

Allie

Tuesday morning. Allie opened her eyes and fixed her gaze on the table beside her bed. Then, catching sight of the silver watch chain hanging flaccidly over the edge, she moved her gaze up the links as though ascending a ladder, and finally stopped on the face of the watch itself, the watch that every man in her mother's line had carried until there was only a woman to inherit it, the watch that Nora had hated, but that she had always loved. The surface of the timepiece scintillated in the rays of sunlight that had managed to find their way past the heavy drapery swaying slowly back and forth in the draft coming from a small crack between the windowsill and the casement. Six forty-five, it read. Or nine thirty-four, perhaps. Time was a matter of perception, anyway, and the trick with perception was to make sure that yours matched that of those around you.

She tossed the blankets and coverlet from herself, making a small gasp of surprise as the cold air hit her, and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She placed them firmly on the wooden planks, but her toes still curled back slightly when they came in contact with the icy floor. A strand of long black hair had come loose during the night. She tucked it behind her ear.

She had used too many blankets the night before, and as a result, had soaked her shift through with perspiration. She could see through the fabric in the places where the cotton, heavy with moisture clung to her skin, making strange shapes and coloring her like watercolor. Her skin looked too pale through the cloth, she thought. She crossed her arms under her breasts and hugged herself against the cold. Her crossed arms pulled the shift tight against her body in a vain attempt to keep warm.

Even so, she shivered as another draft breathed into the room. She should have used fewer blankets, she decided, but it was so cold.

Nora used to let me sleep with her. When I was sad or scared or just in want of company, I would walk over to her bed, usually with Eleanor dangling from my hand.

--What's wrong, Allie?

-- It's Eleanor. She's afraid.

She would lift up the blankets, and I would lie by her, with her arms wrapped around me. So warm. So secure. I would lie with her for hours waiting to fall asleep, promising that I would return to my own bed in five minutes, twenty minutes, forty minutes. I would feel her heartbeat through her chest, hear her soft breath. She would never care if I left and came back, or if even if I wet the bed. She never told me to leave her alone, and go to mother. She knew she was too sick. Sometimes I would lie there all through the night, her soft, warm arms holding me close. Smuggling.

Easing herself onto her feet, she stood up and made her way over to the washstand. She filled the basin with water from the pitcher next to it and splashed the cold water on her face. That woke her up. She washed, scrubbed her teeth, and dried her face and hands on a towel hanging near the stand. She untied her hair, and when it was hanging about her chest and shoulders, she began to brush it in long, even strokes. She paused. Here she was, trying to look presentable when her appearance would not make the slightest bit of difference today. With a chuckle, she went back to brushing.

She crossed to the room, and opened the door to the small closet in the corner. She selected a clean shift from the clothing inside and peeled the damp one

from her. The cold air felt good against her skin, and she stood for a few moments observing her form in the tall mirror hanging on the closet door, and watching her skin pebble with goose pimples. She looked at her left arm and craned her neck over her left shoulder to see her back in the mirror. Yes, the scars were still there, criss-crossing her back, neck, and shoulder with bold, angry, pink lines.

The pungent reek of tobacco and sour liquor filled my nostrils. The almost-empty bottle of Powers was clutched tight in his fist.

--I'll teach you! I'll teach you nawt to lissun! Disrepeck me in my own house! He came toward me in long, but unstable strides. Thunk-thunk-thunk, went his boots on the floor. The bottle raised above his head, and the remaining contents began to drip down his wrist. He wouldn't. He never did when mother was here. He wouldn't. No, of course not. But why was he still approaching? Why was he grabbing my left arm so tightly? I could smell his sour breath coming out in ragged heaves of his chest.

Whoosh! Glass flew everywhere. My lip split and my cheek began to swell. I could taste the blood in my mouth, feel it running down my chin. Cracked pieces of my molars filled my mouth. Whoosh!

