

## Bone and Scrimshaw

Molly had not wanted help with the washing, although she knew she needed it.

“What are you wanting,” she wrote her father, “that we put on airs?”

She had been practicing her letters and longing to at least sound somewhat like a lady, though she had long ago accepted that her lot in life was to work.

He answered back with a gentle insistence that she accept his help, if only for the sake of her husband, whom he also liked. She relented, with some hope in the back of her mind that maybe he'd send more help someday and that their fortunes would improve again. She simultaneously knew that it must not have been too easy for her father to save this much money for her either, and she did take it with gratitude.

After receiving the gift, Molly started asking around at the factory for a laundress that could pick up and drop off the washing. She knew the foreman despised when the women talked on the job, so she whispered to Tabitha as they embroidered lace patterns.

“Its getting hard to keep up, with my Abe's consumption and working these long hours.”

Tabitha clucked her tongue and Molly felt her face redden. She knew without having to look in a glass that her pale freckled skin would be flushed the same color as her ruddy hair.

“If you want to spend your money like that, it will surely leave you quickly. But I have heard of one woman on the far edge of town. Her husband's away whaling off Nantucket and she's got a son to support.”

Tabitha gave her the laundress's name and location before flashing her a warning look. They stayed silent until they could no longer feel the foreman's eye above them, then Tabitha warned:

“Keep your wits about you in your dealings with her. I’ve heard talk about the reasons she lives apart from decent folk.”

Molly didn’t much care for gossip and simply thanked Tabitha as the whistle shrilled. She tried to stretch out her back, leaning from side to side with her hands on her hips. As she wrapped her mother’s shawl around her shoulders, she ventured out to take the long way home.

She hoped Abe would be alright in the meantime; she worried enough about him every day. To distract herself, she thought back to her childhood in Ireland with her mother, father, sister, and brother. She’d helped with their livestock and learned to embroider alongside her sister as their mother quoted scripture and sang hymns with them. It had been a quiet life and maybe somewhat dull, but it was softened around the edges with a genuine love.

Then the famine brought heartbreak to them, as it did to so many others.

Her mother passed, then her brother, and various more distant relatives. Molly still remembered the bitter hunger pangs as she tried to convince her father and sister to come with her and Abe, whom she’d recently married before the blight. But they both insisted they couldn’t start over in a new place; that this was still home and where they would stay. With sadness mingled in joy at her marriage, Molly and Abe departed in desperation and wished them all their best.

Despite the crowded boat and long journey, the couple tried to keep optimistic on the way to New York. She couldn’t remember the specifics of the poems that Abe made up for her about the playful sea-water lapping the sides of the boat, but did remember how it made her laugh despite the still constant hunger and sickening stench below the deck.

“Things have never been too easy for us,” Molly reflected ruefully, “but at least then Abe was strong enough to work, once someone would finally give him a chance.”

She remembered the slurs crisply, since she still heard some directed her way on a fairly frequent basis.

The laundress's house was, as Tabitha had mentioned, at the far edge of the neighborhood. As she got closer, she caught a slight whiff of opium, which nearly made her turn away. But Molly stayed and knocked gingerly. A boy of about thirteen answered the door.

"Excuse me," she started, "I'm seeking help with the washing."

He gave a quick but not impolite nod.

"You'll be wanting my mother, ma'am. I'll fetch her for you."

The boy seemed quiet and well-mannered compared to the ruffians his age she'd seen in the streets that tried to pinch her; she couldn't recall the last time a boy his age had bothered to call her ma'am.

She saw a short but lithe female figure silhouetted through the gossamer curtain before the door opened again. Molly correctly guessed that the woman was about ten years her senior, but she was astonished by her striking beauty and youthful deportment.

"Hello there," the woman greeted, putting down her drink as she extended a hand.

"Beatrix Lavender, at your service."

"Molly McCarthy. Pleased to meet you."

They quickly worked out the terms of service with some general introductions as Molly paid her a little up front. As she did so, Beatrix expressed some sympathy for Abe's condition.

"I rarely get to see my husband Charles. He went to Nantucket and is on the whaleboats more often than not," Beatrix explained.

