Spilt Milk

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We do and we do not step into the same river,
we are and we are not.

Heraclitus

They were a mend-and-make-do kind of family and you had to love them for it. For their patchwork quilt of births, deaths and marriages, the mistakes and foolish regrets, and all the pretty little silken scraps of good things too. They had come together for a family picnic that day. Nellie sat in her deckchair in the shade of summer-green willows, watching them arrive.

The slow procession of men, women and children made their way down to the riverbank, stepping through long grass, one after the other, their hands drifting through the day's fragile bloom of field poppies, all the new-born crimson petals falling at their touch.

The murmur of voices, the greetings and talk turned to seasons remembered, harvests and ploughing, the long days of childhood. They discussed winters long ago gone, whose legendary harshness were in retrospect to be marvelled at and even doubted a little, particularly this deep in the year when the barley fields were pale gold and in the distance beyond the farm, the village with its church spire and the tarmac roads beyond shimmered into the vagueness of a heat haze.

Black and white farm dogs lay low, eyeing the Tupperware boxes of sandwiches and sausage rolls. The transistor radio announced cricket scores. A tartan rug was spread out by the bulrushes, and the baby in its frilly white knickers and matching bonnet wriggled and laughed while the women cooed over her. Sunburnt men sprawled in the grass with bottled beers, straw hats tipped low across their brows.

Resemblances were strong among them, and Nellie often thought the missing ones, those who were absent today, would

be no different. They would no doubt have inherited the stubborn streak that ran in the family, the same tendency to freckle in the sun, the same deep eyes and perhaps the overfull upper lip that must have come from Rose originally and had somehow found its way through generations of faces, so that some of them shared what they called the 'Marsh sisters' look'.

Oh, heavens, Nellie thought, eyeing the new baby. And how did I get to be so old?

She looked at the river, its cool waters running through the fields. She longed to take off her shoes and stockings and dip her feet in its currents once again. A frog croaked and leapt in the reeds. As a young girl Nellie had known love by this river and too much sorrow to speak of. She knew its heart and what it guarded there, down where fish the colour of stones lurked like secrets in its dark and silted bed.

A boat was pushed out onto the water. The oars splashed. Nellie listened to the talk around her, the baby babbling, the creak of the poplar trees. She could feel the earth gathering itself under her feet. The low buzz of things growing. The river that would run on into the future. She remembered the young woman she had once been. Go on, she urged her memories. Go on. Swim!

PART ONE

One

Their eyes were the colour of the river. Grey as rain-swelled waters. It was how you knew the three of them were related. Nellie, Vivian and Rose Marsh.

They lived miles outside the village, down by the river which curved like the blade of a hay sickle around their home. No children needed loving or scolding in their two-up, two-down thatched cottage, no men needed breakfasts cooked or work clothes mended, but there was still plenty to occupy the women.

Rose believed in the glory of work and each morning the sisters left their beds as though their names had been called, rising to their chores before dawn. There was the rustle of skirts, the rough sound of boots on wooden floors, a chorus of coughing, sleep still thick in their lungs. The stove door slammed, water boiled. Chamber pots were emptied, the clank of the ash bucket handle ringing out in the silence that hung over meadows and woodland.

Nellie rinsed the chamber pots under the water pump by the garden gate. This morning she had a feeling something was going to happen, and she wasn't sure whether it was good or bad. She hoped it wasn't bad luck stirring in the March wind. She would go in soon and tell Rose and Vivian what she felt. They'd probably roll their eyes. Rose might say she was a farm worker, not a fortune-teller.

She touched the rabbit's paw in her pocket and decided it would be good luck. They deserved a change in fortune. Rose was in poor health again. The potato clamp was nearly empty, and mice had got at the flour bin last week when Vivian left the lid off.

She was about to go in when she heard footsteps and in the dim light saw a man walking along the grassy track towards the cottage. He had a knapsack on his back, his hat pulled low over his ears, his collar turned up. He walked quickly, as though he might be carrying news. With sudden excitement Nellie imagined him stopping at the cottage. Perhaps he was a distant relative. Another family member long forgotten, come to change their lives and fortunes? She waited, watching. He had come for a reason, surely?

