

Extract from: The Pleasures of Men
Prologue
London, July 1840

Night comes late to Spitalfields Market, across the dump at the back used by the traders for the detritus of old vegetables and splintered crates. The stall holders pack up their apples and cabbages, gather their pieces of meat, oysters and bags of fish, the battered hardware and cheap clothes, down the last dregs of ale, then wrap their arms around each other for the short journey to the lights of Lely's gin house on the corner. I stay behind, near the dump, see the mass glistening as maggots slither out of the soft flesh of the discarded beef.

The first scavengers are the younger men, dismissed soldiers hiking useless legs, crawling up the dump and delving in their hands. Then women, babies swaddled to their breasts, picking off the heads from trout and cockerels and pulling scraps of pork from the bones. Huddles of rheumy children come next, biting off carrot tops and around potato eyes, licking at the old boxes, rubbing their feet in the last juice of the meat. And when all the others have departed, the old woman comes, baring her rotted teeth at the pile, her lifeless bosoms like dirty moons, pulling herself around the sides of the stack, racking herself with laughter.

At first, when she screams, no one hears but me. Not the seamen outside the gin shop, talking about money and girls, or the women in darkened red dresses and thin shawls, waiting along street corners, or even the scavenging children, fighting over their spoils in the corner of the marketplace. She does not stop. The sound hurtles over the walls until they seem to echo to her cries and so the children look up and the women hear, and the sailors put aside their bottles and soon real men come, significant, responsible men with dressed hair and long black cloaks, who never give those who work in the market or the scavengers a single thought. They look at the madwoman, rocking in the blood, and think that she is the one dying.

Then they see what lies behind her. A girl, her blue dress ragged ribbons around her legs. She has been stabbed twenty times, they guess, over and over until her skin lies like ruffled feathers over the darkening flesh. Her arms and legs have been bent back so she is all chest, and her pale hair has been plaited and thrust into her mouth. A blue ribbon and a feathered comb cling to the edges of her hair. Over what remains of her bosom, the killer has gouged a deep star. And then they peer further and see a one-pence coin, perched on the still warm core of her heart.

Abigail Greengrass shakes out her thick skirt as she leaves Davis's Milliners. She beats at the wool, as if by doing so she can throw off the dirt and cruelties of her day. The door bangs behind her and she does not care. She hates Mrs Davis and her simpering girls. She feels the wetness of the cobblestones touch the soles of her boots as she sets off towards Long Acre. Four builders at the pie shop whistle at her and she is not so tired that she cannot toss her head slightly and give a half-smile at the swarthy one at the front. Then into Long Acre and the crowds of people milling home, and her day returns: the bottom of her spine is sharp with pain from bending, her left eye is twitching and the skin smarts under her fingernail from when Mrs Davis pushed the needle there, on purpose she is sure.

The old witch. For the last two weeks, Mrs Davis has been making her sew in lining and mend holes, which means sitting at the back of the shop. Even though she was just as good at netting and embroidering as the others and ten times better than stuck-up Emily Warren, who Mrs Davis petted just because of her thick golden hair fit for pleasing the gentlemen and a face not so pretty that the peaches there would upset the ladies.

Abigail walks past the blazing shops and sees nothing. The rounded glass bottles glowing blue, green, red in the window of the chemist's she has regarded a thousand times before, likewise the toppling apples and pears on the stall next to the stationer's. She ignores the newsboy selling the latest gossip about the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and the boot polisher, his nails blackened for life around the edges. Even the custard tarts trembling in the steamy window of the cake shop, dotted with raisins like stars around the sky, do not touch her eye. She sees only the inside of her mind.

Her mind turns over the spite of Mrs Davis as she walks up Kingsway and to High Holborn. The cuts in her heels catch slightly on her stockings and she does not flinch, for she likes the feeling of rawness, the heat that comes before the fissures widen and grow painful. Abigail crosses the road towards St Paul's and then trots along London Wall. Gathering her heavy skirts out of a puddle, she turns on to Bishopsgate and then Shoreditch High Street, rehearsing to herself how Lily, the front shop girl, said that a customer had asked for her, Abigail, to do the work personally and Mrs Davis had replied that the young lady in question was ill and offered Emily instead. She blows on her thin fingers. One day she shall have her own shop and Mrs Davis and Emily will come begging for work, and she will offer them a little simple stitching to do at home. *I cannot do more*, she imagines herself saying. *I have such good girls now*. Her mind wanders to glassy windows full of hats and to benches of neat workers bent sewing just for her. *Abigail Greengrass. Milliner of Distinction.*

