

Extract from Fingersmith by Sarah Waters

It was like stepping out of heaven, I always thought, to leave our kitchen on a winter's night. Even so, when I had left the food beside Mr Ibbs's sleeping sister and seen to one or two of the babies, that had woken with the sounds of the dancing below, I did not go back to join the others. I walked the little way along the landing, to the door of the room I shared with Mrs Sucksby; and then I went up the next pair of stairs, to the little attic I had been born in.

This room was always cold. Tonight there was a breeze up, the window was loose, and it was colder than ever. The floor was plain boards, with strips of drugget on it. The walls were bare, but for a bit of blue oil-cloth that had been tacked to catch the splashes from a wash-stand. The stand, at the moment, was draped with a waistcoat and a shirt, of Gentleman's, and one or two collars. He always slept here, when he came to visit; though he might have made a bed with Mr Ibbs, down in the kitchen. I know which place I would have chosen. On the floor sagged his high leather boots, that he had scraped the mud from and shined. Beside them was his bag, with more white linen spilling from it. On the seat of a chair were some coins from his pocket, a packet of cigarettes, and sealing-wax. The coins were light, the wax was brittle, like toffee.

The bed was roughly made. There was a red velvet curtain upon it, with the rings taken off, for a counterpane: it had been got from a burning house, and still smelt of cinders, I took it up and put it about my shoulders, like a cloak. Then I pinched out the flame of my candle and stood at the window, shivering, looking out at the roofs and chimneys, and at the Horsemonger Lane Gaol where my mother was hanged.

The glass of the window had the first few blooms of a new frost upon it, and I held my finger to it, to make the ice turn to dirty water. I could still catch Mr Ibbs's whistle and the bounce of Dainty's feet, but before me the streets of the Borough were dark. There was only here and there a feeble light at a window like mine, and then the lantern of a coach, throwing shadows; and then a person, running hard against the cold, quick and dark as the shadows, and as quickly come and gone. I thought of all the thieves that must be there, and all the thieves' children; and then of all the regular men and women who lived their lives - their strange and ordinary lives - in other houses, other streets, in the brighter parts of London. I thought of Maud Lilly, in her great house. She did not know my name - I had not known hers, three days before. She did not know that I was standing, plotting her ruin, while Dainty Warren and John Vroom danced a polka in my kitchen.

What was she like? I knew a girl named Maud once, she had half a lip. She used to like to make out that the other half had been lost in a fight; I knew

for a fact however, she had been born like that, she couldn't fight putty. She died in the end - not from fighting, but through eating bad meat. Just one bit of bad meat killed her, just like that.

But, she was very dark, Gentleman had said that the other Maud, his Maud, was fair and rather handsome. But when I thought of her, I could picture her only as thin and brown and straight, like the kitchen chair I had tied the corset to.

I tried another curtsey. The velvet curtain made me clumsy. I tried again. I began to sweat, in sudden fear.

Then there came the opening of the kitchen door and the sound of footsteps on the stair, and then Mrs Sucksby's voice, calling for me. I didn't answer. I heard her walk to the bedrooms below, and look for me there; then there was a silence, then her feet again, upon the attic stairs, and then came the light of her candle. The climb made her sigh a little - only a little, for she was very nimble, for all that she was rather stout.

'Are you here then, Sue?' she said quietly. 'And all on your own, in the dark?'

She looked about her, all that I had looked at - at the coins and the sealing-wax, and Gentleman's boots and leather bag. Then she came to me, and put her warm, dry hand to my cheek, and I said - just as if she had tickled or pinched me, and the words were a chuckle or a cry I could not stop - I said:

'What if I ain't up to it, Mrs Sucksby? What if I can't do it? Suppose I lose my nerve and let you down? Hadn't we ought to send Dainty, after all?' She shook her head and smiled. 'Now, then, ' she said. She led me to the bed, and we sat and she drew down my head until it rested in her lap, and she put back the curtain from my cheek and stroked my hair. 'Now, then.'

'Ain't it a long way to go?' I said, looking up at her face.

'Not so far,' she answered.

'Shall you think of me, while I am there?'

She drew free a strand of hair that was caught about my ear.

'Every minute,' she said, quietly. 'Ain't you my own girl? And won't I worry? But you shall have Gentleman by you. I should never have let you go, for any ordinary villain.'

That was true, at least. But still my heart beat fast. I thought again of Maud Lilly, sitting sighing in her room, waiting for me to come and unlace her stays and hold her nightgown before the fire. Poor Lady, Dainty had said.

I chewed at the inside of my lip. Then: 'Ought I to do it though, Mrs Sucksby?' I said. 'Ain't it a very mean trick, and shabby?'

She held my gaze, then raised her eyes and nodded to the view beyond the window. She said, 'I know she would have done it, and not given it a thought. And I know what she would feel in her heart - what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning - to see you doing it now.'

That made me thoughtful. For a minute, we sat and said nothing. And what I asked her next was something I had never asked before - something which, in all my years at Lant Street, amongst all those dodgers and thieves, I had never heard anyone ask, not ever. I said, in a whisper, 'Do you think it hurts, Mrs Sucksby, when they drop you?'

Her hand, that was smoothing my hair, grew still. Then it started up stroking, sure as before. She said,

'I should say you don't feel nothing but the rope about your neck. Rather ticklish, I should think.'

'Ticklish?'

'Say then, pricklish.'

Still her hand kept smoothing.

'But when the drop is opened?' I said. 'Wouldn't you say you felt it then?'

She shifted her leg. 'Perhaps a twitch,' she admitted, 'when the drop is opened.'

I thought of the men I had seen fall at Horsemonger Lane. They twitched, all right. They twitched and kicked about, like monkeys on sticks.

'But it comes that quick at the last,' she went on then, 'that I rather think the quickness must take the pain clean out of it. And when it comes to dropping a lady - well, you know they place the knot in such a way, Sue, that the end comes all the quicker?'