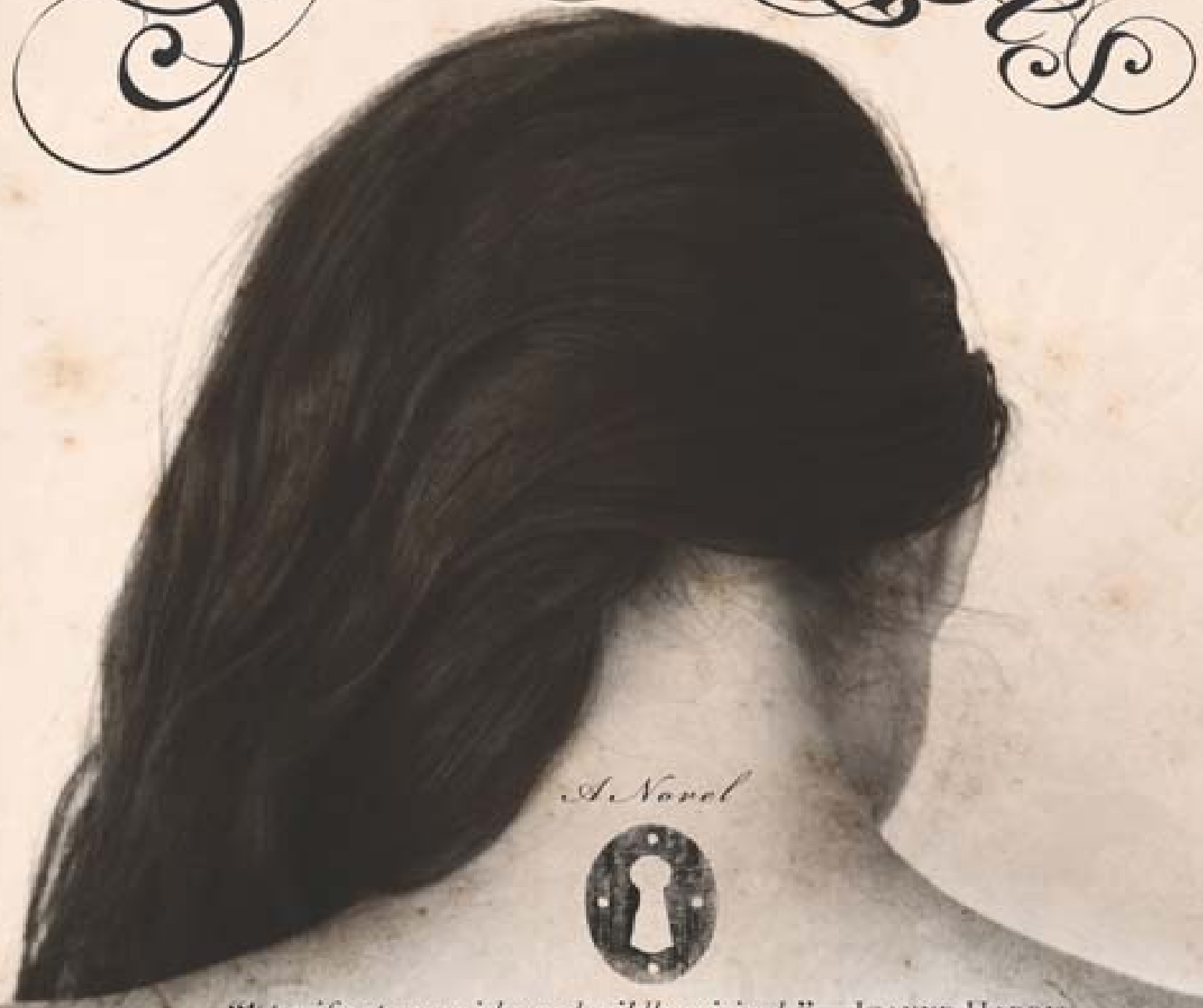




JESS RICHARDS

Snake Rattles



A Novel



"A terrific story, quirky and wildly original." —JOANNE HARRIS

JESS RICHARDS

SNAKE ROPES



 HarperCollins e-books

For Kate,
because she makes up words:
Mitt nitt jub.

and

for Mr Blight,
who lives in the Thrashing House:
a man I've never met.

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Mary



The tall men in boats are coming. I see them through the window, close to the beach. My little brother is sat on my lap. Him puts his hands on the table, leans round and looks up at me. His brown eyes have my reflection inside.

I smile at him, stroke the curls on the back of his head where they need a wash. I say, 'Sorry Barney. I've got to get you hid, they're coming.' He grips on my neck hard, buries his face in my hair and I carry him across the room. He is so warm and I want to hang on to him, but I put him down by the cupboard door, and his face trying to look all angry makes me want to laugh, but I dun.

I hide him in the cupboard behind the boxes. Give him a blanket to keep him warm. Tell him, 'Shush now, and dun even breathe if they opens the cupboard door.'

The tall men are all skinny and pale, with long dark coats and black hats with big brims on them. They give us goods for our stuff. Trade they call it. Da says it be more like theft and if we lived on a main land we'd get a lot more than what they give us. We've got to survive on what we can get. No one here goes to the main land, and no one wants to. Our boats aren't strong enough, we dun know the way, they can't understand us, we're fine as we are. We have so many reasons; they stretch as wide as the distance to cross to take us there.

I stand at the window watching. Nine boats long and thin, like the men. Two in each one rowing with long oars. I sort the piles of broderie, put the ones they will like best on top. Da's left the fish out in the cold room, ready for the tall men.

