

THE HOUSE ON VESPER SANDS

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**THE
HOUSE
ON
VESPER
SANDS**

a novel

PARAIC O'DONNELL



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

... what will become of my soul ...

ELIZABETH PARKER, linen sampler embroidered in cross-stitch
with red silk, ca. 1830, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

*But the angels are spirits, and when they are spirits they are not angels;
when they are sent, they become angels.*

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*

*Come back! Even as a shadow,
even as a dream.*

EURIPIDES, *Herakles* (trans. Anne Carson)

I. REQUIEM ÆTERNAM

February 1893

IN HALF MOON Street, just as she came near to the house, Esther Tull felt the first gentleness of the snow.

She paused at the front steps, setting down her case and extending a gloved hand to the railing. It was not that she felt weak, though she had feared she might. The pain was returning, but it was not yet more than she could bear. It was only that she wanted to look up. The longing was small and simple, and it came to her the moment the first flakes touched her cheek. How delicate they felt. Tender, almost, in the rawness of the air. As a child, Esther had felt a peculiar wonder when it snowed. It was like an enchantment, altering the world and making it quiet. She wanted to lift her face, as she had done then, to the soft tumble of smudges crowding the darkness.

She resisted the urge. She would not look up. There was no joy in such things now. Not in this place, on this of all nights. Instead, taking her left hand from the railing, Esther tugged her right free of its glove. She turned it cautiously, offering her cupped palm to the air, closing her eyes as she waited. A faintness that was almost nothing, then a tiny ache of cold.

At the front door, she collected herself before raising her hand to ring. She looked about her, considering. The servants' entrance

would have been more usual, but for some time now she had been directed not to use it. Esther was given no explanation for this practice and knew better than to inquire further. She twisted the brass turn to sound the bell. Some time would pass, as always, before Mr. Carew saw fit to admit her. No doubt he could bestir himself when the occasion demanded it, but as she turned in from Piccadilly she had heard the striking of half past eight from St. James's. At this hour no other callers would be expected. Not at this house.

When he appeared at last, he greeted her in his usual fashion, lowering his chin in its swaddle of jowls and raising his hand before he spoke to conceal some imagined cough.

"Well, Miss Tull." He glanced at the air above her. "That is a bad dose of weather you have brought. We must hope it will not delay His Lordship's return."

Esther said nothing in reply. She stood just as she was on the top step, waiting until he should bid her come in. Mr. Carew gazed out into the street a moment longer, then returned his attention to her, as if remembering that she was present. Stooping towards her, he made a show of plucking something from her coat, examining his fingertips as he drew them away.

"Come along, Miss Tull." He adjusted his bulk, making just enough room to let her pass. "You will be no good to us perished upon the steps."

Esther followed him through the grand entrance hall, where objects particularly prized by Lord Strythe were mounted on pedestals or loomed in dim recesses. She had never cared to examine these closely, or thought it her place to do so. She was usually conducted without ceremony to the servants' stairs at the rear of the house. But Mr. Carew paused now before a vacant plinth.

“His Lordship waits upon Lady Ashenden this evening, who is giving a gala ball in his honour. It is to be a grand affair, by all accounts. You will recall the specimen that was mounted here?”

Esther looked in discomfort at the pedestal.

“I’m sure you would, if you saw it again,” Mr. Carew said. “It is a rare bird, Miss Tull, a most notable creature, His Lordship says, that was found in Manchuria or some such place. It has a proper name, but you would have no use for that. It is very like a phoenix, I am told. A great prize, even in such a collection as his. Do you think you could name the price of it?”

With both hands, Esther clasped the handle of her sewing case. Her discomfort had sharpened, though she hoped she gave no sign of it. She shook her head.

“Come now.” Mr. Carew placed his feet a little apart and thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers. It was an unseemly posture, but he felt quite at liberty in her presence. She averted her face.

“You are paler even than usual, Miss Tull. I trust you are not unwell?”

Esther drew in a careful breath. “I am quite well, Mr. Carew.”

“Well, then,” he said. “You must give me your guess as to its price. You do not mean to tell me that you are a woman who does not know the price of things?”

He did not disguise his smirk. She had lived honestly for many years, but it had not always been so. It was useful to them—to Lord Strythe and his underlings—to keep her in mind of what they knew.

“I cannot imagine what the price of it might be, Mr. Carew. I am no judge of such things.”

His features lapsed in dissatisfaction. “Miss Tull,” he said. “Permit yourself one guess, if you please.”