He took the path down to the river away from the cottage, past the handsome black poplar trees which gave their cottage its name. As he walked away, Nellie felt a sense of disappointment that was so deep, it was as though she had suffered a great loss. She knew there was no sense in it – nobody ever visited them – yet she had been sure he was going to speak to her. He walked on, past the small wooden dock where fishermen tied punts and boats in the summer months. Nellie loved to swim there, a place where the river bed dropped down into deeper water. Even in winter, she braved its icy waters.

A flock of starlings shook themselves noisily out of the trees, streaming upwards into the turquoise sky. When she looked again, the man was gone and her sisters were at the door, calling her inside.

All through breakfast there was much talk and discussion. It dispelled Nellie's earlier low spirits, replacing them with a feeling of purpose. She had been the one who had seen the man. It felt like an important claim to make.

'Was he tall?' asked Vivian, pouring honey on her porridge and licking a drop of spilled sweetness from her finger.

'Not terribly.'

'Short then?'

Nellie shook her head.

'He was whistling. Though I didn't recognize the tune.'

'A whistler and a crowing hen will bring the devil from his den,' said Rose briskly. 'We should lock the door today.'

Rose didn't like a stranger coming so close to the cottage. She opened a newspaper and began searching for stories of escaped convicts or drunken soldiers absconding from barracks. Single men looked for wives round here. A woman could be bought for seven shillings and sixpence, the cost of a marriage licence. A married man got himself a better wage on a farm than a single one.

Rose looked at Vivian eating porridge, twenty-three years old, her blonde hair swept into a bun. Nellie, fifteen months younger, sat beside her. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair was plaited in a tight style that pulled at the corners of her eyes. She was strong looking. Moon-faced with the smooth features of a carved saint. She was the one who most closely resembled Mother.

When their father died, Rose and Mother had lived in this cottage with the new baby Nellie and toddling Vivian. It had been a brief time of perfect happiness after the misery of losing Father. And then, just after Nellie's second birthday, Mother caught diphtheria, brought to their East Anglian village by city children come from London to holiday at Hymes Court, the big estate twenty miles away. Rose was seventeen when Mother died, just a child herself. The sense of abandonment burned within her even now, so many years later. There had been anger too, at the unfairness of being left to raise the girls alone. In those early years of bringing them up, working at the Langhams' farm, struggling to keep them fed and clothed, Rose's dreams had been filled with ways of losing the children. She'd imagined forests where she might leave them. She'd dreamed of market-day crowds, the girls in their straw hats, neat pinafores and button-up boots, motionless as pale stones, and she hurrying away from them, fast as rainwater rushing down a drain.

Some nights when Rose had longed for sleep, after a day's work at the Langhams' farm, when the little girls suffered from illness and would not settle, she remembered the story of Moses. He was floated downriver by his mother and found by a

rich queen who then charged the mother to care for the boy. As the children's coughing and crying filled Rose's exhausted hours, the story made more and more sense to her. She would float them down the river in the hope that some rich lady might find them.

In the light of morning though, she always changed her mind. How could Moses' mother have abandoned the child knowing the river might take him for itself?

'I suppose I am stuck with you,' she told the girls. She remembered how their grey eyes had stared anxiously up at her. How they had clung to her skirts.

Seasons came and went and came again, until one day Rose looked at the sisters and was shocked. They were young women, just as she had once been. Her fears over raising them were replaced by another fear. That they might leave her. So she had decided they would be spinsters, all three of them, and live here for the rest of their lives, together. Quietly. Hidden away from the world.

Rose ran her finger across the newspaper pages, turning them carefully.

'There's nothing here about escaped prisoners or soldiers absconding. This man had a knapsack, you say?'

'That's right. And a black billycock hat.'

'I'll ask Mr Langham,' said Rose, closing up the newspaper. 'I believe he was taking on a new man at the stack yard. Maybe that's who your stranger is. Just a nobody.'

