the servant for the eaten fruit.

I do not know when to act and when to be still.

I cannot help but equate beauty with greatness of soul. My own self validates this: I am a monster, in both appearance and truth. So when I see a beautiful woman, I think I must be seeing an angel.

The men of Rome, too, gave me sustenance. I was fascinated with the priests and brothers, the professors and their young students. Scholars visited from around the world, and, as in every city I have ever passed through, I often heard as many as five different languages spoken one day. Through the years I learned them without thought, much as a greedy child devouring a cake: one minute the cake is on the outside; the next, it is on the inside; and the child no longer had to think of how to chew or how to swallow.

But in Rome, it was so much more than mere words: it was what was said. Close to the Vatican, the men filled the air with dizzying talk of history, literature, mathematics, natural philosophy, art, and, of course, their curious theology. It is one thing to read a stolen volume of Augustine—so easily acquired in this city, as are writing implements; it is quite another thing to be so close to conversations about original sin as to be fanned by the gesticulations of argument. How I longed to join in, to pose one of the many questions that have plagued me in solitary reading.

Yesterday they argued about body and soul:

“What are you saying, Antonio?” an elderly priest asked, his breath hard and earnest with the topic. “That the soul is just the motor of the machine?”

“He’s right, Antonio,” agreed another priest. “That’s Descartes, not theology. The soul is an act. It does more than inhabit the body; it creates the body.”

“The body is penance,” said the beleaguered Antonio, a young man with a wispy beard, clutching a pile of books to his thin chest.

“It is not. Only while the body is inhabited by a soul can it be called human. The arm of a corpse is no more human than the arm of a statue.”

“The body is our punishment for original sin,” Antonio insisted.

“From Descartes to Origen!” said the elderly priest in exasperation. “No, no, no! The universe—the whole universe, along with our bodies—was created out of pure goodness. The body is the servant of the soul. It may even bring good to the soul that animates it.”

I sat mute, breath held. What if at this point I had slipped off my hood and said, “I have no soul, merely some animating galvanic energy; even this body isn’t mine. I’ve been created from dead pieces—each no more human, as you say, than a marble statue. So what of me? Would the elderly priest have nodded solemnly and said, “My friend, this is a theological knot”? Or would those men of God have feared me as the incarnation of Satan?

It is too late now. Yesterday, as I sat in the square by the double colonnades, leaning back for a moment into the cool shadows cast by the great stone pillars, Walton passed not fifty feet from me. His wild black beard, streaked with gray, gave him the look of a desert prophet calling down a rain of fire. His mouth was tight. His clothes were as severe as a monk’s. The same fierce, other-worldly fervor smoldered in his eyes.

It has been ten years since my father died; ten years since I struggled with Walton on the ice. I had walked away from him with no thought of the future, or that mine would be woven with his from the same thread.

We had first met over my father’s corpse. It was months later when I saw him next. The man I had left on the ice was gone, never to return. Illness had ravaged his face and form, and revenge had fixed itself in his mind. My father’s last words were spoken to Walton. What vow had my father extracted, and then made irrevocable by dying, that had transformed a ship captain in search of the pole into a tracker obsessed with my destruction?

In just those few months, Walton was so changed I did not recognize him. It was after midnight, and I was in a poorly lit alleyway in Minsk. A stranger charged me like a bull, with a dagger instead of horns. Assuming he was a courageous though stupid thief, I took the knife

away and swatted him aside. He charged again. This time I slammed him against the wall and would have rid myself of his nuisance; then he spoke: "You do not know me, do you?"

Having expected a stream of Russian curses and not English, I loosened my grip and peered at the man's face.

"It makes no difference," I said, my own English heavily accented.

"I know *you*. I know what you have done. I know what you are. You do not have the right to pass as one of us. You are not a man."

"Who are you?" I tightened my grasp round his throat.

"Robert Walton." He held up his hand as if it were a means of identification and, indeed, it was, for it was only when I saw the scarred gap between the fingers that I remembered. "It was on my ship that you destroyed Victor Frankenstein, my one true friend, my brother. You destroyed me." Walton smiled. "Frankenstein's last wish was that I rid the world of you. Now it's my last wish, too."

"Why? For your finger? My father could have sewn on a new one."

I flung Walton to the ground. He sprang up, drawing a second knife from his boot.

"I spoke only so you would know that I will have my revenge if it must be from Hell. Next time I will not stop to speak."

He slipped away to seek some later, more opportune, moment.