Barney grumbles loud in the cupboard so I call out, 'Now dun fret, you'll not be shut in the dark for long, it's just till they've gone.'

The tall men dun move to speak to one another. Silent as shadows, everyone says, but when the tall men do speak, they pick the words what'll get what they most want. Not like us folks what live here, we sometimes chatter out whole bunches of tattle. Perhaps we should lock just a little behind our lips, then we'd get more back.

I've got to be watchful with Barney. Three boys on the island were taken in the last three months. Three men what go drinking with Da, each of their sons are gone. Dun think they've got blown off the cliffs, we all think it were the tall men what took them.

Since our Mam died we struggle to get by. Da gets fish from out the sea and I do broderie for selling to the tall men. My broderies are lovely, everyone who sees them says so. I do all the flowers what grow in the summer before the wind sweeps them away, and all the

butterflies. Mam left boxes and baskets full of threads and linens. Them said at her funeral that she were the best broiderer this island's ever seen. She taught me some before she die but I got better quick; Da said we'd be eating grass and drinking air if we were to live off ju hims fishing. Him says now I'm sixteen, I'm old enough to trade with the tall men alone.

I did well last month – the batch I'd stitched raised the tall men's eyebrows and got more goods from them than the month before. The colours sang in the sunlight on this table as if my hands had stroked them into the fabric, rather than jabbed them through with the needle. Some pictures are more difficult to bring to life than others, pulling and drawing, pulling and drawing.

Not a sound from the cupboard. For a three-year-old, Barney is good and quiet for me when him knows I mean it. I cross the room, whisper at the door, 'Them're coming. Keep quiet, good boy.'

'Dun like it in here, is dark and smelly.' Him snuffles.

Hims bunny doll lies on the floor next to the cupboard door. I scoop it up, open the door a crack; hims brown eyes are all teary behind the baskets of linens. Him reaches out him hands.

'Here's your moppet. Just stay put. I'll cradle you when we're done.' I close up the door.

A few women have brought them trade down to the beach, and are handing over woven rugs and baskets to a pair of tall men what're stood by the boats. Fourteen of the tall men walk up the beach in pairs, them head to the path what leads up the cliffs, to other homes of folk what do trade. One pair of tall men come towards this row of cottages. Them need the agreement of two to make the decision of one. Just as we're suspicious of them, them dun trust us not to argue, especially where them goods are concerned. Them coats might be covered in seaspray and salt when them have crossed the surging waves to get here, but them are well stitched, as if somewhere on the main land there's a great old woman who sits them with needles for fingertips, stitching in straight perfect lines, with the threads tucked away so them will never escape.

The knock, four raps on the door. Four raps again.

I open the front door.

'Miss Jared,' says the tall man in front. I swallow a laugh, everyone here calls me Mary.

'I've got the broideries ready.' I step back and sweep my hand towards the tabletop by the window. I wish the sun would shine in and make the broideries look alive. Today them look dull and faded.

Them lean over the broideries, long pale fingers fondle them. I wonder why them dun talk to the girls, only the boys. Something boys can do what girls can't. But what that could be I have no idea; everyone knows boys are only of use if them take to farming or fishing.

One has a pair of glasses balanced on the end of hims nose and I wonder if him wears them out at sea. Him glances at me over them, without a squint. Can't be that bad sighted then.

'These are quite ... elaborate.'

'That's what you wanted last time.' I bite my lip.

'Slightly overexpressive,' mutters the other one, his eyebrows raised.

'You said ...'

'Not *this* extravagant. Not what was meant.' His voice is low and steady.

'Just tell me the price you're suggesting.'

'The women won't like the more ... elaborate ones. It's the simple ones we can sell.'

'The ones you passed over last time?' My voice sounds shrill and both the men straighten up, near enough to hit their heads on the beams.

'We are at the behest of fashion, Miss Jared. We can give some as tokens, as gifts, women choose to buy the plain ones. They want rustic.'

'So you're saying last month they wanted drama, now they're wanting dull?'

'Precisely.'

'Well, I don't know how they can change fashion faster than I can make them. Why they can't just stick with their likes from last month for a few weeks more.'

A thud from Barney, in the cupboard.

I stamp on the floor.

They don't notice.

I fold my arms. 'So, how much?'

'Ten units for the lot,' says one, his lip twitching.

'Well, I think I'll hang on to them till they come back *in* fashion.'

He breathes in like I've just jabbed his chest with one of the needles.

I stamp to the front door and open it. The wind blows in the smell of the sea. I stare at the floor, twirl a strand of my dark hair around my finger and pull, hard.

'Twenty, then. You wouldn't want to be seen as a charity case, I'm sure.'

'Don't care about being seen as a charity case, we've got to eat.' I glance up at his cool blue eyes and swallow hard. 'Thirty.'

'Twenty-five, final price.'

'Take them.' I smile. 'Do you want to do the fish? It's out in the cold room.'

We go around the side of the cottage, and the cold room door sticks – the wooden door guarding the fish. I can feel the tall men's eyes on me. My hair, my waist, my backside – well, no doubt. They're all eyes, the tall men, each and every one.

I yank at the door as hard as I can, it whaps against my boot and springs open. In the darkness the dead fish eyes ogle me from the half-cask barrels. It's so dark in here and I'm shivery just stepping inside. Ash, soot and straw are spread all over the walls to keep the ice frozen. It works. Dad's left the fish sorted and packed in the barrels I wrench out of the ice in the floor. Five heavy barrels and they don't even offer to help.