Nellie watched Rose scanning the newspaper. Her elder sister wasn't interested in the latest stories of suffragettes and Lloyd George's hatred of them. Rose didn't want to read about Home Rule in Ireland or polar explorers in lands of snow and ice. The sinking of the *Titanic* the year before, in 1912, meant nothing to her. Ships can do two things she said. They can float or they can sink. Where's the news in that?

Rose loved stories closer to home. Reports of vagrants stealing food from honest tables, their knapsacks bulging with other people's belongings. The local gazette was her preferred reading. It was full of dreadful stories that made them lock their door at night and fear the creaking sounds of the isolated house.

Since childhood, Rose regaled Nellie and Vivian with other scandalous tales of commercial travellers preying on young women. Men who stole kisses and more from ignorant country girls hankering after romance and feathers for their hats. According to Rose, these men courted lonely countrywomen, offering love like a sleight of hand, a card trick, a gift they gave and took back, leaving behind bitter husbands and unwanted children who looked nothing like anybody else and grew up with roving ways. The stories were meant to frighten Nellie and Vivian, but secretly they were thrilled by them.

Nellie longed to glimpse the salesmen who brought their hand carts into the village, their footsteps quiet as falling snow. The sisters' cottage was too far from the village for them to come calling. She wanted to be sold ribbons and dainties and pills for ailments. To be persuaded to buy miracle cures for disorders of women, for rickets and palpitations of the heart.

Nellie watched Rose close up the newspaper and fold it neatly, adding it to the pile on the dresser. Had their elder sister been their carer all these years, or their gaoler?

'He didn't look dangerous to me,' she said.

'They never do,' replied Rose.

Nellie glanced at the sky through the small kitchen window. It was going to rain. That's what she had felt earlier. Not luck settling upon them. Just a change in the weather. The disappointment she'd felt when the man turned away from the cottage settled on her once more.

It poured for three days, curtains of rain that shut down the landscape. Rose went to work in the Langhams' farm kitchens and

came home at night with news that the river had flooded in the next village. The mystery of the man was solved. He was a hired hand come to take the place of a lad who'd been kicked by a cart-horse a few weeks earlier.

Nellie and Vivian exchanged disappointed glances. They had discussed him at night in their shared bed, another one of their sweet, mad, whispered conversations. They'd imagined him as a rich man, then a poor man, or a travelling magician pulling rabbits from his hat.

Vivian, who read as many romance novels as she could persuade the vicar's wife to lend her, had decided he was a man betrayed by his sweetheart. Nellie, always warm-hearted, imagining his sorrow, said he must be walking the length of Britain to forget her. By the time he got to Scotland, she was sure he would not be able to recall her name.

'Oh no,' Vivian had said, pressing her hand to her breast. She was the kind of girl who tended to brood on things. 'Oh no, you're completely wrong, Nellie.'

He would remember his sweetheart for ever. For eternity. True love was like that. It could never be forgotten in a lifetime.

'A farmhand?' Nellie asked Rose. 'You are sure it was him?'

'That's right. A hired hand.'

Nellie and Vivian pulled glum faces. There was nothing remotely interesting about a farmhand.

On the fourth day the rain hadn't stopped and Rose asked Nellie to dig out the ditches by the house. Rose coughed and spat a bloom of redness into a handkerchief. 'Mr Langham will be sending a farm boy over with sandbags. Put them across the door.'

'Don't go,' said Vivian. 'Stay home today, Rose. You should rest.'

Rose breathed in, a wheezing sound. She waved her hand to bat Vivian away. 'Don't fuss over me. I'm staying over at the farm tonight as Mrs Langham's son has been taken poorly. I'll be back tomorrow.'

Nellie fetched a clean cambric hanky for her. Lavender scented, its edges rolled and stitched by Vivian. Rose was worn down by work and ill health but she would not rest. Vivian wrapped a scarf around Rose's neck and stood on tiptoe to kiss her cheek.

They watched her go along the riverbank. Always the same in her old black coat and short-brimmed hat. Today she had a grain sack around her shoulders, a small protection against the driving rains. She was as tall as a man and bony, with hunched shoulders. She disappeared into the storm with the funny stiff-legged gait she had, her wispy plait the colour of bonfire smoke. What colour her hair had once been was unknown. Blonde, perhaps? She was a private woman who rejected any gestures of affection between them. Rose was loyal and yet unknowable, a mystery just as much as a fixture in Nellie's life.