"That must be very trying for you," Molly responded, trying to forget Tabitha's odd words.

“Oh it is, but, you know. We’ve got our ways to cope,” Beatrix gave a small smile and Molly noticed that her sultry voice seemed to give the perpetual impression that she was on the verge of disclosing a most scandalous and delicious secret. Molly didn’t know what ways of coping meant, but before she could ask further, she noticed the sun continuing to go down and bid Beatrix a good evening before heading back to tend to Abe.

Molly had met Abe, a mysterious dark haired man, as he had passed through their home on his way to Dublin with his brother. The pair sold combs, trinkets, and pocketknives made from bone. Abe explained upfront that he wasn’t the artisan, only the seller, but that the comb with the floral carving would look fetching on Molly.

Her mother warned her about the dangers of falling for a transient man, and one from outside their homeland, but Molly could tell that despite this, he was a good, kind man. Once, he even admitted to Molly that he didn’t much care for selling trinkets and had aspirations to be a poet. He had some scattered education and helped her practice her letters while telling her stories from Greek mythology. She much preferred the stories of the fae, but could tell that he felt connected to something important when he shared them with her. He left her the floral comb for no charge.

She navigated the streets, still perilous but well known, and arrived home without incident. She only stopped once to buy a few pickles from a vendor’s barrel. Molly snacked as she walked, sucking deeply to imbibe the salt and then chewing them gently to devour the hidden layers of dill, garlic, and vinegar so unfamiliar to her. She saved the second one for Abe, just in case he was feeling well enough.

The tenement glowered over her in the twilight, dampening her spirits in that everyday way she’d come to hate. She heard a splash as someone hurled the contents of a chamber pot out

of a window. The street smell and the smell of the widely shared space had mingled for so long that she could mostly try to ignore it; now it operated like the dull throb of a headache. When she drew her attention to the smell, however, she felt an intense longing for the open fields and streams she'd once explored so often as a girl.

Mrs. O'Donovan was still in the windowless room when Molly made it up the stairs.

"He's doing poorly today, girl. Mind him well."

"Thank you ma'am."

Mrs. O'Donovan shrugged.

"Just get that those gloves embroidered. My Seamus saved up to take me to a theatre play and I want to look a proper lady," she beamed before leaving.

"Of course, ma'am."

Molly appreciated that Mrs. O'Donovan peeked in once or twice a day on Abe while she worked, but wished she could do more. Then again, she knew better than to ask Mrs. O'Donovan for help with the washing when Molly knew that she already had so much to do for her husband Seamus and their nine children.

Sometimes Mrs. O'Donovan and others gave Molly pitying looks – they all knew Abe and Molly had been married for three years with no children. They naturally assumed that it was Molly's barrenness to blame and she had wept about it many times, but seeing Mrs. O'Donovan reminded her that perhaps God wasn't giving Molly more than she could handle when it already felt hard enough sometimes.

Molly picked up the bowl of broth on the trunk next to the bed and softly called to Abe. She noticed that he had completed a handful of artificial flowers during the day and she carefully

moved them away from the bed. They'd fetch a few extra pennies. As he woke, she tried not to notice the fresh blood spots on his nightshirt.

"I'm here, love. You don't look well."

He shook his head.

"I feel terrible. How did things go with the girl?"

Molly fed him some broth.

"Well. She'll be here tomorrow morning to pick up the washing."

"Good."

Abe jolted and sloshed some broth out of the bowl as Molly watched him reach for the chamber pot next to the bed and start a coughing fit. She wondered how much blood was in the pot already, but also didn't really want to check until she absolutely had to dump it.

"Aack...aack...AACK."

Molly recognized his pained coughs well. As she rubbed his back, her mind wandered to when they'd first discovered each other, back when he'd been healthier, back when he hadn't been afraid to kiss her and still liked his body, back when they embraced and he stroked her –

She wanted him to touch her again and to be with him. She wished she could touch him again without fear of hurting him. That all seemed like another life right now. The last time they'd tried, he'd gone directly to coughing with scattered apologies. She knew it wasn't his fault that he did that afterward, but she sometimes felt despondent for hours later.