Esther drew her shoulders back and let out a long breath. "Ten pounds," she said.

Mr. Carew arched away from her as if in horror, bringing the back of his hand to his brow. "Oh, Miss Tull," he said. "Ten? Ten pounds? Is that a great sum, do you think?"

He looked away, shaking with voiceless laughter.

"Ten pounds, she says, for a bird that is very nearly a cousin to the phoenix? For a bird that might have taken wing from the ashes of a fire? Why, it is very nearly priceless, but such is His Lordship's generosity that he intends to offer it for auction at the gala. The proceeds are to go to his new institution." When Esther made no reply, he grew stern again and repeated himself. "Such is his generosity, Miss Tull."

She could not bring herself to respond, only lowering her head in a manner that might appear deferential. She sensed that he was not entirely satisfied by this, but he was distracted at that moment by the appearance of a serving boy. He was a slight youth of thirteen or fourteen—Esther had seen him on other occasions—and encumbered by a mass of white flowers very nearly half his own size.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Carew," he said. "I was to give you word, you said, when the arrangement come in."

"Go and stand them in water, you mongrel, before the carpet is ruined. The dust from the lilies is a curse. Has the instrument maker come?"

"No sign yet, sir."

"Be sure to tell me when he does. There are instructions from His Lordship. Get along with you now." Carew produced a plump pocket watch and clucked at it in disapproval. "Come, Miss Tull,"

he said, as if the delay had been of her making. "We haven't the whole night to stand around gawking."

The workroom was on the fourth floor. Mr. Carew was not sprightly, and he made slow going of the climb. At each landing he paused to fuss over some small task—to rub at some invisible smear or inspect the wick of a lamp—until he had recovered his breath. Esther had often chafed at having to keep to his pace. She knew the way well enough, and might have made the ascent alone in half the time, had the circumstances been otherwise. But she was glad tonight to remain unheeded at his back, and to be spared any greater exertion. The climb had disturbed the wounds. She was conscious now of a rupturing, of a seeping heat. Some sound might escape her, if it worsened. Something might show.

Mr. Carew lumbered onwards, giving no sign that he had taken notice, and she saw nothing else that seemed out of the ordinary. A footman stood aside as they approached, a cloak of freshly brushed velvet draped over one arm. Behind certain doors, when they passed, subdued conversations could be heard, or the muted clamour of servants at some obscure but pressing business. In this house, a great deal happened that went unseen.

It was furnished handsomely enough, but sparingly lit. Lord Strythe was known to dislike the gaslights that were now seen in many fine houses, and many rooms had no more than a scattering of oil lamps. They burned less brightly, he maintained, but with a purer light. The drapes and wallpapers were in sombre shades, or they had aged to give that appearance. They had been chosen in the time of the last Lord Strythe, and his son had given them no further attention. His Lordship had never married, and in the ordinary course the ordering of such things might have fallen to his

sister. But Lady Ada did not live at Strythe House. Her opinion in these matters was not sought.

When they reached it at last, the uppermost floor was in darkness as always. The landing was no more than a narrow passage, unfurnished save for a table and chair by the door of the workroom. It was here that Mr. Carew stationed himself while Esther was occupied within. As was her habit, she waited at the head of the stairs, following only when he had lit the modest lamp on the table and lowered himself to his seat.

"There now, Miss Tull," he said, examining a handkerchief that he had put to his brow. "Our penance is done for another day. Your present commission is to be completed tonight, I gather, and then we may hope for a few weeks of ease. Do you know what Lord Strythe says of us?"

Esther shook her head, though she knew very well. This exchange was repeated on each occasion, with hardly a word altered in its sequence.

"He says that we must be quite the pair of alpinists by now, and fit to scale any peak in Europe." He set his hands on his mid-section, as if to contain his merriment. "Quite the pair of alpinists. Oh, dear me."

He waited, and Esther made a small show of amusement, prompting a sudden blossoming of pain. She brought in her elbows, raising her case a little before her.

"Oh, he is a great wit," Mr. Carew continued. "A great wit. Keep an eye on Miss Tull, he says, for she has the indomitable spirit of the mountaineer. At any moment, she might bound away to make an attempt upon the Matterhorn. And do you know, I think he may be right. But you will not bound away just yet, Miss Tull?"

She looked down at the handle of her sewing case, which she gripped so tightly now as to whiten her knuckles. "I am very tired, Mr. Carew, and I fear there is a long night ahead. I understand that there is—that there are new measurements. There is always a great deal to be done when the measurements are altered on the last night."

