



SHORT STORY

# Rag and Bone

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*illustration by* John Jude Palencar

I leave Gabriel in the yard and go into town, taking my bag with the vials of skin and bone, flesh and blood, my regular delivery to Makin. The Peels are looking for body parts.

I love the grandeur of The Strand. High towers of ornate stone. The road's packed with wagons and carts. Boats choke the river. The Mersey is the city's blood and it runs rich. Liverpool lives again.

I can hear the stevedores' calls, those kings of distribution and balance, whose job it is to oversee the dockers loading the barges. The boats must be perfectly weighted for their journey up the Manchester Ship Canal. Guards check them to ensure no unlicensed man steals aboard. Farther along, at Albert Dock, there's a flock of white sails. The Hardman fleet's arrived, tall ships bringing cotton from America.

The Liver birds keep lookout. Never-never stone creatures that perch atop the Liver Building where all the families

have agents. I keep my eyes fixed on the marble floor so that I don't have to look at the line of people desperate for an audience. Peels' man has the ground floor. The Peels' fortune came from real estate, small forays such as tenements at first, but money begets money. They took a punt when they redeveloped Liverpool's waterfront, a good investment that made them kings of the new world.

The other families have managers on other floors, all in close proximity as nothing's exclusive, business and bloodlines being interbred. The Hardmans are textile merchants, the Rathbones' wealth was made on soap, of all things, while the Moores are ship builders.

The outer offices contain rows of clerks at desks, shuffling columns of figures in ledgers. A boy, looking choked in his high-necked shirt, runs between them carrying messages. No one pays me any mind.

Makin's secretary keeps me waiting a full minute before he looks up, savouring this petty exercise of power. "He'll see you now."

Makin's at his desk. Ledgers are piled on shelves, the charts and maps on the walls are stuck with pins marking trade routes and Peel territories.

"Have a seat." He's always civil. "How did you fare today?"

"A few agreed."

I hand him the bag.

"They're reluctant?"

"Afraid."

There are already rumours. That the Peels, Hardmans, Rathbones and Moores, these wealthy people we never see, are monstrosities that live to a hundred years by feasting on Scousers' flesh and wearing our skins like suits when their own get worn out. Their hands drip with diamonds and the blood of the slaving classes. They lick their fingers clean with slaving tongues.

Makin taps the desk.

"Should we be paying more?"

"Then you'll have a line that stretches twice around the Mersey Wall consisting of drunken, syphilitic beggars."

"Do we have to order obligatory sampling of the healthy?"

"That's unwise."

His fingers stop drumming.

"Since when are rag and bone men the font of wisdom?"

I'm not scared of Makin but I need the money so I'm respectful. Besides, I like him.

"At least wait 'til it's cooler before you announce something like that or you'll have a riot."

That brings him up short.

"I'm feeling fractious today." He rubs the top of his head like a man full of unhappy thoughts. "Don't be offended."

“I’m not.”

“You’re a good sort. You work hard and don’t harbour grudges. You speak your mind instead of the infernal yeses I always get. Come and work for me.”

“Thank you but I hope you won’t hold it against me if I say no.”

“No, but think on it. The offer stands.” Something else is bubbling up. “You and I aren’t so different. I had to scramble too. I’m a Dingle man. My daughters are spoilt and innocent. My sons no better.” His rueful smile reveals the pain of parenthood. “It’s their mother’s fault. They’re not fit for the real world, so I must keep on scrambling.”

I envy his children, wanting for nothing, this brutal life kept at arm’s length. Makin must see something in my face because he puts the distance back between us with, “Have you heard any talk I should know about?”

He’s still chewing on my unpalatable comment about riots.

“All I meant was that it’s unseasonably hot and a while since the last high day or holiday. Steam builds up in these conditions.”

I hear craziness in the ale houses all the time that I’m not going to share with him. Talk of seizing boats and sailing out of Liverpool Bay, north to Blundell Sands and Crosby to breathe rarefied air and storm the families’ palaces. Toppling the merchant princes. A revolution of beheading, raping and redistribution of riches.

Tough talk. Despairing men with beer dreams of taking on armed guards.

“They can riot all they like. Justice will fall hard. Liverpool’s peaceful. There’ll be no unions here. We’ll reward anyone who helps keep it that way.”

I want to say, *The Peels aren’t the law*, but then I remember that they are.

I cross Upper Parliament Street into Toxteth. My cart’s loaded with a bag of threadbare coloured sheets which I’ll sell for second-grade paper. I’ve a pile of bones that’ll go for glue.