All morning, Nellie dug ditches. Rainwater dripped in her eyes and off the end of her nose. Her hat flapped wetly against her face, and her skirt clung to her legs. By the afternoon, as the wind slanted the rain sideways, she was tired and shivering. She climbed out of the ditch and went inside.

'I've prepared a bath for you,' said Vivian, hurrying her in, helping her out of her wet clothes, undoing the hooks and eyes on her dress, the laces on her hobnail boots.

Nellie lowered herself into the steaming tin bath in front of the stove. Vivian's love and kindnesses were as warm as the hip bath she sat in. She admired her sister. Vivian was a romantic soul, unaware of the hard toil that farmwork was for Nellie and Rose. She kept their home, and was gentle and gay, and good with the names of plants and wildflowers that grew around the cottage. She was a great reader and there was always the feeling that, with better luck, she might have been a schoolteacher instead of a washerwoman.

'I'm coming in too,' Vivian announced. She undressed, letting her slack black pinafore drop to the ground, clambering over her sister, who complained but laughed, pushing her with her hands.

They were a muddle of legs and arms, slippery buttocks and bellies until they finally sat facing each other, legs dangling out of the tub, water slopping onto the floor.

Nellie watched Vivian washing. Her naked body was always a surprise, no matter how many times she saw it. With her clothes on, Vivian looked like a pale little moth, fluttering from one chore to the next. Naked, she was a secret revealed. Something private and delicate. Watching her was like peeling back the petals from a flower and seeing the stamen hidden inside.

'You are a rare beauty, Vivian.'

'And you are splendid, Nell.'

'I'm like Rose,' said Nellie, passing her sister the block of soap. 'Too tall and I have shoulders like a man.' She stretched a long leg out of the water, revealing a scar across her thigh, a farming accident when she had been a girl. 'And look at that,' she said. 'It's lucky for me I don't need to worry about finding a husband.'

Vivian laughed, a rich, rippling sound, unguarded and loud. She lathered up the block of yellow soap in her hands. 'You are handsome and fine, with very pretty ankles, and that's what counts for a man, isn't it? You are my splendid twin and I would marry you tomorrow.'

Nellie laughed. They were not twins. They both knew they were not. But long ago, as children left alone with nothing but their imagination to entertain them, they had created this story for themselves and still liked its fantastic qualities. They'd decided Vivian had fallen out of her mother's womb early on account of her small size, while Nellie had grown extra large to take up Vivian's place. So though they had been born a good fifteen months apart, they were still twins. Nellie knew this was not possible, but she and Vivian had told the story to each other so many times, the truth of it was unimportant.

And what did truth have to do with stories, anyway? The truth as far as the villagers saw it was that Rose, Nellie and Vivian were unfortunate spinsters, forgotten and dull, hidden away from the

world. In fact, they had chosen not to marry. Truth was always different, depending on whether you were the listener or the teller of a story.

Nellie's favourite childhood tale was about two little girls found in a pit in the woods nearby. Nobody could ever say if it was true or not. The wild girls had green skin and spoke a language unintelligible to others. The girls smelled like fox cubs and ate only fruit. The villagers sold them to a travelling showman. He made them eat meat and would not let them be together, and soon the sisters died of sorrow and stomach pains.

Who cared about the veracity of that village tale? Nellie still, even now as a 22-year-old woman, felt angry the girls had been separated. And there was the truth of the story, if it needed one. The way it made her feel like her heart was swollen and raw with love for Vivian.

Vivian reached a wet hand over to the table where she picked up a small bundle of burnt matches. With a match she drew a soft black line carefully across both her lids, close to the lashes. She opened her eyes. The black made them shine and appear luminous, like the eyes of music-hall stars on cigarette cards. She handed the match to Nellie.

'Your turn.'

Nellie took it just as someone rapped on the window.

A male voice called out, 'Hello? Anyone in there?'