He said nothing, but looked for some moments over her person, as if making a careful inventory.

"It is an elaborate garment," she added. "It calls for a good deal of fine work."

He would hear the unease in her voice, surely, if she had not betrayed herself with some other sign. She had felt something again, a quick coursing against her skin. It would show somewhere. He would see.

"Quite right, Miss Tull," he said at length. "Lord Strythe is particular in his requirements, as you need not remind me. I will not keep you from your work any longer than can be helped. But before we go in, I will trouble you to open your sewing case and lay out what is in it." He swept his forearm across the yellowish tablecloth as if to clear a space, though it was bare save for the lamp. Then he settled himself in his chair with a look of complacent expectation.

"What is in it." She repeated the words as if she were a simpleton, and was conscious of a faint rasp of effort in her voice. To add to her other discomforts, she now felt a tightness take hold of her face and neck.

"You do not seem quite yourself this evening, Miss Tull. Yes, lay out what is in your sewing case, please. We will do the same again when you are leaving. It is no great novelty, surely? How am I to know you have taken nothing if I do not know what you had going in?"

"It has been some time, Mr. Carew. I had thought that perhaps . . ."

"That perhaps we had come to trust you again. His Lordship is a reasonable man, Miss Tull, but he is not a fool. It has hardly been a month since we discovered those items among your belongings."

"I meant only to finish that piece of work at home, Mr. Carew. I knew it would be missed. What else could I have intended? What do you take me for?"

Carew drew himself up at this. Esther shrank from him, though she knew his outrage was feigned. She had not meant to say so much.

"You forget yourself, Miss Tull," he said. "You have been accused of nothing. Not lately, at least. His Lordship's instructions were plain, all the same. Nothing is to be brought beyond what is needed from your sewing box, and above all nothing is to be taken away. Lord Strythe believed he had made himself understood. But perhaps he had not."

She felt herself sway a little on her feet. It was not only the pain. She had taken no supper, nor any sustenance at all since morning. "He made himself understood, Mr. Carew."

"Very good, Miss Tull." He lowered his face so that his brow was very near to her own. "I am very glad to hear it. Then you remember the matter that most concerned him?"

"I remember."

"You remember his words?"

"I remember—I remember, Mr. Carew, but not the exact words."

"His Lordship employs a good many servants, and engages any number of tradespeople. Between them they have many duties, but they have one in common. Do you recall what it is?"

"Yes, Mr. Carew."

“Well, then? Must I draw it from you like a tooth? What is the first duty of a person employed in His Lordship’s household?”

“Discretion, Mr. Carew.”

“Again, please.” Raising his hand, he gathered up the broad flesh of his ear.

“The duty of discretion, Mr. Carew.”

He waited a moment longer before drawing his face away from hers. Even with her own eyes lowered, Esther felt the insistence of his gaze. “Very well, then,” he said, resuming his seat. “In your own time, Miss Tull.”

It was the work of some minutes to empty her case entirely. She had been ill at ease already, and grew clumsy under his scrutiny, piercing her cuff with a bodkin and letting a pair of scissors tumble from her grasp. When she had put out all she had, the little table was all but covered. The garment that had been commissioned was indeed an intricate piece of work, and the machine could be used only for the plainest of stitching. There was hardly an implement in her possession that she had not had call to use in these last weeks.

Mr. Carew took hold of the table lamp and passed it slowly over the bobbins and thimbles, the needles and hooks, pausing now and then to turn something over or hold it up for inspection. She wondered if he knew the purpose of even half these items. Taking up a stiletto, he held it to the light, so that a dull gleam passed along its length. It was used only to puncture eyelets, but its long point was keen, and it might easily do worse than that. Mr. Carew set it down and returned the lamp to its place. He yawned as he turned to her, taking no great trouble to cover his mouth.

“The case itself, Miss Tull, if you please.”

Mr Carew took the case from her hands with a show of relish. He held it open beneath the lamp first, agitating it a good deal as he peered into each corner of its interior. Then he reached inside and began a thorough examination with his fingertips and the flat of his palm, so that she doubted there was a square inch of the lining he had left untouched. Finally—and by now the slackening of his expression revealed a measure of disappointment—he held the case upside down and shook it.

“Well, Miss Tull.” He reclined in his seat with a look of displeasure and gestured impatiently at her things. “Clear all this away, will you, so that we may get on with our business. Such a production you made of it. Did I not say you had nothing to fear?”