“Ra bon! Ra bon!” I shout.

Calls bring the kids who run alongside me. One reaches out to pat Gabriel, my hound, who curls his lip and growls.

“Not a pet, son. Steer clear.”

When I stop, the children squat on the curb to watch. They’re still too little for factory work.

“Tommy, can I have a sweet?”

“No, not unless you’ve something to trade and it’s Tom, you cheeky blighter. Shouldn’t you be in school?”

There are elementary classes in the big cathedral. I convinced Dad to let me attend until he decided it was too dangerous and taught me himself instead. Hundreds of us learnt our letters and numbers by rote, young voices raised

in unison like fevered prayers that reached the cavernous vaults. The sad-eyed ministers promised God and Jerusalem right here in Liverpool and even then I could see they were as hungry as we were, for bread and something better.

“Are you the scrap man?” It’s a darling girl with a face ravaged by pox. “My ma asked for you to come in.”

“Don’t touch my barrow,” I tell the others. “After the dog’s had you, I’ll clobber you myself.”

I wave my spike-tipped stick at them. It’s not a serious threat. They respond with grins of broken teeth and scurvy sores. They’re not so bad at this age. It’s the older ones you have to watch for.

I follow the child inside. The terraces seethe and swelter in the summer. Five storeys from basement to attic, a family in every room. All bodies fodder to the belching factories and docks; bargemen, spinners, dockers, weavers and foundry workers. Dad reckoned Liverpool got shipping and industry when the boundaries were marked out and other places got chemicals, medicines, food production and suchlike. He said the walls and watchtowers around each county were the means by which the martial government quelled civil unrest over recession, then biting depression. It was just an excuse to divide the nation into biddable portions and keep those that had in control of those that didn’t.

Dad also said his grandfather had a farm and it was a hard but cleaner living. No cotton fibres in the lungs, fewer machines to mangle limbs. Less disease and no production lines along which contagion can spread.

The girl darts into a room at the back. I stand at the door. The two women within are a pair of gems. One says, “Lolly,” and the child runs to her. She looks like an angel, clutching the child to her that way.

“We’ve stuff to sell,” says the other one with the diamond-hard stare. “I’m Sally and this is Kate.”

Sally’s dazzling. I take off my cap and pat down my hair.

They share the same profile, long hair fastened up. Sisters. Sally’s still talking while Angel Kate puts a basket on the table. I catch her glance. This pitiful collection’s worth won’t meet their needs.

“Let’s see.” I clear my throat. “These gloves might fetch something. The forks too.” The tines are so twisted that they’re only worth scrap value. There’s a jar of buttons and some horseshoe nails that look foraged from between cobbles. “I’ll give you extra for the basket.”

Kate looks at the money in my outstretched hand with hungry eyes but Sally’s got the money in her pocket before I can change my mind.

“Are you both out of work?”

“Laid off.” Sally makes a sour face.

“I’m sorry. Laid off from where?”

“Vicar’s Buttons.”

A good, safe place for nimble-fingered women.

“I’ll let you know if anyone’s hiring.”

“Lolly, play outside.” Lolly jumps to Kate’s order, dispelling any doubt about which woman is Lolly’s mother.

“We need more money.” Mother Kate is fierce. “I’ve heard that you’re looking to collect things for one of the families . . .”

“Which one?” Sally butts in.

“The Peels,” I answer.

“The Peels have taken enough from us already.”

I want to ask Sally what she means but I don’t get a chance.

“*We need more money, Sally.* Peels, Vicars, Hardmans. What’s the difference?”

“There is.”

“No, there isn’t, Sal.” Kate sounds flat. “Lolly needs food and a roof. She comes above pride or principles.”

Nothing could make me admire Kate more. I’m gawping at her.

“We’ll get work.”

“Not soon enough.” Kate turns to me. “Tell me more.”

“It’s just in case one of the Peels get ill.” I feel foolish trotting out this patter. “Should they need a little blood or skin, or bit of bone.”

“Are they too proud to ask one another?” Sally’s sharp. “I’ve heard that they take the bits they want and toss the rest of you to their lapdogs. And what if they want an eye or kidney?”

“They wouldn’t want anything vital and the compensation would be in keeping, of course.”

“Compensation?” Sally presses me. She’s the sparring sort.

“That’s up for discussion. Someone got granted leave to live outside Liverpool for their help.”

Outside. Myth and mystery. That shuts her up.

“Yes, but what will you give me now?” Kate has more pressing concerns.