Abe's coughing fit subsided. He declined the rest of the broth and, prudently, the pickle she had bought for him. Molly kissed him on the forehead and set to work on Mrs. O'Donovan's gloves, even though her fingers still ached from work that day. Abe started to read through one of the few books they hadn't yet been forced to sell – Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – but quickly tired

and nodded off again. Molly thought she remembered him telling her one of the stories: a man that changed into a woman and then back again. But that sounded so fantastical that she thought she might have imagined it, too.

She rubbed her eyes. Part of the night had already passed; she could tell by the shortened candle. But she had finished the gloves. She folded them neatly and put them up away from the bed as she fell into a state of desperate rest.

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Molly continued embroidering and running lace at the factory, hastily rubbing the sweat out of her eyes. She also kept practicing with the sewing machines, which still frightened her with their violent machinations. She'd already seen girls maim their digits beneath the ruthless, constantly pounding needles.

While she admitted the machines made it faster, she didn't much care for the breakneck pace and felt happier when asked to do hand sewing jobs. Sewing to her meant careful and heartfelt work, but she knew she was lucky to have something at all, especially something for which she had skill. In fact, she'd almost blocked out one of the things she'd tried for money when they'd first arrived. Almost.

They'd been both actively seeking work, but nothing happened yet. Molly saw a poster on the wall of the alley near the first tenement they'd stayed in calling for "Young Beauties Seeking Fame and Renown." Molly didn't much care for that, but walked to the address listed on a day that Abe also was asking around for work, her hair neatly in a bun crowned with Abe's comb. Two men let her in, the air thick with what they explained, with a laugh, was opium and tobacco when she asked. Besides the ragged sofa, the only other prominent feature of the room was a daguerreotype camera set up to one side. At first she felt surprised – *I'm not important*

*enough to have my portrait taken, and why would they pay me for that?* – then she made the connection.

She fought the urge to gag. The mens' breath didn't smell much better than the odors in the room and they were standing close.

Molly forced herself to speak, feeling removed from her body.

"I'll have you know I'm a respectably married woman. We just need some money, that's all."

The first one eyed her, unimpressed.

"That's well and good, love. But if you want your money, Mrs. Respectable - " he spat some tobacco into a chipped vase, "you'll need to do us a service, too."

She lost her voice as she stripped, feeling herself blush, trying to think of all the food the money would buy them, and maybe even some thicker blankets for winter –

The second man descended under the dark fabric behind the camera like a shadow shifting in an alley. She sat back on the gaudy ochre sofa and tried to follow the first man's instructions, wondering what her mother would have thought. Molly wasn't quite as religious anymore, but she still tried to offer up a quick prayer of forgiveness as the flashbulb snapped.

It was over sooner than she'd thought. They watched her dress and she noticed one of them stroking himself. She snatched the money from the hand that offered it, then felt something rubbing behind her skirts as an arm tightened around her.

"No," she thought, "*please*, no. I don't want this from you."

She bit and kicked her way out of the tangle and felt the comb slip from her hair as she nearly tripped over a horse carcass in the road. All she could tell Abe was that the job hadn't worked out and someone stole the comb. His eyes were sad, but he just held her.



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Although Molly missed Beatrix picking up the wash with her son, she generally ran into her when she dropped it off in the evenings. Molly started to allow herself to have a close friendship with another woman, relatives excepted. Abe liked Beatrix, who never complained about the blood stains, and especially felt a kinship with her son, who he said reminded him of himself at that age.

Molly admitted to Beatrix that she was no good at making friends – the girls at the factory with her were always stressed which made it hard enjoy each other’s company. Beatrix laughed gently.

“Its lonely at the edge of town, too. I’ve lived here a long time, but the secret is that everyone wants a connection, even misers that deny it.”

Molly nodded her agreement with Beatrix’s words and Beatrix fixed her eyes on Molly and gave her a quick embrace on her way out.

“That is true,” Molly reflected. “My girlish lonesomeness had no compare to some days here, despite being surrounded by more people than I’d thought could be packed together.”