She touches her hair and then the soft blue silk of the ribbon. The gentleman had come with a lady (some lady, Lily said) to pick out a hat, returned an hour later and said that if the young lady with the hazel eyes might accept a ribbon from the shop – any type – he would be pleased to add the cost to his account. Mrs Davis was out, so

she came up. His eyebrows thinned at the ends and she imagined reaching up and touching the few stray hairs into place. Thanking him, she felt Lily's nudge and wondered – was this the beginning of ruin? The gentleman would come back for her and start taking her to the theatre where she would wear big flowers on her hat and everybody would think her fallen. She chose the blue and waited. But he did not come, and even sent a servant to the shop to collect the hat. 'Men are unaccountable,' said Lily, a word they both enjoyed. Still, months on, Abigail wonders. Well now, when he finally came for her, he would be too late, she would be the owner of her own shop, married perhaps. The young lady with the hazel eyes. And since yesterday, she had a better ornament, a feathered comb she'd found on the street near St Magnus the Martyr Church.

She turns into Boundary Street. As the gas lamps thin and the street darkens, she is not seeing, not thinking, caught in the trap of her mind.
A scuffle behind her. A footstep.

She looks ahead and the street is empty. Only the beginnings of the moon casting over the stones. The trail of pictures of Mrs Davis and Emily Warren disappears and she thinks only of where she is and the air around her.

The footstep comes once more, and then there is a breath. Walking forward, she tells herself that there is nothing. So many times she has thought a man was too near behind when he was simply close by for no reason. She hears a cough and a clack of fine-sounding heels and her chest tightens. She moves more quickly. So does he.
God help me.

She will not turn. To do so would make him seem real, but if she walks and pretends she does not know he is there, he will melt away and she will be safe and she will never tell of this to anyone, never. Soon someone will appear, a man carrying his bundle at the end of the day, a ragged woman with two squalling children. She will go up to him or her, smile and stay beside them and take the route home that stays in the light.

Abigail walks on. So does he.

Stay calm, she tells herself. Only a few streets to her lodgings. Not far. She has not spoken to God since she was a small girl and her mother was dying. Now she bargains. *Let me return, and you can have anything. I will be in church every Sunday. I will make Joseph marry me. I will love Mrs Davis and Emily Warren.* Her mind tries to hold the image of a white-bearded man looming kindly in a yellowy tunic, just like the one her father wore for mending things around their rooms when she was a child. She walks, faster now, hearing the man do the same.

Stop imagining things, she tells herself. He's just trying to frighten you.

She turns left and knows he will follow. The street is quiet. A few years back, the parish decided to knock down the homes and put up brand-new buildings, in which artists and the like could make paintings and furniture for rich folks. But the buildings were completed just as everything changed and all the money was lost and so they are empty, some already run over with rats. There is no other route she can take, save turning around. She passes the deserted blocks, their windows shining like eyes, hearing him behind her. Nothing will happen. You are a lucky person – remember that. You have always had good fortune. She moves slightly to the side of the road, and hears him do the same. Happier thoughts, she tells herself. That day with Joseph by the Thames. The times her father swung her over his head when she was small. But all she can think of is her lodgings. Her room, left in a tumble when she hurried out in the morning, bed still unmade, her chemise thrown across the floor. Mrs Wornley hanging over the rails, her bangs catching her face, shouting, ‘Not another instant for the coal money, my girl, it had better be tonight or you’ll be in trouble.’ She would do anything to be in her bed, trying to sleep while Nelly crashes around in the room above her, breathing in the stench of overcooked sprouts and suet, hearing Peter bump buckets of water up the stairs. How she had detested her tiny room, longed for something more spacious, in a better part of town. Now she wishes only to touch open the greasy door, pull off her boots, sit on the wobbly chair she found on a street near Holborn and know she is safe. Then, she tells herself, you will laugh at how afraid you have been.

And you will never take the short route back again.

Only a few more yards. First left and second right. Then all she has to do is cut through the alleyway behind the pie shop and she will be there. She moves to the black mouth of the alley. Hesitates for a moment, breathes. She is warm now. She thinks of Mrs Wornley, opening the door to her, peering as the yellow from the lamps floods out into the street. Home. She straightens, smiles to herself and moves towards the light.