What stayed my hand that first night and the others that followed? That Walton was the sole person who knew the truth of my existence? That he was the sole link left to my father? I do not know. Over the subsequent months and years that he tracked me, each time that he did not rid myself of him made it that less possible to kill him. Now it is unthinkable. I doubt I shall ever fully understand his reasons for revenge, for his word was true: he has not spoken to me again in all this time. We meet and struggle in silence, usually in the night; sometimes we spill our blood onto the ground; we part, knowing we shall meet again.

Thus it has been for nearly ten years.

The candle now melts to the stone, and its flame grows dim. While there is still light, I shall put away my pen and take out my book of poems by Cavalcanti. Although I picked it up and pocketed it only last week, I have read it so many times—for lack of anything else—that the words are now my own. Once I thought every book a true history. Now I know the deception of art. Cavalcanti deceives twice over: he writes love poetry. Even so, he has been my constant companion on this part of my journey.

Tonight I shall read him aloud. The skulls here have not heard poetry in too long and are eager for diversion.

Venice ***April 30***

Venice, city of freaks, city of death. I have disappeared into its watery Byzantine labyrinth. In Venice I can stand next to the carved walls that line the narrow alleys and be just one more gargoyle whose features excite disgusted admiration. Like me, nothing here

symmetrical. The once-gorgeous palaces totter with rot. Only their proximity to one another supports them, like a one-legged cripple leaning against a leper with no face.

Dwarfs, hunchbacks, idiots, and other oddities haunt the backstreets like cats. The Venetians tolerate, even patronize, such unfortunates, being fascinated with decay and deformity. Such a vice will be a virtue if it allows me to dwell here for a time.

I landed in Venice as a stowaway, sitting cramped, knee to chin, in the ship's hold. I share the quarters with crates of moldering cheese and some curious rats. Together they made a fine meal. In the morning, I climbed out of the hold while it was still dark, dropped a rope over the side, and silently slid into the Adriatic. The ship's wake boiled around me, and my sodden cloak was a millstone. As if in concert, they tried to pluck my fingers loose, but I clung to the stern like a barnacle. At last there was a final swell as the sea rushed into the lagoon, and all was calm.

The water of the lagoon had a milk white pall, while the city was gray and pink; in the dawn it shimmered like a dream dissolving. Fishing boats wore the tree of life, omniscient eyes, and other cabalistic signs painted on their prows. Only the stench of garbage and human waste—dumped into the canals and awaiting the tide—belied the fairy-tale wonder of the vision.

I stayed in the water all day as the ship was unloaded, all evening as sailors and merchants came and went about their business. At last, night descended and the docks were empty. It was so quiet I could hear the soft padding of feet as a cat walked by.

I let go of the rudder, swam to the side of the ship abutting the dock, and pulled myself up. For a few minutes I crouched in the shadows. Water puddled off my cloak and dripped through the planks like a fall of rain. I did not move. I had waited all day in the lagoon, lump of flesh that I am; on a dry dock I could wait forever.

In the distance a bell began to strike. Before I could count the hour, another bell, and another, and still another rang, till the air vibrated first with striking gongs, and then with their echoes. I left the dock and crept onto shore.

In the canals, the water gleamed blackly like oil. Once, as I was getting ready to cross the bridge, railed with wrought iron, instinct pressed me back. I stood still in the darkness. Seconds later a gondola sliced through the canal. Up front a uniformed officer stood with a lantern held aloft, searching on either side. I remained motionless till the last trace of light had faded and the sharp laps of water against the bulwarks were replaced by silence.

I soon found a half-tumbled-down campanile, whose heavily rusted bells still lay amid a pile of bricks at the bottom of the tower. First I made certain that the structure was not a shelter to someone else, then I settled down in its most secluded part to rest.

It is dawn. Men are already about on morning business. Voices outside the campanile complain about the city's occupation. After a thousand years of glory, Venice has begun to change hands as often as a weary old whore. The Austrians claim her now, not for the first time. Arguing over who is worse, the Austrians or the French, the voices at last move away.

My clothes and boots are still wet, my cloak still soaked, but the oilcloth I keep wrapped around my few belongings has once more kept my treasures dry. A candle, a flint, my precious journal, pen and ink, and my current book—each is safe.

May 2

Sometimes Fate offers me gifts. No matter how small, I count each one a treasure.

This morning, before dawn had stolen the safety of the lingering shadows, I found a man facedown in an alley, his expression beatific, his cheek comfortably resting on a pillow of dung. And there—by the fool's hand—a book! I have read the Cavalcanti five times over. This new book was more welcome than usual. I picked it up, wiped it on the man's shoulder, and slipped it into my cloak, still wet after its bath in the Adriatic. There the book bumped against the volume of poetry.