Both women are bright-eyed. They don’t look like they buy backdoor poteen or have the sluggish, undernourished look of opium fiends. They’ve worked in a button factory, not a mill, so they’ve young unblemished lungs, engine hearts and flawless flesh, except for their worn hands. Just the sort I’ve been told to look for. I feel like a rat, gnawing on a dying man’s toes.

*Do whatever you need to survive*, Dad would say. *Do whatever you need to be free.*

I put a silver coin on the table.

“I’ll do it,” Kate says.

“Don’t.” Sally’s like a terrier. I don’t know whether to kiss or kick her.

“We’ve queued for weeks with no luck.”

The indignity of hiring pens and agency lines. At the respectable ones they just check hands and teeth. At others, they take women and boys around back for closer inspection.

“What if they want something from you? What then?” Sally sounds panicked.

“All they ask is a chance to speak to you. No one’s forcing anyone.” It’s what I’ve been told to say, but the rich always have their way.

“Do it.” Kate’s firm.

I take off the bag strung across my chest and sit down at the table.

“What’s your name?”

“Kate Harper.”

Kate’s hands are callused from factory work but her forearms are soft.

“It’ll hurt.” I remove the sampler’s cap.

I put it over her arm and press down. I feel the tip bite flesh and hear the click as it chips off bone. It leaves a deep, oozing hole. Kate gasps but doesn’t move. It’s only ever men that shout and thrash about.

“I’ll give you some ointment to help it heal. What about Lolly’s father?” I try and make it sound like easy banter as I write her details in the log book and on the tube.

“He was a sailor on *The Triumph*.”

“You’re Richard Harper’s wife?” A name said with hushed reverence.

“Yes, and before you blather on about heroism, he didn’t give us a second thought. Everything we’d saved went on his sailor’s bond.”

*The Triumph* was a Peel ship that landed in the Indies. You can’t send men across the ocean on a boat and not expect them to want to get off on the other side and walk around. It’s a foul practice to stop sailors absconding, resulting in cabin fever, brawling and sodomy. The crew of *The Triumph* mutinied.

The leader, Richard Harper, was a martyr for his part. The authorities tied him to the anchor before they dropped it. His sailor’s bond, held with the port master, was forfeit.

“You were widowed young.”

Kate’s nod is a stiff movement from the neck. She tries to soften it with, “It’s just us now.”

“I understand. It used to be me and my dad until he died. He was a rag and bone man too.” I’m overcome with the need to tell her everything, but I can’t. “He wanted a horse instead of pulling the barrow himself. One day I’ll get one, if I can save enough.”

I’m trying to impress them. Sally sighs as if I’m tiresome

but Kate pats my hand like an absentminded mother. Her unguarded kindness makes me want to cry. I want to put my head on Kate’s knee and for her to stroke my hair.

Sally watches us.

“I won’t do it. I don’t trust them.”

I realise that I want to touch Sally too, but in a different way. I have a fierce urge to press my mouth to the flesh on the inside of her wrist where the veins show through.

Sally stares me down and I want to say, *I’m not the enemy. I’m not a flesh-eating Peel up in an ivory tower*, but then I realise that I might as well be.

I sit in my room at The Baltic Fleet. Mother Kate’s essence shouldn’t be contained in a vial. I don’t want anyone else to possess her. Not some sailor, bound and drowned, and definitely not a Peel. She should be free.

Times are hard. I’ve filled in a whole page of Makin’s log book.

I go walking to clear my head, Gabriel at heel. Mrs Tsang, the publican, is stocking the bar with brown bottles of pale ale. She’s good to me, just like she was good to Dad. She lets me the room and I keep my barrow in the yard under a tarp.

“Okay, poppet?” she asks as I pass.

On impulse I lean down and kiss her cheek. She swats me away, hiding her smile. Mrs Tsang’s tiny but I’ve seen her bottle a man in the face for threatening her. The jagged glass tore his lips and nose.

The factories are out and everyone’s heading home. Workers pile into the terraces. Some sun themselves on doorsteps. A tethered parrot squawks at me from its perch outside a door, talking of flights in warmer climes. Kids play football on the street.

I head to Otterspool Prom where I stand and consider, looking out at the river. Herring gulls scream at me for my foolishness. Gabriel lies down and covers his face with his paws.

I drop Kate’s vial and stand on it. Then I kick every single fragment into the water and don’t leave until the Mersey’s taken it all away.

I pause outside Makin’s office.

“I’d advise caution with his sort, sir.” A stranger’s voice.

“What’s *his sort* then?” That’s Makin.

“Loners, in my experience, are freaks or agitators.”

“Tom’s neither.”