Nellie dropped the match in alarm and the two women began to struggle to get out of the bath, water sloshing across the hard earth floor.

'I saw a face!' cried Vivian. 'It's those boys again.'

A shadow passed by the window, and Nellie hurled the bar of soap at it.

'Get out of here!'

Vivian was crawling on the floor, trying to reach her dress on the back of the chair.

Nellie stood naked, her long limbs dripping soapy water.

'Take a bloomin' good look at us, would you?' she yelled. 'I'll put the wind up you. I'll tell your mothers what you were doing. I know who you are!'

'Nellie, sshhh! Don't shout!'

'Why not? They need telling.'

Nellie felt her face darken with shame. This was what being a spinster meant. No village lad would dare spy on a married woman. He'd get horsewhipped for his trouble. But she and Vivian were fair game for rowdy boys.

'They'll be calling us witches next,' she said. 'Like poor old Anna Moats.'

Vivian was already dressed. She pulled on her boots.

'She *is* a witch.'

'She is not.'

There was a knock at the door. And again.

'I've got sandbags from Mr Langham. I can leave them here. Are you all right in there? Mrs Langham said to see you were safe. The river's rising fast.'

The sisters looked at each other in panic.

'You go upstairs,' whispered Vivian. 'I'll answer the door.'

In her bedroom Nellie fell onto her knees, pressing an eye to a hole in the floorboards. Vivian opened the door to a man wearing wet-weather clothes, a big black rubberized cape, and a hat that covered his face.

'Good day, Miss,' he said, taking his hat off and shaking the rain from it. He had high cheekbones. Dark hair. 'I've sandbags for you. Terrible weather, isn't it? If this goes on much longer we'll all be turning into fish. I nearly had to swim here myself.'

He told Vivian that Rose was ill. Mrs Langham had called the doctor and Rose would not be coming home tonight. Nellie could see Vivian holding her hand to her face, trying to hide her black-lined eyes.

Nellie crossed to the window and watched the man leave, hunched against the weather. It was the man she had seen walk-

ing. Her stranger. The farmhand. Rain splattered against the window and she finished dressing. When she looked out of the window again, he was standing by the river, looking back at the cottage. She slipped away, afraid he might see her staring.

Vivian mopped up the spilt bathwater and Nellie made Rose's bed, tucking in the blankets extra tight. Neat corners, a blanket turned down properly, pleased Rose, and Nellie liked to please her. A black-bound Bible sat on a chair in her room. In it was a photograph taken at a village fete to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in1897. Rose, with a very young Nellie and Vivian, stood by a flower arch away from the crowds. She had on a wide-brimmed hat decorated with flowers. The three of them held hands. Rose looked young and hopeful.

Rose didn't look young or hopeful these days. The time was coming when she would be unable to work. Then they would care for her here. She'd lie in this bed until the end came for her, and what would become of Nellie and Vivian then?

Nellie held the photograph up to the light. She had no memory of it being taken. She loved the way they held hands so tightly, like paper-cut maids in a row. Or maybe she loved the wonder of a recorded image from another time, like the magic lantern shows she'd seen as a child in the parish rooms, all the brightly coloured, faraway foreign lands that had astonished her innocent eyes.

The next morning Nellie was collecting eggs in the henhouse and was the first to see the flood water coming across the fields. She ran through the orchard and found the front gardens flooded. Despite the sandbags against the door, the parlour was already ankle deep in water. A knot of shining eels flickered on the scullery floor. Vivian was trying to scoop them into a bucket.

Nellie carried Rose's newspapers to safety. As she came back downstairs she heard a sharp cracking sound, then the front door creaking and groaning on its hinges. The flood waters were

pressing against it. The thin wooden panels of the front door gave way. They split and broke, and a gushing wave of dirty brown water exploded through the door. Riding on it, a monster burst into the kitchen. A three-foot-long fish with clouded eyes. It came through the broken slats, fat and fast as tarnished coins tumbling from a ripped purse.

Vivian screamed. Nellie tried to take the thrashing beast into her arms. It was an omen. A sign of luck. An antique creature come from the depths of the river.