I was nearly to the next street when I turned and walked back. A fool with a book is less a fool for having one, given most fools and most books. I gave him the Cavalcanti in exchange for his and hope he finds some wisdom in it.

My new prize is *Sorrows of Young Werther*. It was one of the first books I ever read, along with *Paradise Lost* and Plutarch's *Lives*, and had such a profound effect on me that I hesitate taking it up again. Then, I had read it as my introduction to the entire race of humans. I believed all men to be like Werther: deep, sensitive, overwrought, noble, suffering with the agony and isolation of sheer existence. Now I hope to read the book as a cautionary tale against emotionalism, against the dangers of believing oneself to be accepted—nay, more seductive, against the dangers of believing oneself acceptable.

May 3

“Light a candle,” said the voice, and a candle was lit.

“Light another,” the voice repeated, and another candle was lit.

On and on the voice commanded, until a full candelabra blazed in the darkness.

In the dream, I wrote in my journal by the candles' radiance, breathing in the thousand spices of Venice: not the stink of the rotting hulk in which I now dwell, drained by centuries of extravagance, but the incense of ancient Venice, jewel of the sea.

On waking, I eagerly dwelt for hours on every detail of the dream, burning each into my mind as a memory of actual life. Such fleeting images, the mere suggestions of printed words offer me more joy, more consolation, than reality ever has.

May 4

“Alms for the poor and blind!” the little beggar cried out. “Pave your way to Heaven with alms! A coin for me is worth more indulgences than a dozen novenas!”

Today I have met Lucio, master beggar, who gives twice what he gets, though not in the same coin.

The abandoned campanile is a mere dozen streets from the Piazzetta, next to the old Ducal Palace and overlooking the Basin of San Marco. Yesterday I wandered from alley to alley till the sun set. I drank in the light that is so peculiarly Venetian, its luminosity doubled by the

water. The facade of the palace deepened from pink to rose. The building seems to be supported by air alone, lacy columns beneath, with a solid angular bulk on top. It is an impossible structure, and for that I feel kinship with its stones.

Today I arrived at the Piazzetta early and settled in a corner, enthralled with the conversations around me. An hour after I arrived, a blind man took up position a few feet away and held out a wooden bowl to be filled. Instead of sitting in silence as I did, he harangued every person who walked by, grabbing at the air to try to catch a skirt or pantaloons if someone passed without giving.

“Alms for the poor and blind,” he said coaxingly. “I am blind, my wife is feeble, and our baby is sick. Alms! God hears the prayers of the poor, especially when they pray for the generous benefactors. Alms!” When the coins did not fall quickly enough, his speech became louder and included threats and curses.

Never in a week have I collected half of what he earned in hours. As his bowl filled, I could not help but imagine what I might buy if the money were mine. I could purchase books truly desired, rather than stealing or stumbling on random titles. For a brief moment I considered his feeble wife and sickly babe, then dismissed the thought. Even if the story were true, he was richer than I simply to possess their companionship.

I crossed to him noiselessly and bent close.

“I have learned to fear the rich,” the beggar said. “Must I fear the poor as well?” From inside his ragged cloak, he pulled out a chunk of bread, tore it in half, and held a piece toward me. “If Venice has been that tightfisted with you, my friend, I should not be. It’s an unprofitable business all around when beggars must steal from beggars.”

Though his eyes wandered slackly, each filmed as if with a caul, he addressed his words in my direction and held the bread before my face.

When I did not reply, he laughed. “You are thinking now, is he really blind? And if he isn’t, can I take the money anyway and outrun him?” He gestured again with the bread. “Go ahead and take it, even if you mean to steal from me besides.”

Surprise at being openly, even kindly, addressed fixed me to the spot and made me more hungry for the spoken word than the written.

“How did you know anyone was there?” I asked. I sat down and accepted his bread. “Are you sighted?”

“I’m blind, but for every fifteen coins that clinked in my cup, one would clink a little away from me. How long have you been practicing the noble art of begging?”

“Not long. I arrived in Venice just a few days ago.”

“And not from elsewhere in Italy either, judging from your accent. Well, you’re too silent for my friend. Here, you must fight for every penny. You must speak up. Beg loudly, pray for those in the crowd, curse them, grab them, jeer at them, make them know you are here. They know Lucio’s here. That’s me. They cannot escape Lucio.”

Lucio talked and talked, as though—robbed of his eyes—he had grown two tongues. When the crowds moved our way, without a break in breath he resumed his loud beseeching. I began to leave, and he seized my cloak.

“Stay. You will starve without me. How could I sleep at night with that on my conscience? Besides, you are an amiable conversationalist: you say ‘yes’ and ‘I understand’ at all the right times.” Laughing at his own remark, Lucio asked me my name. I gave him the first one I thought of; so quickly was it gone from memory that I cannot record it here.