I struggled, tried to wrench my arm free, but he held on too tight for me to get away. At some point, I began to cry. After a while, all that existed was the sound and the pain. Over and over and over again. Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

She pulled the clean shift on and did up the buttons. She selected a blue dress and did up the buttons of that too. She put on her boots, coat, and hat, and once she had done up the buttons of her coat, she took up her money purse and the watch, and left the tiny apartment.

She made her way into the wind blowing down Dorset Street. The air felt moist and heavy, and looking up, she saw that the clouds were covering the sky in a near uniform coat of grey. They looked like the ink of a letter that someone had spilled a glass of water onto, each individual word dissolving away into illegibility. It would rain that day, she thought, but not until later. She closed her eyes and imagined the feel of the rain on her face, each drop splashing its cool water on her cheeks and forehead. She imagined catching them in her mouth and listening to the pit-pat of even more raindrops falling all around her on the pavement stones. Like God's tears as he cried for humanity. She abruptly opened her eyes and quickened her pace. No, not God. Never God. No God.

Nothing seemed to be stirring within the house, but even so, I approached it as quietly as I could. I was certain that he would be gone, drowning himself at the bar or out borrowing money to drown himself at the bar. Even so, I entered slowly, listening for any sound, any hint that he might be home. Nothing. As I made my way carefully about, I looked around me, checking and checking again. Still nothing. I began to climb the stairs. Slowly, slowly, I made my way, cursing the creak the third step made when I put my weight on it.

I froze. I had heard something, and not just the creaking of the step. I listened for it again, but heard nothing. Tentatively, I began to try the steps again. Perhaps it had been my imagination. Four. Five. Six. Again, I heard the sound, but more clearly. I knew that it was not a sound he would have made. His were loud and discordant. This was soft, delicate, even. I climbed more with curiosity than fear now. Seven. Eight.

Nine. Again, I heard it. Ten. Again. I seemed to hear it more frequently the higher I climbed. I edged my way down the hallway to the room I shared with Nora. Again.

Suddenly I recognized it. It was a cry muffled by a pillow or a blanket. It was a sound that I knew all too well, a sound I myself had made all too often. But I was not making it now. The person in the room was, and that person had to be Nora.

As I neared the door, I noticed signs that it had been forced. There were scuff marks on the door's surface just to the left of the handle, and the door itself was splintered where we had screwed a padlock into it a few weeks before. The door opened with a single push, and swung silently into the room.

My sister was on the floor in the middle of the room. She was on her knees, but sitting back on her heels so that her legs splayed out slightly. Her head was down, and her blond hair, short though it was, hid her face from me. In her hands, she clutched a torn strip of red fabric. Besides that fabric, I could see no trace of clothing covering her. Beside her was a small decorative pillow covered in tears and mucus.

--Nora?

She raised her head to look at me. Her face was stained with the same tears and mucus I had seen on the pillow. Her eyes were bright red from crying, and her cheeks were flushed from the hyperventilation I had heard outside the room. She looked at me and smiled. The smile told me that there was a lighthearted explanation for what I saw in the room. It told me that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that I should not worry. Oh, how I wished I could believe that smile. How I wished that I could leave the room and reenter to find Nora dressed, and with that same smile fixed on her face. But I did not. I remained rooted to the spot staring at her.

Nora's hands clutched the fabric tighter and tighter. She held it so tightly that her hands began to shake, and her knuckles began to whiten. Then, a small hiccup of a cry escaped her, and her eyes began to well up. Her face began to convulse and lose the smile. Soon tears were flowing freely down her face.

Before I had time to think, I had crossed the room, dropped to the floor beside her, and snatched her up in my arms. She was crying openly and loudly now. Her tears dripped onto my shoulder and back like warm raindrops.

--What...

I stopped. I knew what.

--Who...

I stopped again. I knew who too.