'We should put it back,' Nellie yelled. 'Free it. It's a sign of good luck.'

Vivian climbed onto the kitchen table. 'For heaven's sake! Do you think it's going to grant you three wishes? Get away from it, Nellie, before it hurts you.'

'It belongs to the river,' Nellie insisted.

The pike bucked and flapped at her feet. It was a muscular creature and solid; it flexed and panicked like a carthorse trying to free itself from deep mud. They were never going to be able to save it. In desperation, Nellie took an iron poker and ended its suffering with a blow to the head.

'I'm going to get herbs to cook it with,' she said in the silence that followed.

Vivian climbed off the table and gave Nellie a hug. 'It's not magic. It's just a fish,' she whispered, and turned her attentions to catching the pots and kettles floating around her knees.

Nellie waded through the garden. The rain was softer now but still persistent. The fields were covered in pale lakes of water. The cottage was an island, a place where monsters could wash up and yet, not far away, the modern world hurried along. There was a daily omnibus service to neighbouring villages. It stopped outside the post office in the village where telegrams could be sent all over the world, so the postmistress claimed. A railway station too, where you could ride a train all the way to London. New factories had sprung up, miles downriver. On still days their hooters could

be heard, telling the workers it was time to go home. The young twentieth century was all around her. It was just that their lives were not a part of it.

Three wishes, Vivian had said. One for each sister.

Good health for Rose. Ostrich feathers for Vivian and sherbet for her sweet tooth. Nellie didn't know what she'd wish for. A train ticket or a boat ride to other lands. Maybe just an end to the long winters when she froze her hands blue, harvesting turnips out of the frosted mud.

What happened next stayed in Nellie's mind for a long time. A boat rowed into view. In it were two men. The one standing, the one without the oars in his hands, was her stranger.

'We're to take you to the farm,' he called. 'Mrs Langham sent us. Your sister's very ill.'

'No, thank you,' called Nellie. She heard Rose's voice in her head, telling her to send the men away. 'No, we don't need help, thank you. We'll walk there.'

Then Vivian appeared at the broken door. She had her hat and coat on; the pike, wrapped in brown paper, lay in her arms.

'We'll come with you.'

Nellie could see her lip tremble a little. Vivian rarely left the cottage.

'Bring the boat up to the door, please.'

The two women sat with the pike lying across their laps. Nellie held a black umbrella over their heads. The boat rocked gently on the flood waters. The rain was softly falling, leaving misted jewels of raindrops on their clothes.

'And that pike just came in through the door?' the stranger asked, wiping his face with his sleeve. Nellie tried to imagine his name. Was he a Tom, a Dick or a Harry?

'Now that's a poacher's excuse if ever I heard one. The local policeman would laugh till his socks fell down if you tried that one on him.'

'It is a gift for Mrs Langham,' Nellie said, glancing up from under the brim of the umbrella. She noticed his eyes were dark brown, dark as winter plough. 'There are no poachers in our family. We do not take what does not belong to us.'

She looked down again and the rest of the journey passed in silence. When the boat slid onto dry land up by the farmhouse, Nellie shook out the umbrella and closed it. Vivian held the pike, struggling slightly under its weight. The sisters stood up, readying to get out. The rower took the fish from Vivian and the stranger held out his hand.

'Here, let me help you ladies out.'

Vivian ignored him. Nellie hesitated and then put out her hand.

'That's a good girl,' he said, and grasped her fingers in his. His hand was warm, hard and muscular. There was a pulse in his thumb that she felt as he pressed it against the flesh of her palm. Had she ever held a man's hand before? But yes. How could she have forgotten? There had been the incident that had scandalized them all. She remembered and stumbled, nearly falling over the lip of the boat. Heat flushed her face and she laughed nervously, pulling her hand away, stepping quickly away from the man.

'Come on, Joe, leave off playing the gent and give us a hand,' said the rower as Nellie and Vivian carried the fish towards the farmhouse. 'We're to drag the boat up to the stables.'

Joe. His name was *Joe*. She whispered it to herself as they trudged through the mud, the word as round and smooth as a river pebble in her mouth.