When the beggar departed for the night, he earnestly sought my assurance that I would return tomorrow to the same place. He also made me promise that, sometime soon, I would accompany him to the lean-to he considers home and share his dinner.

“It is little more than a hovel,” he said, “and the food may be meager, depending on the day’s luck, but I promise you the conversation will be filled with sparkling wit! You will confer on me the greatest honor, my friend, for what could any man want more than the sound of his own voice being listened to?”

Lucio has told me of his wife and their babe of six months: yes, they are real, but neither is sickly. Because of them, his hovel for me would be as grand as a palace. I doubt that I shall go there, however. His wife is not blind.

May 6

I am almost fearful to commit my thoughts, my experiences, to paper. *Experience*—what a strange word for one such as I who lives too much in the mind. Something has happened. I have had an *experience*.

To Lucio’s sincere delight I returned to the Piazzetta. The little beggar touches a place where I did not know was there. He talked and talked, and, when it came time to appeal to the crowds, he included me in his rantings, asking for alms for the “poor devil beside me too dimwitted to beg for himself.”

It was a day such as I have never had, and my story has not even begun.

At sunset Lucio left and I remained. The city quieted down around me till I could hear only the gurgle of water from the nearby basin and the rats as they crept out of hiding. Despite the peaceful night, I began to feel tense anticipation. I grew restless, yet was reluctant to leave. The dank air pressed in around me and urged me to stay. The darkness thickened as I waited; it held me in and thwarted my attempts to move.

At last a gondola from the basin was drawn close, and men climbed out of it. I edged round the column of St. Mark’s Church so as not to be visible. I heard a weak, muffled moan followed by a rush of whispers.

Two men were dragging a woman across the Piazzetta; she was gagged, bound, and blindfolded. The scene was disturbing enough; the contrast between the men and the woman made it more so. The men were dressed in rich velvets with feathered caps, their plumbeous hands bejeweled with rings. The woman was thin and dirty, wearing cast-off clothes from several disparate outfits. Weeping, she fell onto her knees, only to be kicked till she stood again.

I emerged from behind the column, hobbling and bent low.

“Who’s there?” one of the men challenged. I was enormous, yet to him, still just a lam

hunchbacked beggar with his alms bowl. "Go away. This does not concern you."

"What is your business with this woman?"

He looked incredulous to be confronted.

"I tell my business to no man, much less garbage from the street."

Wine and heat exuded from them in sickening waves. I limped closer till they were within reach.

"What will you do with her?" In answer, they laughed. "Let her go and I will not harm you," I said, which only set them laughing again. With a single movement, I shook off my cloak, stood straight, and grabbed one of them off the ground by his collar.

"What will you do with her?" I repeated.

"It is nothing," he gasped, his eyes wider with shock at my face than with choking. "It is merely a prank. We have bought her and are going to make a gift of her to a friend."

"Bought her?" This I understood, for I had often wondered if I might buy an hour of acceptance. "If you bought her, why does she weep?"

The other man, the drunker of the two and who had not seen me as clearly, chuckled. "She did not want to be bought. It was her man that sold her."

During this discourse the woman, still blindfolded, turned her face from one voice to the other. She made a pleading moan.

Holding her tightly, the drunkard reached into his pocket, withdrew his purse, and threw it several yards away. "Take it and go," he said to me.

I tossed aside the one man to grab the other. He let go of his captive and ran at me, head down like a butting goat. I caught him by the shoulders and shoved hard. He landed on his back. Quickly I stepped on his arm; the plaza resounded with the sharp crack of a branch being snapped. The man's howl became whimpering gasps for breath. He dragged himself on his feet, arm dangling, face oiled with tears of agony.

"Leave her, Camillo," he said, teeth gritted. "I need help."

He staggered into the shadows.

The one called Camillo came up behind me and caught hold of the woman.

"Do you know her?" he asked harshly. "If not, what is it to you what I do with her?" He drew a knife and held it to her throat. At the bite of metal, she choked back her weeping and stood still. "It should mean nothing even if I kill her," he said. "What's one life less on the streets of Venice? A beggar should know that best of all."

"You're right," I said softly. "What is one life less to me? Nothing. Kill her. I don't care. It will give me a better reason to kill *you*."

Slowly he backed toward the dock, holding the woman as a shield. I followed, certain he would try to escape in the gondola. My only question was whether he would attempt to take the woman with him. Instead, he pushed her into the water, then ran, daring to stop only to retrieve his friend's purse.