Behind me, someone clears his throat. I turn to find myself on the sharp end of a pointed look from Makin’s secretary. No doubt he’ll tell later.

“I told you to knock and go in.” He opens the door.

“Ah, Tom, this is Mr Jessop.”

Jessop’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, with good teeth and all his hair. He’s no gentleman. He has the swagger of the law, not a regular policeman but a special.

“Tom, we were just talking about you.” He sounds like a Scouser now, a rough edge to his voice that was missing before. He must talk it up or down, depending on the company. “Can I see the log book that Mr Makin gave you?”

I look at Makin who nods. Mr Jessop flicks through it, checking against the ledger where a clerk copies the details.

“Is this address correct?”

It’s Kate’s.

“Yes.” I shrug. “I filled it in at the time.”

“Anyone else live there?”

“Her sister and daughter.”

“And you broke one of the samplers that day?”

“Yes. An empty one. I’m a clumsy oaf.” I try and sound like I’m still berating myself. “I dropped it and stepped on it. I reported it straight away, didn’t I, Mr Makin? I offered to pay for it.”

“No one’s accusing you of anything, Tom.”

“Do you know where Kate Harper is now?” Jessop doesn’t let up.

“Isn’t she there?”

I know she isn’t. I knocked at her door and an old man answered. *Bugger off. I’ve no idea where they went.*

“No, but you know that already because you went back.” Jessop smiles, the triumphant conniver. “You do know that she’s Richard Harper’s widow, don’t you?”

“Yes, but what’s that got to do with me?”

Jessop’s hands are spotless. He must scrub them nightly to get out suspects’ blood. Specials with manicured hands don’t come in search of factory girls without reason.

Makin sits back, waiting. Of course. They’re terrified of Harper. That his wife will be a rallying cry.

“I didn’t know who she was until she gave the sample.”

“And why would she do that?”

“She needed money.”

“So she’s not being looked after by her Trotsky pals?” Jessop won’t let it go.

“I don’t think so.” I try and catch Makin’s eye.

“Why did you go back?”

Makin’s holding his breath, waiting.

“The thing is”—I shift about, embarrassed by the truth—“they were pretty and I wanted to see them again.”

“There’s no shame in that.” Makin seems relieved. Thank God that good men like him can rise in this world that favours politicians who use smiles, wiles and outright lies.

I feel bad about lying to him.

“We need to speak to her,” Jessop says.

“But I don’t know where she is.”

“But you’ll tell us if you do find her?” His smile makes me want to bolt for the door. “You’ve never had a job, have you?”

“I work.”

My dad would say, *We’re free. Never subject to the tyranny of the clock. The dull terrors of the production line. No one will use us as they please.*

“Bone grubbing. Piss-poor way to make a living.”

“Enough.” Makin tuts.

“So sorry.” Jessop’s oily and insincere. “If you do find her, be a good lad and run up here and tell Mr Makin.”

I want to say, *Shove your apology*, but keep my gob shut.

The bastards follow me about all day. Jessop and his pals, got up like dockers. I pretend I’ve not seen them but they stand out. They’re too clean to look real.

I look for Kate and Sally in the hiring lines, strolling past with my barrow as if on my way elsewhere. I wouldn’t give her away. I just want to see her face. I ask the washerwomen at the water pumps and the old men standing around the fires at night.

Kate, Sally, Lolly. There’s not a whiff of them.

I go up to the destitute courts of the Dingle, each court comprised of six houses set up around a central yard. The noxious stench from the shared privy is of liquid filth. I look through open doors: blooming damp patches on the plaster, crumbled in places to bare brick. I see faces made hard by deprivation. Infants squalling from drawers because they’re hungry. It was a miracle that Makin clawed his way out of here.

“You.”

A priest accosts me. He’s on his rounds, demanding pennies from the poor to give to the even poorer.

“Come here.”

Closer and he’s unshaven and smells. He’s ale addled. I feel for him, driven to despair and drink by the gargantuan task of saving so many lost souls. He follows me out of the court, onto the street.

“I’ve heard about you, Thomas Coster.”

I tie Gabriel to the cart in case he goes for the man and wait for the rage of the righteous. I don’t feel so well-disposed towards him now.

“You’re in league with evil.” He shoves his face into mine. Gabriel goes crazy. We’re drawing quite an audience. “The Peels keep people in tanks like fish, cutting off the bits they want.”

I’m panting from pushing the cart uphill and trying to outpace him. Jessop’s up ahead, leaning against a wall.

“A man should be buried whole in consecrated ground.”