Pulling the last barrel out, I hear the back door slam and glance at the side of the cottage. 'So then.' I glare at the two tall men. 'What am I getting for this lot?'

They move further away, so they can see the whole lot of fish all together. They hide

prices back and forth and glance up at me every so often. Taking them time, as always. Just want to get a good long stare at a single young woman. The wind musses my hair up and dun bother getting it off my face. I wipe my pink wet hands on my dress. I stink of fish. Good.

Eventually a trade is offered, I needle them up a little and settle. It's a good job Da's got daughter, for the tall men offer far more for what girls and women make with our hands than what fishermen drag out of the sea.

I've got enough sense to do the best trade I can, and also enough sense not to help them once they've paid. The tall men take the broideries and go down to the boats. When they come back, I get them to put all our goods on the path by the front door. I count them up while the tall men come back and forth to drag the barrels of fish down to them boats.

I take some of the jars and cans of main land foods into our cottage and put them just inside the front door. The jars and cans are worth one unit each. I go outside to get more of the goods. There's a box with the words *exotic fruits* printed on the side.

'What's this meant to be then?' I call out to the tall men who've just grasped another barrel of fish.

The tall men look up. 'Five units.'

'But it's strange-looking things I'm sure can't be eaten.'

'Happy enough with them on the mainland,' says the one with the glasses.

'Joyful, no doubt, to send them to us,' I mutter.

Them carry on hauling the barrel, and I knock on a yellow thing shaped like the sun, but squashed. 'What's this then?' I hold it up.

'Melon,' calls out one, and them both stare at me like I'm simple, so I take the box indoors and put it on the table by the window and go outside to get the rest.

There's a tin of varnish and a pot of white paint worth three units each, seven boxes of matches and two packets of firelighters. There's a small sack I've never seen them bring before. It's got red words on it, but I dun know what's inside, for the words are in foreign. Dun ask them about that one. Maybe the foreign will make sense later, when I've opened up the sack.

The three units of ice are in great sacks made from the clear shiny stuff them call plastic with thick layers of it. I put it in the cold room and kick the door shut behind me. I watch the two tall men emptying the last of the barrels into the crates in them boat. The tall men never forget the ice, for it's needed to keep the fish fresh. Still have to trade them for it, but. Mainland folks must stink of fish. Whole lot of men here do fishing, and there's a fair few cold rooms on the island, as well as a smokehouse. But the fish is all traded, for none of us like the taste.

I think the tall men must have one great huge boat what picks up all nine of the oar boats. Them keep it just over the edge of the horizon. For if them dun have a quicker way to get from the main land to here than just oars, then the ice would melt on the journey.

Not that I'd say anything to the tall men, for however them do it, them're the only folks what bother to brave the distance to us. Back inside, I watch the tall men roll the empty fish

barrels back up the beach to the cold room. Them leave them stacked up outside, so the other tall men know them've got our trade and dun come knocking twice.

I call, 'Come out Barney, them're done.'

No answer. Him must have fallen asleep in there, or be messing with me.

I cross the room, open the cupboard door. The moppet sits on top of a basket, its ears askew.

Barney's blanket lies there rumpled, without him on it.

My head goes bang bang with the throb in it. I open the boxes at the back, pull Mam's linen out of the baskets. No Barney.

I tear through to the bedroom, look under him's small bed, under my bed, rumple up the bedclothes in case him is hiding. In Da's room, I rummage through the wardrobe where Mam's clothes still hang, but there's no Barney. Back in the main room I check the cupboard again and under the table.

I open the trapdoor in the floor and climb down the ladder into the storm room. Light a candle and check in the shadows. Nothing. I slump down on the floor.

Barney's mine. Him can't be took like the others. Him is too young.

If Mam were still alive she'd be shouting about this. She shouted so often, even when Da gave her a bruise for saying Barney were hers but not him's. Them shared me. Dun know why she wouldn't share Barney as well. Maybe she thought Da dun bother enough with me, so her son would be just another thing for him not to bother about. Or she could have loved Barney best.

I loved him best.

I want to shout like Mam would've done, only I've got all the shouts stuffed in my chest and them dun want to come out. Barney's been mine since Mam died. Da said after her funeral, 'Him is all yours Mary, through an' through. Nowt to do with me, so you got to work hard, do a lot of broideries to keep him fed.'

Always has been my arms Barney wanted.

I've always wanted him in my arms.

In our bedroom, I stuff the pillow from Barney's bed in my arms and squeeze, hard. If I squeezed him this hard I'd stifle the life out of him, but my arms need to do something. Tears pinch up in my eyes. I dun have the time for this, got to move, else there'll be no chance to do anything – the tall men will be gone and there'll just be a blank hole in the world where Barney's fallen through.

I dun know what to do.

What did Annie next door do, when her Kieran got took? I must have known. Weren't long ago. Kieran, fourteen years old, nose thick with freckles, just like him's Mam. What happened then, what did Annie do?

The front door thumps and rattles.

Da's voice hollers, 'Mary, where are you?' all gruff. Him is back much earlier than usual.

I've got to get out before Da sees Barney is gone and decides Barney being gone is all for the best. One less mouth to gannet down not enough food.

Hurling down the pillow, I run to the kitchen, click the latch and get out the back door around the side of our cottage and down to the beach where the tall men are loading crates and boxes onto them boats.