Esther began packing away her sewing kit, not meeting his eyes. Would he attempt to search her clothing? He had not gone so far before, but might be moved to it by some new suspicion. She replied with as much evenness as she could manage. “Those were not your words, Mr. Carew, but perhaps that was your meaning.”

He gave her a keen look, but pursued the subject no further. When she had gathered up her things, he went to unlock the door. While his back was turned, she made the last of her preparations. With delicate movements, she adjusted her clothing. It was to ease her discomfort, in part, but that was not her only concern. She had made certain alterations, in places that were hidden from view. She would depend on them, when the time came.

“There now,” said Mr. Carew, as they entered the workroom. “All neat and tidy. Whatever else may be said about us, let no one give it out that we keep a slovenly shop. What do you say, Miss Tull?”

Again, he had made the same observation many times, and always in the same words. This time, at least, he did not wait for

her response. The workroom was always cold, and he never stayed longer than he must. With a wheezy sigh, he slouched towards the great iron strongbox that stood in the corner opposite the door. Esther watched his movements carefully, taking note of the pocket to which he returned one key before drawing out another.

“You might oblige me by looking away, Miss Tull.”

Esther turned her back, since it humoured him to have her do so. She knew by now what was kept in the safe. Mr. Carew had fond notions of his own shrewdness. Perhaps his master did, too, since he was entrusted with so much, but in truth he was often inattentive. She had taken those opportunities that came. She had seen enough.

She stood in silence as he brought the pieces of the gown to the workbench, taking care to give no sign of unsteadiness in her posture. She heard him return to the strongbox, his tread ponderous and shuffling. It would take him three trips, or even four. It was not only the dress that was locked away, but the box of cards on which the measurements were marked. Esther did not know how these measurements had been procured, and did not wish to.

She listened carefully when he returned to lock the safe. The hinges were apt to creak, but she had greased them with oil from the Singer sewing machine, applying only a little at a time. There was a dull clang as he shouldered the door closed, but that could be avoided with gentleness. The hinges themselves made no sound at all.

She turned, hearing him approach the bench again.

“There you are now, Miss Tull.” Mr. Carew said this with a small flourish, as if to emphasise some act of benevolence. “You have all you need, I believe.”

Esther waited. Nothing must be rushed. There must be no appearance of urgency.

“Thank you, Mr. Carew.” Her tone was not curt, exactly, but neither was it courteous. She had repeated the words before her looking glass, adjusting the set of her jaw by degrees, until she was sure of the effect they would have. Mr. Carew was accustomed to her deference, and when he found it lacking he favoured only one form of correction.

He approached her, standing so close that his knees pressed faintly against her outer skirts. His breathing had slowed now, but it was laboured still. She felt it against her cheek. He smelled of plum cake, of must and snuff.

“Is everything to your satisfaction, Miss Tull?”

“Yes, Mr. Carew.” She did not soften her voice. Not yet.

“Are you quite sure?” He leaned closer. “Is there something you would like me to put right?”

“Nothing, Mr. Carew.”

He raised his hand, and she felt his fingers curl about her nape. “You know you may come to me, Miss Tull, if you want for anything. I will be glad to see to your needs.”

Esther raised her face to his, and as she did so she made a small show of distress and contrition. This was all that was required. As Mr. Carew studied her with satisfaction, Esther made a movement he did not detect.

“Forgive me, Mr. Carew,” she said. “It is only that I am tired. My sister is unwell, as you know, and I sat with her for much of the night.”

“There now, Miss Tull.” He turned away, his attention already elsewhere. “We have each our cross to bear. I will leave you to your work. The door must be locked, as always, but you need only knock. I will be at my little station outside the door. Now, that reminds me. Where did I put down my newspaper?”

He had left it on the workbench, almost at his elbow, where he could not have failed to notice it. He waited until Esther picked it up and handed it to him, a small act of reparation that completed her penance. He unfolded it as he crossed to the door, peering at the ghoulish illustration that took up the greater part of the front page.

“Heaven help us, Miss Tull. It seems a resident of Southwark was found devoured by his own cats. What has the world come to, that such things can happen not three miles from us?”

He continued tutting and clucking as he let himself out, and when at last he locked the door behind him Esther released a long quiet breath. She allowed herself to slump a little, now that she was no longer observed, and to loosen her clothing where it pressed against the injured place. She had imagined this moment many times, fearing always that her courage would fail at the last. She had prayed, though she knew the wickedness of doing so. The Lord could not be called upon by those who had chosen her course.