The priest’s enraged when the crowd laughs. Burial’s expensive. The poor are cremated on pyres.

“You’ll be damned. You’ll suffer all hell’s torments. You’ll be flayed. The devil will sup on your gizzards and crack the marrow from your bones.”

Jessop laughs under his breath as I pass.

It’s a rare day that a Peel comes to town.

The Peel factories have closed an hour early to mark the day. Men loiter on Hope Street, outside the Philharmonic pub. Rowdy clerks from the insurance offices and banks are out, seeking white-collar mayhem. One turns quickly and shoulder barges me as I pass. He’s keen to prove he can push more than a pen. His friends laugh.

His mates all line up across the pavement to block my path. I step into the gutter. One of them steps down to join me. He’s wearing ridiculous checked trousers and his hands are in his pockets. I wonder what’s in there.

“You walked into my friend. You should apologise.”

I open my mouth but someone’s standing at my shoulder. It’s Jessop.

“I think you’re mistaken,” Jessop says as he opens his jacket. Whatever’s glinting within is enough to put this bunch off.

I glance around. Jessop’s travelling in numbers, all of them in black suits.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

Oh, to wield so much power that you don’t have to exert it.

Jessop picks up his pace, looking back to give me a final grin. I follow in their wake, pushing through to the barrier. There’s a big crowd. Lord Peel’s here to give a special address to his foremen. They must be in need of bucking up if he’s got to come down here to talk to them himself.

The doors of the assembly rooms open and a pair of specials come out, eyes scanning the crowd. The foremen follow, dressed in their Sunday best. They look uncertain as they emerge, blinking in the afternoon sunlight. Makin and his secretary follow. Makin looks stiff and starched. I’m used to seeing him with his shirtsleeves rolled up, fingers inky from his calculations.

Then Lord Peel steps out, the brim of his hat angled to shade his face. I realise there’s silence. Not even the sound of shuffling feet.

Some lackey shoves a child forward and she holds up a bunch of pink roses. Peel turns his face as he takes them. He’s a shocker close up. His nose and eyes are leonine. Thin lipped. Skin stretched to a sickening smoothness that rivals the silk of his cravat. His blue eyes are faded by age.

Then it begins. A low baritone from deep within the crowd.

*The sea takes me from my love . . .*

Another voice joins in, then another, then more so there’s a choir.

*The sea takes me from my love  
It drops me on the ocean floor  
The sea tempts me from my true love's arms  
And I'll go home no more.*

Peel smiles, thinking this impromptu serenade's for him. He doesn't know that each ship has its own shanties and ballads and this one's famed as *The Triumph's*.

Makin leans over and whispers in Peel's ear and his smile fades. There's another chorus and it sounds like the whole of Liverpool is singing.

*The sea takes me from my love  
It drops me on the ocean floor  
The sea tempts me from my mother's knee  
And I'll go home no more.*

There are no jeers or shouts. Just the people's indignity dignified in song. The police don't know how to respond. They form a ring around Peel and his retinue. The foremen are outside this protective circle. Someone motions for Peel's carriage.

The air's filled with fluttering white sheets. They're being thrown down onto the street from the roof of the infirmary. Hands reach for them. Makin plucks at a sheet, reads it and crumples it in his fist. Peel's caught one too. He's angry. He turns to Makin and jabs at his chest with a gloved forefinger as if he's personally responsible.

I pick up one. It's *The Echo*, a dissident rag, printed on cheap, low-grade paper, the ink already smudging. It advocates minimum wages, safety measures and free health care. This edition's different. It bears the words *Lord Peel's Triumph*, with a drawing of Richard Harper floating on his anchor. It's the anniversary of his death. A bad day for Peel to show his face.

Once Peel's departed the police will demonstrate their displeasure for this display. Jessop's already giving orders. It's time to leave.

Peel's in the carriage as the singing continues. Makin turns as he climbs in and his gaze fixes on me, *The Echo* still clutched in my hand.

It's an official match day, when the factories close for the machines to be serviced.

Football's a violent and anarchic game where passions are vented, on and off the pitch. The crowd wears the colours, red or blue. They're no longer just a dark mass of serge and twill that pour into the black factories.

Jessop and his sidekick are behind me. I try and lose them in the crush. The hoards of Everton, Toxteth, Kensington, and Dingle come together for this sliver of pleasure.

The constabulary are mounted, their horses stamping and pawing the cobbles. They'll tolerate fisticuffs amid the

crowd to vent rising tensions. A good-natured kicking or black eye, as long as everyone's fit for work the following day no harm's done.