My boots slip on the shingle, get tangled in the spiky grass, sand gets in the holes and near trips me. I get close enough to one of the tall men, grab him wrist as him is picking up crate of ropes, wearing black gloves. Hims cold wrist feels like him is dead though him is up and walking. Touching him skin sends a judder right through me.

Him drops the crate. We both jump back. Him turns and glares at me.

I yell at him, 'My brother, give me him back! Him is only little – what use is him for you? Him is mine, the only one I've got!'

Him leans forwards. 'We don't have him. We don't have the others either. If your parents can't afford to feed you, we can't be answerable for their actions, or their blame. We're here for trade as we always have been.'

'We have to go,' says one, shadows in him eyes.

The tall men load up them boats, like I'm not here. I clamber over the boxes and check each boat, all the baskets, every sack. There's nothing being loaded but fish and flour, brown boots from the cobbler, horseshoes and birdcages from the smithy, weavings, woollen tapestries, stitchings, broideries and ropes. Clothes and cushions for the fancy women's houses what them must change as often as them fashion.

No brother.

All the crying what's stuck in me finds the blank place in the world what him has fallen away through. I fall on the sand, can't see a thing through the tears. Been looking after him so hard since Mam died, I feel like him Mam myself. I draw my arms around my chest, only there's a hollow where him should be. Tears fall into it; him is not there to cradle. I want to be strong for him, only I can't when him is not here.

A tall man leans over me. Him has brown eyes, not like the others. Him looms against the grey sky, like a giant gravedigger. I grasp a stone lying in the wet sand and raise my fist, I hurl it at him.

Him grips my wrist. I try to shriek but my throat's stuck. Hims touch sends shivers all up my arm and I can't move my hand. Him pinches out my fingers. It's a big white shell what in my palm, not a stone at all.

Him lets go. 'You can't hurt me with *that*.' Hims voice is low and cold. A glimmer of gold flecks around the pupil in him right eye. Puts me in mind of the gold flecks in Barney's eyes. Him smells of salt and dust. Something in the smell makes the sky blink dark for a moment. Then it's grey again. A sharp pain cuts through my belly.

Him turns and walks away. The tall men are done with me. Done with all of us till next month. Them push the boats off the beach and the long oars stir up the waters.

Barney is not in the boats.

Not in our home.

Not in my arms.

My throat gets unstuck and I howl and scream like my heart will clean break out of me. So loud Da comes out of our cottage.

Da gets to me and I feel a sharp bite on my shin. A thick rope lies next to my foot on the sand. It's moving, twisting, glints of teeth woven through the strands. Da pulls me up on my feet and I punch him's big chest and bury my head in him's neck.

'Barney's gone!' I shriek. 'Him's been took.' And everything goes blank and dark.

Da sits beside my bed on the wobbly stool. Slumped over, wearing all greys, him looks like an empty canvas bag.

Him says, 'You've got a fever, Mary. Been talking strangeness what makes no sense. Brown eyes and blue eyes and bruises. Ropes tied all over you an' the whole island. You know where you are?' Him's tired eyes look at me like I'm going to be gone any moment.

I roll away, face the cracked grey wall and whisper, 'Want him back.'

Da's voice sounds loud. 'Him is gone, Mary, and it's not your fault.'

I know it *is* my fault. Shouldn't have let him get away from my eyes, not for a moment, not even to be hid where I thought him'd be safe.

The ropes come up over the bed. I'm tied to the island and all twisted. I scream and here I am in the blank dark place again.

I hear my voice ... 'Da, find him ...'

'Him is gone ...'

In the blank dark, blue eyes are everywhere, staring at me.

I shout at them and ask them and cry at them, for Barney.

The back door to the cottage slams.

I'm carrying a fish eye out of the cold room on the tip of a broderie needle. I grip the needle with all my fingertips to hold the eye steady. The eye blinks. I judder and the eye falls off the needle into a barrel filled with ice. My head is burning hot. Someone wipes a cold cloth over my forehead.

The back door slams in the distance.

'Mam,' my voice says, 'can you see Barney?'

Da's voice is loud in my ear, 'Mary, you're in a fever. Mam's buried.'

'No ... no ... no.'

Mam's voice is here. 'This fence is made of threads. Woven with broken lost things. Everything they want to forget.'

'Dun tell me to forget Barney!'

Something cold on my face. A hand, a cloth, a piece of ice ...

Da's voice, 'Shush up Mary, you're shouting ...'

I call out, 'Mam, can you see where him is?'

Da's voice says, too loud, 'Mary stop it, it's a fever you're in. Mam's gone. Settle now settle.'

Mam's still talking. 'Forgotten things *will* make a person sick ...'

I'm crying.

She's gone.

Da wipes the cold thing over my face, says, 'Have a drink, come on, there's meadowsweet in this water.' Hims arm holds up my back, tilts a cup to my mouth. I clench my lips tight shut, water rains all over me. Wet all over ... Da bangs the cup down, and says, 'You dun even *want* to get better.' Him lets go of my back, I fall. Down through cloud, rain, fog ...

Hands reach out from the sky, hold out food, bowls of soup, plates of steaming vegetable stew, I'm getting fatter and fatter from eating and I punch my huge belly. It unravels, like stitches on a broiderie. All the stitches twist, wriggle like maggots, twirl and squirm themselves into the shape of eyes.

I'm in a tunnel of blue eyes.

The back door slams.

Da's voice calls my name from the day Barney got took, calls again. Over and over, 'Mary where are you? Mary, where are you? Mary ...'

Him never called Barney's name.