Yet the strength had come. It held now even as her posture slackened, like a wire that had been drawn taut at her core. She had saved the drug until the last possible moment, being unused to its effects. She had done the stitching without it, fearing it would leave her insensible, only binding her jaw with a leather strap to keep herself from screaming. The relief, when it came, had made her weep. The opium had done its work, but she had endured the worst without it. Whatever strength she had found had some other source.

When it was done, she had swabbed the stitches with a solution of carbolic acid, then examined her work in the looking glass. The words had appeared backwards, and she was not confident in

her letters on the best of days. But she had taken her time over it, meaning to be sure. There was a small satisfaction in that, and in preserving the neatness of her work even at the height of her agony. She had taken a fleeting pride in her efforts, but had seen that in the next moment for the sin that it was. She had turned away from the glass to dress, lest she make herself late.

Esther roused herself. She had much to do still, and the danger had not passed. From a pocket sewn to the inner part of her petticoat—this was the first of the alterations she had made—she drew out a wad of ragged gauze that she had soaked in spirits. Reaching beneath her clothing, she dabbed at the skin around the stitches. She did so without looking, since she could not risk unclothing herself further, and kept one hand clamped to her mouth in case a sound should escape her. She withdrew the swab at intervals to examine it, refolding it and readying a clean patch once a portion was saturated. It was not that she feared for the cleanliness of the wounds—with that, at least, she need not trouble herself—but she was anxious that the stitches might be too much obscured by blood. They must be plainly visible, or nearly so, or her efforts would be wasted. It was a small part of her plan, and might have been done without if she had only one purpose, but it was not only a matter of saving those who could still be saved. She had made a promise and meant to keep it. For a little longer she must conceal her purpose, then the moment would come. She would bear witness, in the end, whatever might become of her soul.

She stooped to unlace her shoes, wincing as she worked them off. The pain had sharpened, but she refused to give it her attention. These were the moments that mattered most. She must be quick and exact in every movement, and above all she must be silent.

Esther kept to the edges of the room, where the boards under her stockinged feet had less give. Her father had taught her that, many years ago, and a good deal else. She remembered him fondly enough, for all his wickedness. Reaching the strongbox, she paused to listen, just as he would have done.

Stealing is half waiting, girl. His face was long gone, but she could still raise his voice. *Stealing is half waiting, and the other half is listening.*

A minute passed, maybe longer. Mr. Carew coughed once, but no other sound came. From a narrow pocket sewn into her cuff, she drew out the key. He had felt nothing when she took it from him. She had learned her skills at her father's side, in the low places of Spitalfields that she had known as a child. She had renounced them years before, but they came to her again without effort. She had learned an honest trade when her father was gone, but one that had kept her fingers nimble. She had not forgotten.

The lock was stiff, but gave without a sound. She had greased it too, working the oil in with a crochet hook. Again she waited, closing her eyes this time to sharpen her hearing. Nothing. She eased the door open by a fraction. Silence still. Another inch.

She stopped dead. The noise had been slight—a momentary shudder of heavy iron before her hand stilled it—and Mr. Carew's hearing was not keen. But in this silence even he might have been disturbed. Esther glanced at the workbench, where her sewing case lay open. She did not wish for it, in spite of all his petty cruelties, but she had given it thought. If he discovered her now, she would have nothing to lose by it. She was quicker by far, and would close the distance in three strides. He would find out then what use a stiletto might be put to. She would do what she must.

But no, he only coughed again, and presently she heard a low chuckling. He had found something else to amuse him in the *Illustrated London News*. Esther returned her attention to the strongbox door. In one movement, soft but swift, she opened it halfway. It was all she needed.

The crystal vessels were arranged on a tray that occupied the whole of the middle shelf. It was lined with velvet, and each bottle stood in its own recess. There were eleven in all—there had been twelve, but one recess was now empty—and until now she had only glimpsed them. They were beautifully made, fluted and intricately faceted, and gleamed mutely in the yellowish light. A man in Antwerp had fashioned them, that much she knew, and to His Lordship's particular design. Nothing like them could be had in all of England, Mr. Carew maintained. It was more than he ought to have said, but he took a pitiful pride in such things and a braggart is a poor keeper of secrets. Esther did not know everything, but she knew enough.

Of the eleven vessels, eight were empty and discoloured. They could be used only once, that much she had learned, too, and yet each was returned afterwards to its place. When they had put it to use—later tonight, perhaps, she did not know—they would bring back a ninth blackened bottle. They would see then what had been done, but that was a moment she would not witness. It was a pity.