The coppers know if they weigh in the crowd will turn on them, but I can see in their eyes how they'd love to beat about with batons and hand out indiscriminate thrashings in the guise of peacekeeping.

I see my chance. A chanting group comes up the street towards Anfield's football pitch, waving Evertonian flags. Red banners are at my back. The two groups meet, posturing and jostling. I dart down an alley, ducking to avoid the lines of washing. Jessop's lost.

There's one place I've not looked for them. The dirty terraces where parlours of women wait for the game to end. It makes me shudder.

I peer into windows and am shocked by what's on show. It's just another factory, churning up girls, making fodder of their flesh. I go around the back. Women line the wall, waiting to be hired. My heart stops when I see her. I push past the other girls who try to lure me in with promises that make me blush.

“Where's Kate?”

“You.” Sally looks tired and bored. “Are you paying?”

Hard and heartless. I rifle in my pocket, glancing up and down the street. “Here.”

“It's double that.” She scowls.

I give her more. We have to get indoors.

She leads me to a house. A room's free at the top of the stairs. It's painted an oppressive red that would look fashionable somewhere grand. The window's dirty. There's a bed with a sheet and pillow on it. A pitcher and bowl on the dresser. A headboard rattles on the other side of the wall.

“What are you doing, Sally?”

“Earning a living.”

“Here?”

“I can't get work.”

“And Kate?”

“Dead.”

The mattress sinks even farther as I sit beside her. She moves away.

“When?” Then, “How?”

“A week ago. We moved in with a family in Croxteth. The woman was sick that day so Kate went to work in her place. She got her sleeve caught in a roller. It took her arm. They were too slow tying the stump off. She bled to death.”

Sally's matter-of-fact. Her lip doesn't quiver. Her eyes are dry.

“I'm sorry.” Words clog my throat. “Where's Lolly?”

“At home, where else?” She's glad of an excuse to be angry. “What sort do you think I am, to bring a child here?”

“The best sort.” I try and soothe her.

Kate’s dead. I wish I’d gone back to their terrace sooner but posthumous offers of help mean nothing to the dead.

“I’m the best sort, am I? Is that why you think you can buy me with a few coins? You men are all loathsome.”

I’m angry too. I want to shut her up. I grip her head and cover her mouth with mine. She pulls away.

“Don’t kiss me with your eyes shut and pretend I’m Kate. Fuck me for my own sake.”

I don’t relent. I’m too busy kissing Sally to correct her. The tension in her is like a wire.

We lie down. She’s thin, a skeleton wrapped in skin. I’m not much better, but I take the weight of my large frame on my knees and elbows.

“This doesn’t mean anything. Understand?”

She’s wrong. It means everything.

“You’re crying,” she says.

“So are you.”

She undoes my trousers and puts her hand between my legs. No one’s ever touched me there before.

“Oh,” she says. Then louder, “Oh.”

I feel the wire snap, and her whole body relaxes. She kisses me, finally yielding. My whole life’s been leading to this moment of sex and solace.

I want to say, *Thank you, thank you, thank you*, but I’m too breathless to speak.

Sally’s head is on my chest. Sleep slows her breathing. My trousers are around my thighs, my shirt’s undone. Her petticoat’s rucked up around her waist. I don’t move for fear of disturbing this lovely girl. The sudden roar from Anfield carries over the rooftops and into the room. It masks the quiet click of the door opening and closing.

Jessop stands at the end of the bed, chuckling. I leap up, struggling with my trousers.

“So Tom,” he says, sarcastic. “Who’s your pretty friend?”

I do up my fly. Sally retrieves her blouse from the floor and pulls it over her head. Jessop’s sly look scares me. He takes off his jacket.

“We’ve all afternoon. Why don’t you both lie down again?”

I go at him like a cornered dog. Dad used to say, *Fight if you’re cornered*. I stick him in the throat with my pocket knife. Bubbles of blood mark the wound. I put my hand over his mouth to stop him crying out. He grips my wrist and twists. Sally’s fishing about under the bed and I wonder what the hell she’s doing, then I see the docker’s hook. It’s the weapon of choice in Liverpool. The handle sits snug in the palm, the hook protruding between the first and second fingers. She comes around behind him and plants it in his skull.

Jessop pitches into my arms. I lower him to the floor.

“Hold his legs.”

I grab them to stop his boot heels from hammering on the floor. Sally helps. How he clings to life. It seems like forever before he’s still.

“Are you okay, Sal?” A woman’s voice.

“Fine.”

“Sure?”