I knew what and I knew who, and yet I could do nothing, nothing but stay there and hold Nora. So I remained in the center of the room with my arms around my crying sister, stroking her hair, and making empty promises that things were going to be all right. I held her the way she held me on those dark nights only a few years ago, trying in vain to comfort her, to give her some shred of the security she had given me. But even after what felt like an eternity, her cries persisted. I began to pray. I prayed for help. But I received nothing. I prayed again. I prayed for an answer, for a reason why. But I still received nothing. I prayed again. Again. Again. But even when my prayers became curses, I still received nothing.

She continued up Dorset Street and turned right onto Fredrick Street. After a bit of walking, she turned left onto Denmark Street. As she walked, she passed the intersection of Temple Street. Looking down to her left, she saw the steeple of St.

George's Church looming above all the other buildings. It stretched up toward the sky, trying to pierce the clouds like a man with a sword. Except the sword was upside down. She chuckled. Here was man, trying to reach up toward heaven, but falling well short even of the low-hanging clouds. God need not have worried about the Tower of Babylon. She wondered how high they would have managed to build it before the whole thing collapsed under its own weight.

She looked back up at the steeple, and chuckled again. Crosses were funny things. It could just as easily have been, say, a noose that killed Jesus. That would be something: nooses round everyone's neck and gallows at the top of every building. Hangmen would be priests, and executions would be prayers.

The wimple covered most of her head with the exception of her face. Instead, the starched fabric surrounded her visage making a sort of frame for her features, crossed by a few strands of her blond hair. They had worked themselves loose, or perhaps she herself had let them down in a show of individuality or rebellion. When we were girls, people would always ask if we really were full sisters because of the difference of our hair color. Hers was a near transparent blond, while mine was a dark, inky black. I knew, even without Mother's confirmation, that we were sisters, though. Now she was a different sort of sister. That made her a sister twice over.

--Father, Allie. He is still our father.

--He is not! Not after...

--I know! I know. But he is still our father. Regardless of his actions...

--He'll not be much of anything soon.

--But you can't, Allie! You wouldn't!

--It would be justice! It is righteous!

--No, God is righteous! Revenge is a wicked sin!

--God is a sham!

She crossed herself

--After what he did to me? To you? You would forget?

--I have not forgotten, Allie. I have forgiven him. Now I pray for his soul.

She grasped my hands in hers.

--You cannot play God, Allie. To try to do so would be a sin even worse than any he committed.

I tried to speak, but I could not find the words to formulate an answer. She believed what she was saying. She actually believed every word. With all that praying, she had somehow managed to convince herself that she forgave that man.

--Come to confession with me Allie. Just confess, and you will be forgiven.

She began to pull me in the direction of the confessional box, but I wrenched my arm from her. She gave a start of surprise. I looked into the face of the woman who had been my sister. I was unable to recognize even a trace of the girl I had once known.

--You are a fool.

I turned and began to walk out of the church. My footsteps rang against the floor, and echoed in the church.

--Allie!

I did not stop

--Allie! Allie! You will lose me! If you do it, you will lose me! I'll send you no more letters if you do it!

My stride slowed for a moment, but I did not stop. I shook my head and continued walking.

--You fool, I whispered under my breath. You fool.

She continued up Denmark Street until she came to a small shop at the intersection with the North Circular Road. Fishing and Boating Supply read a sign above the door.

A small bell tinkled above the door when she entered. Fishing rods of different lengths adorned the far wall. They were lined up like the halberds she had once seen in a picture in a book about medieval knights. To her left was the counter, above which hooks, sinkers, and reels sat in boxes on wooden shelves. Against the right wall were a number of different kinds of ropes, cords and lines. She began to walk toward her right, and as she approached, her gaze fell on a thick fishing line rolled and stored on a shelf against the wall.

The fishing line was wrapped tightly around my fingers, and it got even tighter as I pulled. I could feel the line beginning to cut of the circulation to my fingers, but I would not let go. I pulled even harder towards me, harder than in my entire life. Then I relaxed. It was done. I had done it.

--Do you need any help, missus?

She spun quickly to face the voice. Standing in front of her was a short, stocky, balding man. From his thick, burly arms to the scent of salt he carried with him, he looked every bit the seaman. He stood a few inches shorter than she, and held his callused palms out in an open, welcoming gesture. His eyes widened a bit with recognition when he saw her face.