As he must have hoped, I jumped in after the woman rather than pursue him. Bound so tightly, she would never have been able to save herself, even if she could swim.

I grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulled her struggling body to the surface, and lifted her out of the water. Curled on her side, she coughed in violent spasms as I removed the gauntlet, blindfold, and ropes. Eyes pressed shut, she wrapped her arms around herself and labored, shuddering. She did not respond to my soft entreaties. At last I enfolded her in my cloak, picked her up, and carried her here to the campanile.

May 7

Mirabella.

Beautiful sight.

That is what I call her. I mean no irony in the name. Surely, after she saw me, she must have understood why I called her *beautiful sight*.

Mirabella.

She is sitting in the corner this very minute watching me attentively.

Who is she? Where does she come from? What were those men going to do with her?

She is plain of face, with quick movements and alert black eyes. She cannot speak: her neck is marked by the jagged red scar of a recent wound. It is no wonder she grew still when the knife was held to her throat. She watches my writing with fascination. When I offered her my quill pen, she shook her head.

I was amazed at how little she reacted when she saw me that first night.

“I am ugly,” I warned her, her face shielded from mine with the hood of the cloak I had wrapped around her. “Uglier than you could ever imagine. But isn’t ugliness better than fairness that deceives, like those men who would take you with them?”

She nodded, then slowly pulled back the hood. On seeing me, her features registered not the slightest change. Perhaps simple calculation made her accept me: I had rescued her; therefore, there was at least the possibility that I might be good. If she expressed her revulsion, she might have had to return to whoever sold her to the nobles.

Or, if she expressed her revulsion ... I might kill her.

To fill the silence I have named her and constructed my own elaborate story, given her a history of neglect, ending with the kidnapping. In my fancies, I have continued the horror. If I had not interfered, knowing that, without my presence, her misadventure would have ended in abasement. I have embroidered the story with so many dark deeds, I shake that the subject of my wretched dreams actually sits next to me.

What would have become of her? What am I doing with her now?

I spent that first night talking to her, still believing she was capable of telling me, showing me what had happened. I have spent the day with her as well. I do not dare to leave her alone in order to join Lucio, lest she vanish in my absence, but also do not dare to bring her home lest someone recognize her and try to take her from me. It is my own sort of kidnapping, I suppose. I want her for my own, with a desire as base as that of the nobles.

May 8

We have just finished the last of the food and water.

May 9

“Have I harmed you?” I asked Mirabella this morning. “Have I made a move against you any way?” She shook her head no.

Seized with restlessness, I paced back and forth in the confines of the campanile, still uncertain what to do, what to say. I am more accustomed to writing words than speaking them, am more manlike in my thoughts than in my deeds. Violence and desire make my fingers tremble until action sets them free. I wanted her, but more than the momentary gratification, I wanted her to remain with me.

“And you,” I said, spinning round and pointing. “You have made no move against me but trying to leave.”

Again she shook her head. Although she leaned easily against the stone wall, her eyes were wary. If I did not calm myself, I would frighten her into escaping.

“I will ask you plainly,” I said. “Will you stay with me? We have nothing left to eat. I must go to the Piazzetta to join Lucio”—for I had told her of the blind beggar—“and there I will earn enough to bring back food and water, wine if you wish. I want you to be here when I return, but I do not want to keep you tied up while I’m gone. Will you stay?”

She nodded. And so I left, saying I would see her in few hours. Instead, I slipped to the rear of the campanile and watched her unawares through a window.

She crept to the door and peered out. Apparently satisfied I had left, she began to pick through my few belongings, lingering over random objects I had picked up on the street: bits of colored pottery, a glass bead, a tin candlestick, a length of rope. The glass bead she balanced between two fingers and held out her hand appraisingly as if she wore a ring. Next she sorted through the rags I had piled up as a pillow, holding each against herself for something wearable. A few of these she kept separate.

At last she stood up and looked around the stone-walled room. She saw it differently than I did because she began to rearrange its contents, moving the pile of rags from one side to the other, sticking the candle stub by which I wrote into the candlestick, setting my book next to it, and propping the largest piece of colored pottery up against the wall as decoration.

She meant to stay.

I hurried off, the sooner to hurry back.

Lucio expressed concern at my absence of the past few days. He accepted my story of being too feverish to come out, for I was reluctant to tell him so soon of Mirabella. Then he described with great detail all I had missed yesterday. A near riot had provided some rare excitement. Austrian soldiers had combed the city looking for a deserter, as Venetians stood by and jeered. Accusing the more boisterous ones of hiding the fugitive, the soldiers threatened them with imprisonment. Lucio heard swords being unsheathed and shots fired.

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