Sally gets up. I wipe the blood spray from her face. She goes to the door and opens it a crack. She whispers something and the woman laughs. Then Sally locks the door.

“Who was he?”

“A special.”

“Jesus. We’ll both swing.”

She’s right. We’ll go straight from the law courts to the noose in Victoria Square. But before that there’ll be long days and nights in a cell with Jessop’s friends queued outside.

I’d rather die.

“What did he want with you?”

“He was looking for Kate. They think she can lead them to trade unionists.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Sally, we’ve not got much time. I’ll deal with this. You need to go.”

“No. We stay together.”

“Get Lolly. Wait at The Baltic Fleet. Don’t speak to anyone but Mrs Tsang. Tell her I sent you. You can trust her.” It kills me to say this. I want to be a coward and say, *Yes, stay. Never leave my side.*

She kisses me. Why did I ever think her hard?

“I’m sorry that I got you involved with this.” I usher her out. “Go on now, quickly.”

Once she’s gone, I splash cold water on my face and button up my jacket to hide my bloodied shirt.

All the while I’m thinking of Sally. Of how my parting words were *I’m sorry that I got you involved with this*, when what I meant was *I’m sorry that you think I love Kate more.*

I roll Jessop under the bed and pull the rug over the stained floorboards. I’m thankful for the room’s violent colour as it hides the blood sprayed across the walls.

The specials must be going house to house. I’m on the stairs when I hear outraged shouts from the room below. A pair of them come up the narrow stairs. I grapple with the first one and he knocks me down. The other tries to hold my thrashing legs. Like Jessop, I struggle against the inevitable.

A third clammers over us, pretty tangle that we are, and checks the rooms. There’s a pause, then a hoarse shout. Jessop’s been found.

“Take the bastard outside.”

They’ve cleared the street. Faces peer from the window. Someone kicks my legs from under me. I land on my knees.

“Mike, remember what Makin said.” The man holding my arm is young and nervous.

Mike, who’s looking down on me, pauses, but then he decides I’m worth it. He kicks me in the chest. I feel the wind go out of me.

“Bugger Makin. He killed Jessop.”

I curl up on the floor, hands over my head. My view’s of the boots as they pile in. It doesn’t matter. I’ve had a kicking before.

I’m in Makin’s office. The clock sounds muffled and voices are distant. The hearing in my left ear’s gone. The vision in my right eye’s reduced to a slit. Breathing hurts.

Makin’s furious.

“Get out.”

“Sir, the man’s a murderer,” Mike whines.

“I gave specific orders. Tom wasn’t to be harmed under any circumstances. You were to bring him straight to me if anything happened.”

“Sir, Jessop . . .”

“Are you still here? Go before I have you posted to Seaforth.”

Mike flees at the threat of Merseyside’s hinterlands. Makin fetches a pair of glasses and a decanter. He pours out the port. It looks like molten rubies.

“Drink this. It’ll steady you. I’ve called for a doctor.”

I drain the glass, not tasting the contents. His sits, untouched.

“You’re in serious trouble, Tom. I want to help you.” The chair’s legs scrape the floor as he pulls it closer and sits down. “Did you kill him?”

I nod. Then I start to cry.

“It happened so fast. He burst in. I was with a girl.” I’m babbling. A stream of snot, tears and despair. “I’m not a trade unionist.”

“Who was the girl?”

“Not Kate Harper, if that’s what you’re thinking. Jessop didn’t do his job very well. She’s dead. He should’ve checked the register.”

“He did. The body didn’t match the sample you gave me for her.” Makin tips his head. “You have to trust me. Is Kate really dead or were you with her?”

“No. All I know is that she’s dead.”

“Who did the sample belong to? Was it the woman you were with?”

“Does it matter?” He looks down at his hands. Ink stains his fingers. “More than you think.”

He tops up my glass.

“Let’s suppose Lord Peel’s keen to find this woman, whoever it is. Let’s say Lady Peel needs medical attention that requires a little blood or perhaps a bit of skin. It would be a wealth for this woman and a reward to whoever helps me find her.” He lets this sink in. “Suppose Jessop got himself into a spot of bother with some girl. He played rough from what I’ve heard. There’s no proof. The girl’s long gone. An unsolved case.”

My nose starts to bleed. Makin hands me his handkerchief. Blood stains the fine linen.

“You could do that?”

“I’ll do what’s necessary.” Makin, not afraid to scramble.

“I want somewhere away from Liverpool. Out in the country. A farm with cows and chickens where nobody can bother me,” I blurt out. “And I want to take a woman and child with me.”