“We’re fortunate to have each other,” Abe answered, and didn’t turn away as she kissed his forehead.

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Months passed; Molly worked, Abe languished, and Beatrix provided a bright spot. Beatrix exclaimed in surprise when Molly gifted her a piece of lace and it made Molly proud in the nicest way, especially since she’d taken a huge risk smuggling the scrap away from the factory. She’d felt the foreman’s eyes undressing her suspiciously as she walked out the door that day, more so than usual.

But finally they had to stop Beatrix's services; the payments at the tenement had increased even for their tiny room. The landlord demanded extra compensation after realizing he had a consumptive in the building. Between that, food, and necessary items, they didn't have much choice but to let the washing pile up again and let the blood stains flower brown. It didn't help that Molly hadn't heard anything more from her father recently, despite Molly's frequent letters. She wished with increased frustration that there were some way to receive letters more quickly, something even quicker than telegraphs.

Although Beatrix offered to help again without charge, Molly felt something compelling her to keep what little pride she had. She stayed up a long night each week to scrub and wring it all herself, feeling perpetually drained.

When she did feel well enough after work, she did trek to Beatrix's house just to chat and have a quick drink. Molly even told Beatrix about the daguerreotype incident and Beatrix, while gently nodding in understanding, also seemed visibly distressed.

"Is something the matter?" Molly asked.

Beatrix stared out the window, although the curtains were closed.

"I just know what it is to be forced to do things. You were very lucky, you know. Even family can betray you like that and hurt you, like my father did with me."

Molly felt a chill wash over her and gave her an embrace. Beatrix returned it and they stood, fused.

Beatrix wiped her eyes and continued:

"With that start to life, I promised myself – and my husband agreed – that I shouldn't have to submit myself to anything I didn't want or deprive myself of anything I did want in his

absence. You may have heard rumors about why I live here at the edge of town,” she said.

“Some people hate me because I refuse to limit myself in the ways they do.”

Beatrix sat and took a long drink of whiskey. Molly had remembered Tabitha’s warning, but hadn’t pushed further, though she’d seen sour glances sometimes when she’d gone to and from Beatrix’s house.

“But I don’t understand,” Molly insisted. “You’ve never given me reason to doubt your intentions.”

“You’re so innocent, my darling girl,” Beatrix cooed. “And no, I never intend to steal your Abe. Let me put it this way: Charles and I have the unconventional understanding that we can explore other options while he’s away on the whale boat. He’s told me in letters that he greatly enjoys the intimate company of some other men on the ship and that he’s tasted the pleasures of women at foreign ports.”

Molly sat her drink down in surprise, although she’d wondered sometimes about the loneliness of the open ocean for whalers.

“And you aren’t outraged?”

Beatrix gave a clipped, mechanical laugh.

“I ought to be, shouldn’t I? But after the initial shock and further conversations, we decided that we would be more fulfilled this way as long as we’re both still working to support our boy. And Charles and I do celebrate fully when he does make the journey back.”

“So you sell your body, then, to add on to the washing money?” Molly spat.

“On some occasions I’ve charged for my favors, but its not like your unfortunate excursion. If I do anything like that, I make sure that I control the terms and prices completely, although I much prefer being with someone simply because I’m fond of them.”

Molly drifted toward the door. She knew she should consider Beatrix a common hussy and never look back, but she couldn't bring herself to instantly cease her only new friendship. Scripture returned to her as she recalled the Lord himself holding company with beggars and whores. Beatrix looked softly at her and Molly couldn't help but see a little too much of a reflection of herself in her; a wild reflection.

Molly returned the glass to the table, then muttered that it was time to go.

"I understand," Beatrix said. "I don't want to cause you discomfort, but I hope to still see you again."

Molly gave a noncommittal nod and went along, her thoughts feverish as she charged home through the bustle of the pushcarts and people.

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But to Molly's own surprise, she did still think about Beatrix after some time. *After all*, she thought, *it is still a decent thing to lessen our loneliness.*

She'd talked with Abe about Beatrix's revelations and he also expressed surprise, but admitted that perhaps her situation was different than theirs and maybe if both she and her husband had honest intentions with each other, it might not be as wicked as it first seemed.