'The doctor has been,' said Mrs Langham, folding her solid arms across her chest. The woman was a great one for misery. She had brown hair as fine as darning wool, eyes that glittered with the thrill of impending disaster, a high colour in her round cheeks. 'He came for my son, who was taken bad the other day, and he

heard your sister coughing and didn't like the sound of it. She had a shocking bad night, I'm afraid. The doctor thinks she should go to hospital.'

'Oh no,' said Vivian. 'Rose wouldn't want that.'

'Rose has been like this before, Mrs Langham,' said Nellie. 'We'll get her home and nurse her ourselves.'

Mrs Langham shook her head.

'It's a time of waiting, my dears. You'll just have to see what her fever does.'

'She would prefer to be at home with us,' insisted Vivian.

'You can't move her now. Go and sit with her. Be with her in her last hours. Take the vigil. Poor old Rose, she's not had much of a life.'

Rose lay in a single bed, a pale grey blanket covering her, sweat dampening her brow.

'Take me home.'

'We will,' whispered Vivian. 'Tomorrow.'

Rose closed her eyes. She seemed to sink lower into her pillows. 'Together you will be safe. You must promise me you'll always be together.'

The sisters promised easily. Of course they would stay together. Hadn't they always?

'The morphine has calmed her,' said Vivian after a time. The two of them were settled in chairs, blankets over their knees. The lamp had been put out and the room was in darkness. The sound of their sister's breathing washed back and forth.

'Joe is a fine name, don't you think?' whispered Nellie. 'The man in the billycock hat? His name is Joe.'

'Sshh. Don't wake Rose.'

'She's sleeping. Joe must be short for Joseph, I suppose?'

'I have no idea, Nell. And you should stay away from him. You know what Rose says. Don't forget what happened to you.'

Nellie hadn't forgotten. Rose and Vivian would never let her. It had sealed the sisters' fate.

Some years ago, when Nellie was seventeen, one of the Langhams' hired hands had said hello to her, leaning over a farm gate as she passed by. Rose insisted they mustn't speak to strangers, but Nellie had ignored her rules. She was full of good feelings that day. What harm could it do to say hello?

He was an ugly little fellow with bowed legs and a fleshy smile. He showed her his wallet, which contained three locks of hair.

'This is my wife's chestnut hair, this buttery curl is the baby and this brown lock our son.'

Nellie was touched by his tender words. He told her he hoped she would make a good wife one day. Nellie nodded. Rose had never spoken of their future back then, but she and Vivian talked secretly of the husbands they might have one day.

He picked yellow-hearted field daisies for her, and Nellie sat until late into the night, listening to his talk. She wished she was his wife so he could have spoken as gently of her as he did of the woman whose lock of hair lay in his hand.

There seemed some heroic quality in a woman loving a man as ugly as this one, and Nellie at seventeen thought she would be equal to the task. When he asked if he could have a curl of her hair as a keepsafe, she agreed readily.

'Oh, but you're beautiful,' he told her, his breath damp on her neck. Night had fallen and insects spun around them, drawn by the flame of the hurricane lamp he lit. His fingers stroked her long neck. 'A peach you are, my dear. A cherry, a sweet blossom in God's garden.'

Nellie closed her eyes as the scissors flashed in his hand. He left her with cropped hair as short as the hogged mane on Langham's bay cob. The man slid her severed plaits into his knapsack and told her to get on home before the bogey man got her.

Rose rocked Nellie in her arms when she returned to the cottage in tears. Hadn't she warned her about strangers? Had he

done anything else? Oh, but Nellie was so young to be ruined by a man. Nellie tried to explain that he had not even kissed her, but Rose didn't seem to believe her. Beside them Vivian cried heartily as if it was her hair that had been cut off.

Anna Moats the midwife came to the cottage soon after. She'd heard the village gossip.

'The hair will grow,' she told Nellie. 'It's your heart we need to protect, my dear.'