“That’s a lot, just for information.”

“It’s more than that. Peel will be pleased. It’ll make up for that day when he made his speech. But promise me first, that we have a deal.”

Jessop looks at me with narrowed eyes.

“A deal then, as long as you deliver her.”

We shake hands.

“The sample’s mine.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

He stares at me.

“Test me again and you’ll see.” I’m an odd-looking woman, but I make a passable man. I’m too big, too ungainly, too flat chested and broad shouldered. My hips narrow and features coarse. “I’m not trying to make a fool of you. I live this way.”

“Why?”

“Sarah, my mother, got me when she was cornered on the factory floor by men who resented a woman who could work a metal press better than them. She swore she’d never go back. She became Saul after I was born.”

*Rag and bone men. We’re free, Tom. Never subject to the tyranny of the clock. The dull terrors of the production lines. No man will use us as he pleases.*

“What’s your real name?”

“Tom.” It’s the only name I’ve ever had. “Do we still have a deal?”

“Yes. The girl you were with when you killed Jessop. Is she the one you want to take with you?”

His face is smooth now, hiding disgust or disappointment.

“Yes.”

“I’ll need to know who she is and where to find her if I’m going to get her out of Liverpool.”

I tell him. When I say Sally’s name he takes a deep breath but doesn’t ask anything else.

I want to ask, *What do the Peels want from me?* But then I decide it's better not to know.

I've never been on a boat. I've never seen Liverpool from the sea. My stinking, teeming city's beautiful. I've never loved her more than I do now. I love the monumental Liver birds, even though they're indifferent to the suffering below. The colonnades and warehouses. Cathedrals and crack houses. The pubs and street lamps glowing in the fog. Workers, washerwomen, beggars, priests and princes. Rag and bone men. Liverpool is multitudes.

The boat's pitch and roll makes me sick. A guard follows me to the rail. He's not concerned about my health. He's scared I'll jump. I get a whiff of the Irish Sea proper. Land's a strip in the distance.

We don't moor at Southport but somewhere nearby. I'm marched down the rattling gangplank and onto a narrow jetty. Miles of dunes roll out before us. It's clean and empty. I've never known such quiet. There's only wind and shifting sands. I wonder if it's hell or paradise.

The dunes become long grass and then packed brown earth. I've never seen so many trees. Their fallen leaves are needles underfoot, faded from rich green to brown.

There's a hatch buried in the ground. One of my guards opens it and clambers down, waiting at the bottom.

“You next.”

The corridor leads downwards. Our boots shed sand and needles on the tiles. There's the acrid smell of antiseptic.

“In here.” One of them touches my arm.

The other's busy talking to someone I can't see because of the angle of an adjoining door. I catch the words, “Makin sent her this way. She'll need time to heal.”

“Take your clothes off and put them in the bin. Turn this and water will come out here. Get clean under it.” My guard's talking to me like I'm a child. “Soap's here. Towel's there. Put on this gown after.”

I'm mortified, thinking they're going to watch, but they're keen to be away. I drop my clothes into the bin. I can still smell Sally on me but she doesn't stand a chance against the stream of hot water and rich suds.

A woman's leaning against the far wall, watching. I pull the towel about me and try to get dry. She looks like a china doll, with high, round cheeks and blue eyes. Her long yellow hair swings as she walks.

“Sit there.”

She tuts as she touches my cheek where the skin's split. Then she checks my eyes and teeth. A needle punctures my vein. Blood works its way along a tube into a bottle. She takes scrapings from the inside of my mouth.

“Disrobe.”

I stand up and let the towel drop to a puddle at my feet. I stare ahead of me. She walks around me like a carter considering a new horse. Her hand floats across the plane of my back, around the garland of yellow and purple bruises that run from back to front. She touches my breasts, my stomach, my thighs. From the steadfast way she avoids my gaze, I know there's more chance that the Liver birds will fly than of me leaving here.

I try and stay calm. I was dead from the moment Jessop opened the door of the red room. From the moment I put the sampler to my arm. It's either this or a jig at the end of a rope. There's no point in me going cold into the warm ground to rot when I can help Sally and Lolly. I hope they'll remember to take Gabriel with them.

Ink-fingered Makin, the artful scrambler, making his calculations. The possibility I've got him wrong is a cold, greasy knife in my belly. If I have, I've served up Sally, Lolly and Mrs Tsang into the constabulary's hands.

The woman seems satisfied. I want to say, *Look at me. Look me in the eye. I'm a person, not a piece of meat*, but then I realise I just might as well be. A piece of meat. Rag and bone.



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