The blue eyes blink.

Him knew Barney weren't here ...

Da puts him cold hand on my cheek. 'Come back Mary, come home, come back.'

This morning the sun is bright. Da opens the curtain so the light gets in. I sit up slow. Him looks like someone I dun even know.

Da folds him arms. 'You're through the worst of it. I need to go fishing so we can eat – the tall men'll be coming back in a week or so. Is tha' all right, but?'

'Aye Da, you go, I'll be fine right here.'

Him is polishing a battered compass with him jumper sleeve. Hims eyes are so tired. Like them've seen a thousand monsters just sitting here with me. But Da knew Barney weren't here ... the day him were took.

'Go Da. I'll be fine. Da?'

'Aye, Mary?' Him puts the compass back in him pocket.

'I'm sorry about Barney.' I watch him face. It dun change.

Him picks at a hole in him jumper. 'Aye,' him says, quiet. 'So am I.' Him gets up stretches, cracks him neck and goes. Him dun mean it. Hims life will be easier with just the two working, with no boy he dun love, to teach to catch fish.

So the tall men are coming soon. I've been in bed for over two weeks.

Days and nights and days of fever.

Dun believe I've lost this much time – Barney missing, with me not able to look for him. want to cut and rip and unpick all the days what've gone, thread them back together so them're made all over again, but I can't feel my hands.

Nights and days and nights of not looking. Of no one looking.

I try to stand but the floor shifts around and my legs trip me back on the bed. I try again. And again till I'm all stood up. It takes a while, but I get over to the bedroom door. I go through to the main room with the cupboard with Barney in it, only him isn't in there. I open the cupboard and look at all the boxes and baskets full of threads and linen. It's dark in there.

Blank dark.

Ice in barrels. I blink, and it's just the cupboard and all the broiderie stuff Mam had. All the hoops and frames. All the linen she never put pictures on. That's what I do. I make broiderie on the linen and the tall men come and take them away. Them take a lot of things away. Them dun take my brother, though that's what everyone'll say, but I know, because I looked

On the floor by the cupboard, there's a white shell what looks like something I should remember, so I pick it up. I grip hard on the shell. I remember the eyes of the tall man who pinched out the fingers of my hand when Barney were took. Brown eyes. Not like all the others. The gold flecks around the pupil in him's right eye. Just like Barney. Maybe Barney got took into him's face somehow and kept him's own eyes. The smell of the tall man fills my nose. Salt and dust. I snort it out.

I put the shell to my ear.

Listen close; the sea comes in, so close, like it's in the room with me, so close, like it's my head, filling it with waves.

Barney's voice speaks inside the shell, 'Mary, where's moppet?'

Just hearing him I cry out.

This shell is precious.

The floor goes crooked. The wall hits against me. I go into our bedroom. Barney's moppet lies on him's bed, its long ears unravelling, one eye hanging off and a squinty mouth.

I bring it to the table in the main room by the window and sew on the eye, only it seem even more wonky.

Getting my broiderie scissors, I cut the whole belly open down the middle. I take some of the stuffing out and put the shell inside. Stitch it up again, like a surgeoner.

Secret now.

I put my ear to it and hear Barney's voice in the shell inside of it. 'That's better Mary,' him says. 'All better now.'

I want to speak back, only my voice is gone.

Too secret to speak of.

I lie down on Barney's bed, curled up with the moppet next to my ear, hear Barney's voice sing la la la like the baby him still is. I listen close, him's voice talks and I hear a dreamin' place of Barney's. Not the blank dark place in the fever – Barney's dream is all light and th

wind blows us up in the sky like butterflies.

Barney's dream is in his voice:

In this place you an' me dun have to be big or growed up acause we're small like flutterbees. V both little up in the sky. Mam and Da is big. Them creeps out of a tunnel in the grass.

Them runs round round round looking for us, we doing hidings in the sky. Them looks up high and sees us. Them pulls fishing net out them hair. Them doing chasings after us. Me and yo Mary, we got our own flutterbee wings, real ones.

We go up in the clouds acause we doing laughings what makes the wings flap hard.

Mam and Da is leaping – jumping up and up to catch us in nets. Them sees us with brave wings an' shrieks in them mouths so loud them eyes roll around and all around.

We laughing Mary, doing laughings so loud.

Mam and Da is leaping higher and higher, eyes all big mad. We not afeart; we know them can catch us.

Morgan



Mum has emptied her plate of parsnip stew. She looks at me with narrowed eyes across the kitchen table. ‘Why aren’t you eating?’ she asks. ‘Is it an attention thing?’

The twins watch her.

Dad eats painfully slowly.

‘I’m not hungry,’ I answer.

Mum says, ‘Yes, it was like that when I cooked too. This is why I prefer eating. Cooking is awful. I eat it through my nose, just smelling it I get the taste, and by the time it’s ready, I’m full.’

‘Yes, it’s like that,’ I reply. But it’s *not*. After I’d called them the first time, then finished cooking, I dished it all up and ate mine. I called them again, waited for them to come. I emptied their plates back into the pot, warmed it, sat and tapped on the table and dished it back onto their plates when I finally heard their footsteps coming along the hallway.

Mum stands up. She says, ‘You like me again,’ as she walks out of the kitchen.

Dad glances at me, nods just once, chewing.

The twins scurry out after her. ‘Mum, can we—’

‘—have a story tonight?’

‘The one with the flying rats ...’ A door bangs shut and their small feet run up the stairs.