The remaining three were intact. At first glance they too appeared empty, but their stoppers were in place still and cloaked in a rich wax. At the base of each lay a dark fraction of viscous oil. The resin, she had heard them call it. She knew, too, that this resin turned to vapour once opened to the air, that it was the vapour

that did the work. Beyond that, no more had been said in her hearing, but no more had been needed. She had formed a clear enough notion.

It was not only the resin they talked of, but the vessels themselves. The Dutchman would make no more, for reasons she had not discovered. Maybe they had quarrelled with him, or he had taken ill. Another craftsman might be found, but it would be no easy matter. They were not priceless, these bottles, but they were something near to it.

From a hidden fold in her skirts, Esther worked free what she had made. It was a satchel of sorts, fashioned for strength from sail-cloth. It was divided into chambers or pouches, and each of these was lined with quilting so that the vessels would make no noise when they were carried side by side. With the utmost care, she grasped the neck of an intact bottle and lifted it from its place. It was a heavy thing, though it held what could hardly be more than an ounce of fluid. Still, it was smaller than she had judged and disappeared entirely when she slipped it into its pouch. That was good. Better too much room than too little.

Again Esther waited, though it was a struggle now to keep still. *Wait, girl. Wait and listen.*

She tucked the second bottle into the satchel, where it nestled softly by its neighbour, then waited again. Ten seconds. Twenty. She took the third vessel.

When it was done at last, Esther returned to the workbench. Settling on her stool, she allowed her gaze to wander. Even without its sleeves, the gown had a sad, vacant splendour. The gloves and the veil had been laid out too, and those few pieces of lacework that remained unfinished.

She would be free of all this, as she had yearned to be for so long. It was not fondness that detained her in these last moments, but some necessity that she could not name. It had not come into her plans to spend time in prayer, but she felt now that it was called for. She knelt before the gown, since it was a way of being near to the one who was to have worn it. And to the others, who had gone before. It was a way to honour them.

Another thought came to her. From the box that had been set on the table, Esther drew out the newest card. However the measurements were taken, it was done with great exactness, down to the eighth of an inch. She scanned the columns, sounding them out in a whisper, and as she did so the girl's slight form came to her, as surely known as if it were cradled now in her arms. Softly, she put her fingertips to the card. They left a dim smirch of blood.

When there was nothing else to keep her, Esther stood for a moment with no particular purpose. She smoothed down her skirts and put a hand to her hair, but did not otherwise concern herself with her appearance. She looked for the last time about the room, and wondered if some great surge of panic would flood her thoughts.

There was nothing, nothing more. It was time.

Esther stooped to retrieve a low wooden step from beneath the workbench, turning it over to inspect its feet. She had lined them with felt so as to soften the noise. She set it carefully beneath the window, waiting afterwards for ten or fifteen seconds, then stood on the step and worked at the catch above the sash. This too had been oiled in preparation, and came free with only a small effort. The sash itself gave easily in its frame, just as it had done when she tried it last.

She could not see the lights of the Walsingham House Hotel, when she had hauled herself out and stood upright. She had

imagined she might, but the rooftops opposite obscured the better part of the view. At the end of the street a man stirred in a spill of lamplight. Beyond that, she could make out Piccadilly and the dark fringe of Green Park. Nothing more.

Esther drew the first vessel from its padded chamber and held it before her. She rocked it gently, watching the slow gleam of the resin, then leaned a little way outwards and let it fall. The sound it made was small and delicate. She did not look down. That was the one thing she knew she must not do.

She caught sight of the man again. He had crossed the street, moving quickly now. Esther paid no attention. They had set someone to watch, perhaps. He had seen her and knew that something was amiss. It would make no difference, not now. It was too late. She took the second bottle from the satchel and let it fall. Then the third.

She allowed herself a moment then. It was something she had promised to herself, that before the end there would be an unburdened instant, belonging to her alone. She took a long breath and released it. Her own living warmth, turned to mist in the cold. But it was not as fierce as she had imagined, that cold, and there was very little wind. She took her place on the ledge, spreading her arms a little way to steady herself, and it was only then—sensing its intimate scatter against her knuckles—that she remembered the snow.

It was everywhere, when she lifted her face, falling now with soft insistence. It felt tender almost, like a final kindness, and when the moment came it was not like falling at all. She offered herself, nothing more, and the waiting air was swift and sure, knowing her for its own. It rushed to gather her up, at last, to take her and carry her weightlessly from the earth.