--Ah, it's you. Back again to my humble shop. How was the fishing? Your husband was happy with the new line, was he not?

She had not expected him to remember her after over a week. Not many women visited his store, she supposed.

--Yes... My husband. He was... He was very glad to get it.

--Good quality, that. Braided, not twisted like some of the cheaper ones, you'll find, and coated with wax for durability. How was the fishing? You catch anything?

--Yes. A... A big one.

--A big one, eh? How did the line hold up? It didn't fray or nothing, did it?

--No. No, it didn't fray.

--That's my line for you, he said beaming. Well, what brings you back? What're you needing now? More line? Some hooks, maybe?

While he talked, she had been examining the coils of ropes hanging against the wall. Each one was of a different texture or thickness. She decided on a smooth-looking one of a medium girth, and gestured toward it.

--A length of this, please.

--Sail cord? You didn't mention a sailboat. How much do you need?

--About two meters.

--Two meters!

--Yes. We... have a very small boat.

He stared at her disbelievingly.

--It's a scale model, actually, she added quickly. He, my husband, builds and collects them.

--I see. Well, if it's only two meters, it's... uh... three pence.

She took the coins out of the purse and placed them in his hand.

--Thank you, missus. Remember, my shop is at your disposal if you and yer husband need anything in the way of fishing or boating.

With a nod of her head, she left the shop. Her husband, indeed! She wondered what state of mind had caused her to come up with such an absurdity.

She took a different way back to her apartment. She continued on the North Circular Road until it intersected Dorset Street. Then she turned left and travelled down it. The route took her past a butcher's shop. Dlugacz's shop, if the sign printed above the window was to be believed. A woman was exiting the store when she passed by, followed closely by an older man who all but had his nose up her skirt, he was looking so hard at her backside. He bumped into Allie, and in doing so, almost dropped the small package of meat he was carrying. It smelled a bit like urine, she thought. Or perhaps that was just the man himself.

By the time she arrived back at her apartment, it had begun to rain. She doffed the damp coat and hat, and placed the purse in a pygg dish in the narrow entry hall. She pulled the watch out of the pocket of her dress, and read the time. Eight thirty-nine. It was as good a time as any, she decided. With a sigh, she uncoiled the length of rope and began to tie a knot in it. Round and round, she wrapped it. She pushed it through the loop, and holding it in place, pulled it tight. Then, standing on a chair, she fed the other end over one of the bare roofing beams overhead. Making a loop in the rope, she pushed the end of the rope through it, around, and

then back through the other way. She pulled on it to be sure it would hold. It felt secure, she thought. She chuckled.

My fate claims no tears – no friend cries for me. They'll not have anything to cry about soon, for I will soon be nothing. How could one cry for Nothing anyway? Perhaps it is just the fact that Something is now nothing that is, in itself, something to cry about. Is that the same as Nothing, though, something that is no longer? Is No Longer, which is the same as No More, the same as Nothing, which is the same as Never Was? Because if Never Was, which is the same as Nothing, is indeed the same as No More, which is No Longer, then it is not for Nothing that they cry, but for what now is not, and for the inevitability of Nothing. For Everything becomes Nothing, living, dead, or never alive. All is gone eventually, and Gone is as good as never was. All people and things decay along with their memories, and the memories of them. Tears dry up leaving trails of salt, which fade away. Even stones eventually weather away. And what is a mountain, but a stone? What is an ocean, but a basin of tears? What is the world but a mountain range soaking in a massive puddle of tears, dissolving as the puddle dries up? Nothing consumes Everything sometime. And when that happens, Everything will have become Nothing.

The chair tipped back. The watch slipped from her hand, and hung from the end of its silver chain, swaying slightly and rotating as it did. It spun to the left. It rotated once, twice, almost a third time, then paused and slowly began to turn back the other way, all the while filling the room with its incessant ticking.