I clear their plates and put them in the washbowl. Dad sits at the table, still slowly chewing. His curly grey hair tied back in a black bow. He looks like a pirate, but smells of cologne.

‘Dad, they’re *my* books, they’re the only things I ...’ I turn to face him.

He stares into his plate, his eyes like marbles.

I pull out the chair next to him and sit down.

‘Dad, if she reads one of my books to the twins, will you make sure I get it back?’

‘What?’ He swallows almost painfully and shakes his head. ‘Oh.’ He looks surprised I’m here. ‘Yes, it’s very good. More peppery than usual. I’d prefer even more, next time. But yes, very good. Thank you.’ He puts down his spoon though he hasn’t finished his meal. ‘Right? You’re all right?’ He glances at me and back at his plate. ‘Good. I’ll go and take over from

your mother with the twins.’

‘Thanks. But Dad, could I talk to you—’

‘Good. Very good.’ He doesn’t look at me as he leaves the kitchen.

I put on a block of peat, stoke up the fire in the range.

Pick up a bucket and go out of the back door to the well in our garden.

And back into the kitchen and pour

and pour

back to the well

back to the kitchen

and pour –

fill four huge pans with water.

Put them all on the range together.

When they’re boiling, I get all the small sacks of rice out of the cupboards.

I put the rice in the boiling water.

When the rice has puffed up, thickened and starchy, I go outside, put a bath towel over the drain by the back door and strain the rice.

Haul the rice back into the kitchen, wrapped in the towel.

And again. And again.

I cover the whole table in rice, a glutinous thick layer and I stand in the corner of the kitchen and watch the steam coming off it.

When the steam has gone, I get a wooden spoon and a mixing bowl and stand on a chair.

I scoop out the rice so the table shows through where I carve the words into it:

I AM HUNGRY BUT
NOT FOR FOOD

Mary



Somehow time has passed. Nights have washed through the sky like a dark blue dye, and rinsed out into days. The broderie needles feel like them're covered in salt. So do the linens and the threads and the table. So does the washtub, my blankets, Da's fishing nets, the tatties and Barney's bedsheets. Salt is used for the fixing of dyes, but I dun want the world to be fixed like this.

While Da is out fishing, inside this home I have to somehow keep, somehow live, no one else breathes this air, no one else eats or sleeps. No one stares from the window, washes or cleans, makes messes or broiders, loses or finds things, mends broken torn dropped things, cooks or tells stories, smiles, shouts or curses, unless it is me.

Barney's toys are faded, bleached and pale from missing his touch.

About one hundred and fifty people live on this island and if I have to ask every single one of them if they know where Barney is, I'll lose my voice and my legs'll fall off from walking to them all.

So I'll have to do it a bit at a time.

This morning I can walk better, so I leave our cottage, turn left and walk as far as the furthest cottage on this row.

Rap on the door.

Chanty answers. 'What you knocking this early for?' Her hair is curly on one side and flat on the other. She's got the Thrashing House key on a chain around her neck; it's her turn on the bell list so I've got to talk nice to her today.

'Excuse me, Chanty, for interrupting your sleeping. Thought I'd get your Mam. Have you seen or heard anything of my Barney?' I ask, my arms folded.

'Course not. You still sick? Been took. Tall men dun it. Ask anyone.'

'I'm asking you. Please.'

'Ah, get gone. Got too many things to do before the bells.' She shuts her door.

I might have to talk to her polite, but I can think whatever I want. Bloody rude cow.

I hammer on the next door.

Beattie's got her sleeves up. Her arms are red.

‘Have you heard anything of Barney?’ I ask.

‘You’ve been in bed the longest time. All right now? Come in, I’ve got eggs and tattiecak on the go. You look like you could do with a bit of mothering.’

‘No, you’re all right Beattie. You heard any talk?’

‘No doll, no talk of the boys. Or nothing new or for certain. Get back indoors, it’s going to rattle down any moment.’ She peers up at the thick grey clouds.

It dun rattle down yet.

I bang on the next three doors.

Merry is sat just behind him front door on a wooden stool, sharpening the paring iron and slane what him uses up the peat pits. Him dun bother answering me as him is old and miserable. Him dun ask folk questions anyway, so him won’t have been told.

Jek’s fixing him fishing nets and asks me how come the women have took to putting buttons on the necks of the jumpers, and him shows me how easy them get caught in the nets. I tell him it’s probably to do with main land fashions, for Annie told me a few years back that the tall men wanted jumpers full of holes called the grunge, but now them wanted cable or ribbed.

Old Nell’s walking stick is leaned against Camery’s door, so she must be visiting her. I can hear them inside, arguing. Nell’s saying, ‘... them’re a danger to us, could’ve killed her. We *have* to keep getting them took ...’ and Camery’s saying, ‘... so them’re a danger to folk further away? Well, why are we not bothered about them? Just because we dun know any main land folks, it dun mean them’re any less ...’

I knock and Camery answers her door. She cries out and tries to hug me, but her patchy ragged shawl stinks of chicken shit, so I get clear fast.

The last door is Annie’s cottage, right next to mine. If anyone’ll talk, she will.

She opens it before I get near enough to knock it. Her three great black dogs charge out and one thuds me spinning. Annie kicks the front door shut behind her, sweeps her frazzled hair off her face.

‘Oh Mary, come on. Glad you’re better. Gave me a fright you being sick so long. Let’s just two walk on the beach, the dogs need it.’