Rose sent Anna Moats away. Doctors cured illness; policemen and courts punished badness. Everything else between birth, love and death was in God's hands. Anna Moats was a fraud. Hadn't her husband died of illness even though she said her remedies could cure all? The woman was a drunkard without a seed of sense in her head. That woman couldn't cure a ham hock for Christmas, let alone a gullible girl taken in by a man who sold hair to wig makers.

Nellie had thought differently. She crept to Anna's house asking for a cure. Anna's daughter, Louisa, invited her in, showing her a pale pink ostrich feather fan she had been given by a travelling showman she'd met. Wasn't it beautiful? She flapped the fan and danced around the room while Nellie ignored her, trying not to breathe in the sour smells that made her eyes water and her gorge rise. Herbs hung in bunches from the ceiling, and dried animal bones tied together with twine dangled like marionettes.

'Is she really a witch?'

Louisa laughed lazily and threw herself onto the couch, smoothing her darned skirts.

'Witches don't exist. Not in real life. My mother just pretends they do.'

'I don't pretend anything,' said her mother, coming into the room. She was as solid as a birthing sow, with a stiff-hipped gait. 'I help where I can, that's all.'

Anna filled a blue glass bottle with pins, mare's urine and a

snip of Nellie's hair. She corked the bottle, and together they went to the river and threw it in. Nellie couldn't say why, but when she saw the bottle float away, relief flooded through her.

When she got home, Rose was waiting for her. She took Nellie's hand and kissed her cheek. Sometimes things happened for a reason, she said. Even bad things.

'There are stories about you now. Nasty gossip. Some villagers say you sold your hair. Some say you lay down with that man and you cut your own hair off because you were ashamed of what you'd done. People like to talk, and they like best of all the kind of story that brings shame on the innocent. I won't let them shame you, dear. Mother always said that talk and lies cannot touch us if we're deaf to the sound of them.'

The sisters would be spinsters. Rose's fingers squeezed Nellie's hand. Their mother's wedding ring, which Rose wore, cut into Nellie's skin. She tried to pull her hand away, but Rose had her tight in her grip.

'My darling girl. We will turn our backs on them all. It is better this way.'

Rose coughed harshly once or twice. Was she crying? But no. She had long been consumptive and it was the disease making her eyes teary.

'I love you,' said Rose. 'Sisterly love goes beyond the dangerous infatuation that men can provoke in women. We must dedicate ourselves to sibling love and in this we will be pure. Safe and bonded together for ever, even beyond death. We will be happy, you'll see. I chose to forgo marriage when you were babies. I was just a seventeen-year-old-girl like you, Nellie. I have never regretted dedicating my life to you. You will not regret dedicating yours to us.'

Nellie heard a mouse hurry across the wooden floorboards. Rainwater dripped in the gutters outside the window. She listened to Rose lying in the bed beside them, the rasp of her breath. What a

weight Rose's particular brand of love was. Nellie pressed her cold feet together and tucked her blanket tighter around herself. If Rose got better, she would stop her silly dreaming. A fish was not an omen. It was just a fish. A man appearing out of the blue was just a man. It was as simple as that.

Mrs Langham shook her awake just before dawn.

'Wake up,' she cried. 'Wake up. Here you are sleeping like babes and your sister has slipped away.'

Nellie and Vivian got to their feet, going to Rose's side in a flurry of panic.

Mrs Langham busied herself, putting out the fire in the hearth, turning mirrors to the wall, opening windows to let Rose's soul fly free. Nellie and Vivian crouched over the body, unable to move away, saying Rose's name over and over, as if they could call her back to them. How could she have left them while they were sleeping? It was not possible, and yet the dead woman lying in the bed, her cheeks as cold as frost, was already not Rose. Their sister had gone, and in her place was the worn body of a 37-year-old woman. A thin, fragile-looking stranger.

Rose's words, spoken so long ago, tumbled over and over in Nellie's head. That love endured, even beyond death. She held Vivian's hand. They had been orphaned as children when their parents died, and now, as women, they felt orphaned again.

'What are we to do?' asked Vivian. 'How will we live?'

'We have not lost everything,' Nellie whispered. 'We still have each other.'

'We *only* have each other,' answered Vivian, and began to cry.