‘You’re all right, Annie, my legs’ll not do more than what them’ve done this morning. You heard anything about your Kieran yet, or my Barney?’ I lower my voice. ‘What are they saying in the Weaving Rooms?’

‘Shush now. I’m not telling you Weaving Room talk. Look, whoosh! Them’re off!’ She strides after the dogs down the beach, her brown coat swashes in the wind. She calls over her shoulder, ‘I’ll pop round yours later, Martyn’s fixing up our new cottage at Wreckers Shore. Him’ll be gone all day.’

‘You’re moving Annie?’

She turns round and smiles. ‘Aye, but it’s lovely. More space all round it. We’ll grow tattiecak and onions and kale, it’ll be perfect. Dun be sad! I’ll still visit you. You get indoors afore the

rain.' She strides away. She could do with one of Beattie's breakfasts – she's just as skinny as me, and twice as tall.

I go back indoors to our cottage, sit down and let my head unravel in Mam's old rickety chair. The rain rattles down on the roof and makes the beams seem too low. I'm too small to see anything, to find anything so little as Barney, when there's this huge sky what takes over the whole island by hurling down all this rain.

So none of my neighbours know anything about Barney.

Or no one's saying anything at any rate.

I keep the moppet hid from Da. The moppet fills a small part of the gap what Barney's left for it gives me him voice. Not always; sometimes it's just the sound of the sea, but sometimes it's Barney's baby talk I hear, before the waves wash him voice away from me. I ask it over and over, every day, 'Barney, where are you?' But him voice always says, 'It's dark.' That makes me cry more than anything else.

Da dun speak about Barney. I keep asking him questions, I know him has got an answer somewhere hidden in him head, only him won't tell me it. I dun like it here with just me and him. Him is out at sea all day and some of the night, thinking solid thoughts what always draw him back to land. And when him comes home, him wants me to fix the fishing net while him eats dinner, then him washes the smell of sea and fish off himself and goes to sleep on Mam's side of them bed.

Each morning Da says, 'It's best to carry on as usual,' before him takes up the nets and leaves. I wait for him to say something different, but him dun.

Tonight, Da comes in, pulling the smell of the sea behind him.

I say, 'Tell me what happened to Barney.'

Him dun speak.

'You just want me to broider. You never cared for Barney and you dun want me to find him. You ...'

Him takes off him coat and thrusts it on the hook behind the door.

'You know something, but you dun want to tell me it, because we need less to live on, now him is gone.'

Him folds him arms and says, 'It's best to carry on as usual.' Him goes to the kitchen, picks up a bowl, ladles in the chicken stew, sits down and fills him mouth with it so there's no room for any answers to come out.

I've thought really hard about how to get an answer out of Da's head and I think I can do it with just two words.

Da is going to be home for the whole day today, for him says the waves are white and high, which means the sea's too full of wind and danger for fishing.

I practise while I get dressed and while I wash my face and tie back my hair, and the more I say it I know I can keep saying it because I dun think I can stop. In the kitchen I make oat porridge and say it while I stir the pot.

Da walks in and I feel his eyes on me.

I say, 'Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me ...'

'Stop it, Mary.'

I keep saying it.

He takes his porridge into the main room, sits in Mam's rickety chair by the empty grate and ignores me.

I eat my porridge in the kitchen and between mouthfuls keep saying it.

When it comes to mid-morning, he shouts, 'You're driving me mad! Shut your bloody sodding mouth up!' He glowers at me like he wants to stick a fish hook in my lips, so I whisper, 'Tell me tell me tell me,' all the afternoon, all the while he goes in and out of the kitchen through the back door, and all the while he tidies up out the back, and all the while he gets water from the well and washes down the kitchen floor, and all the while he cleans and oils our boots, even Mam's old ones she'll never wear again, and all the while he shuffles in and out of the main room, all the while I try to teach my hands to brooder again, all the while I peel potatoes and chop leeks for soup, and all the while I sit opposite him and watch him eat it without filling the empty bowl I've put in front of me.

He gets up from the table, his hands thump down.

I look up at him, say it louder, 'Tell me tell me tell me.'

He leans over me, says, 'Forget Barney and get on with your broideries. What's wrong with you? You're skittering in some kind of madness and you'll *not* be pulling me in there with you!' He gets his coat and stamps off outside, hollers that he is off to the peat pit to do something useful, and the door bangs shut behind him.

Even without him here I keep on saying, 'Tell me tell me tell me,' because now I've been saying it all day long, I really *can't* stop. The words are in my ears and my mouth and my head.

I keep saying it and the bells ring out, but Da still isn't back. I say it at the moppet but she just stares back at me, all wonky and silent. I put the moppet on my pillow. The moppet rushes the sound of the sea into my ear, but I keep whispering till I fall asleep.

Morgan



I'm locked in my bedroom, being punished for the rice.

Mum said, 'I would never have dared waste food. Never.'

I said, 'It's not a waste. There's always loads of rice because someone keeps leaving outside our gate and you let Dad out to bring it in, but we never talk about it. I ask, but you won't tell me.'

She said, 'I don't want to talk about rice, and you, you're giving me a headache – what do you mean, hungry? *I'm* hungry, my family only had two rooms, between six of us – no room in there for me, not for anything I might be *hungry* for ... broken hand-me-downs—'

I said, 'I'm not a child. You've moved the age. It was eighteen. I *am* eighteen.'

She said, 'It wasn't. It was *always* twenty-one. You're too immature to leave home. You're making me feel nauseous. Is this what you want? That rice is disgusting. Congealed. I feel sick.'

How often she tells me how I make her feel.

She yanked me into the kitchen, handed me a bucket and a cloth and walked out. I cleaned the rice off the table and it took a while because it had set like glue. I wasn't sure what to do with it all, so I took the grille off the drain just outside the back door and pushed it down there. It filled up the drain and there was still some rice left. So I filled the bucket from the well and poured it in. It glugged through the rice, which sunk a bit in the drain. Not enough. So I wrapped my hand in a towel and pressed it down to make room for more, and the towel felt like a slug. I poured more water in, and more rice, more water and more rice, till all the rice had gone.

The drain might be blocked.

Mum came back into the kitchen with Dad when I was looking at how shiny the table was. Neither of them spoke. They both hauled me up the stairs, one arm each, pushed me into my bedroom and locked the door.

I didn't speak either. Because it doesn't matter. It happens all the time.

I stare out of my bedroom window. On the hill in the distance is the tall building with the bell tower. Sometimes it seems newly constructed, perfect. Other times, when the wind blusters and the sky turns charcoal, it's more like a ruin, the ghost of a house.

My bedroom is the smallest room in our house. There's nowhere to hide things, even if managed to steal anything of use. In here, I have: my books, a single bed, one table, one chair, my old dresses of Mum's that she's taken in, my rags, a tiny pair of nail scissors and a hairbrush.

Other rooms, I'm kept away from. The room Mum builds furniture in has hammers, saws, screwdrivers ... all the tools she needs to create furniture of beauty and function, but the same tools I'd use to break my way out.

The high fence outside, the fence that runs all the way around our house, has only one gate. The gate is kept padlocked. And Mum has the only key. It swings from an old charm bracelet that she never takes off her wrist.

She said for years I could have my own padlock key when I was eighteen. That she'd go with Dad to go to the smithy and get one cut for me. And I've counted the passing of years and months and days, imagining my eighteenth birthday, when I'd walk to the gate, my hands outstretched, my fingertips clasped on the key, unlock the padlock and walk away.

But my eighteenth birthday was three months and twelve days ago and I still haven't been outside. Because Mum changed her mind. So she told me she'd never made that promise. She said, 'I just wouldn't. Doesn't even *sound* like me. I'd worry too much. You don't want me to worry, it fills me with ...' She held her chest, as if she couldn't breathe. Then she narrowed her eyes and said, 'You wouldn't want to make me feel like that.'

After her mind had changed, and my birthday had gone, I tried to dig my way out under the fence with a bread knife. In five weeks I'd only dug down about a foot, a tiny bit at a time. I hid the hole under a plant pot.

Then a stormy wind blew the plant pot over and the knife went blunt and my mother found the hole and cried and raged in her room and my father disappeared in there with her and when they came out they hid the knives till they realised that meant I couldn't cook, so they gave me just the one, watched me chop vegetables with it, and then took it away.

By the time they trusted me enough to give me back the knives, or didn't want to watch me making their meals any more, I'd decided to steal the padlock key when she was sleeping. The night I made my first attempt, their bedroom door was locked.

It was locked the next night, and the next, and the next.

The night after that, I tried again, but a small square of white paper was pushed out under the door, and it said in her handwriting: 'I'm cleverest.'

I realised then, she'd decided to think of everything.

One night last week, I saw my twin sisters steal down the stairs to the basement. The next night, I went down the stairs. At the back of the basement are three rooms: one for the coffin-building, one for the office where my father writes all the deaths in his book and the other for the preparation of bodies. In the coffin-building room there was a hole that the twins had started to dig in the back wall. It had been boarded over, roughly. My mother's handwriting was smeared in pink paint over three planks she'd hammered across it: 'Morgan. You will never think one step ahead. I know you better than you think.'

I didn't bother telling her it was the twins. When they were really small, the twins joined

in my games. Before they learned that they could play more interesting games when alone with each other. The babies they'd been when I carried them, one in each arm, the toddlers they became, one attached to each of my legs, have now become inseparable. In my parents' eyes, they are obedient little girls. In mine, they are far too quiet, and they tell one another lies a little too well.

I went into their room and asked them about the hole in the basement. They gazed up at me, holding hands, and said in rehearsed voices, 'It was a tunnel. For *you*. It was meant to be a surprise.' When I told them I didn't believe them, they looked at each other's eyes in silence, the kind of looking that they can get lost in for whole days, or until they get hungry.

Since then, I haven't thought of another escape plan to try.

Other than the one I've got now.

The one where I annoy my mother so much she'll *want* me to leave.

But I can't annoy her tonight because I'm locked in my room till my family get hungry and remember that no one else wants to cook. I don't mind being in here, because my books are locked in with me.

I am reading reading reading, locked in the stories.

I'm a wicked daughter, a drunken witch, a terrible scientist, a king with a severed hand, a resentful angel, a statue of a golden prince, the roaring wind, an uninspired alchemist, a fantastic lover who has only one leg, a stage magician with glittery nails, a shivery queen with a box of Turkish sweets, a prostitute wearing poisoned lipstick, a piano player whose hands are too big, a raggedy grey rabbit, a murderer with metal teeth, a spy with an hourglass figure ...

I am eighteen years old and my real life is here locked inside these books.

My pretend life is here, locked in, with my family.

I breathe on my bedroom window and write in the condensation:

WITCH REQUIRED,
PREFERABLY WITH BROOMSTICK.
ENTRAPPED FEMALE IN NEED OF
ESCAPOLOGY LESSONS.
PLEASE APPLY WITHIN.

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