In the meantime, they had other concerns. For one, Molly decided to take another street home after work. The tedium of her daily routine, she determined, needed to change occasionally or she might go mad. She cut thorough an alley, covering her nose while she passed a heap of spoiled vegetables. A curled print scuttled along the cobblestones, tickling her feet. She retrieved it with curiosity.

One of her daguerreotypes stared back at her, mortified. The caption, partly effaced, read “This Irish Venus is hungry for your - ” Molly felt the old humiliation well up as she folded the print and hid it away in her bodice, never to be seen by anyone without her permission again.

When she got back, Abe called her over to the bedside table.

“Sit.”

He held a paper. For a terrible moment, she thought that he’d somehow gotten one of the daguerreotypes, but he handed it to her and lowered his head.

Molly could read well enough from what he’d taught her, but she didn’t want to believe the words.

“We’re not allowed to stay, Abe?”

He intently stared at a blood stain on the floor.

“The landlord sent his boy today. He says people complained about having a consumptive here. We’ve not got too long.”

Molly clutched his hands as they felt the dread fester.

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She slogged through the next day, irritable and tense, and nearly had an accident with the sewing machine. Once again, she shuffled through her options. She remembered another time when she’d inquired about selling her hair, but the wigmaker expressed distaste for her “tangled Irish mop.” She could help Abe make more artificial flowers or do extra embroidery or...

The problem was all those things took time. Besides her rejected hair, she felt again the pressure to market some piece of herself; a flawed saint pawning premature relics.

Her day over, she paused near the entrance of a certain street. The opium scented room hid down that way, fastened in her memory like a tick on flesh.

She remembered Beatrix's words, how she had emphasized her firm demand for autonomy over the terms of events in her life, even if she was more brazen than Molly.

*If she won't submit to something unless she's in charge of it, then I don't need to go through that terror again,* Molly decided, turning back.

When Molly arrived, Abe again had a paper in his hand. This looked more official, printed instead of handwritten.

"A telegram? Who from?"

Abe motioned for her to sit again.

"When it rains, it pours," he quoted sadly. "Molly, your sister sent this to tell you your father passed away."

Molly whimpered as she snatched the telegram. All she saw were the words "loved you and wanted –" before the tears returned to her burning eyes.

"I'm so sorry, love. He was a good man."

He held her as the memories of her father came all at once – him working on the land, telling her stories of the fae as they watched for them in the grass around the streams, and picking blackberries that darkened their fingers with fragrant inky juice.

"Dear, did you see the rest of the message?"

Molly continued reading.

"She's sending me my half of the inheritance?"

Surprise and hope, still dampened with grief.

"I know this is all sudden," Abe spoke, "but let's start looking for places outside the city. The climate could do me good and I know you've been feeling frantic here."

"Yes," she agreed instantly. "I don't think there's much for us here anymore."

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When the money came, part of it went to bribing the landlord to stay a little longer and part went to hiring help to get them and their few belongings out of town. It certainly wasn't a large inheritance, but it was just a little more than they needed for the transition.

Molly tried to see Beatrix again before leaving, but missed her on every occasion. Finally Molly decided to leave a letter with Beatrix's son, explaining the situation.

Despite feeling unsatisfied at leaving things so, Molly still allowed herself some careful optimism at leaving the decrepit tenement room, the breakneck pace of the factory, and the filthy streets. Even better, she could hardly believe her luck in finding a situation as a cook and maid at a wealthy family's country estate. The family would let them use the servant's wing if Abe stayed out of the rest of the house.

As they left, Molly took one look back at the city that had shown her terrible and wonderful things.

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They grew accustomed to life outside town. Although Abe's health only slightly improved, Molly was able to tend to him better being right inside the house. While the new position was still demanding, it was not the same as the factory. The family treated her well enough, mostly by pretending she was invisible.

One day, as Molly fetched the letters, she noticed one whiskey scented bulging envelope addressed to her. There was no return address and the hasty scrawl did not belong to her sister. She didn't have time to read it until she finished tidying the dishes and putting out the lights. She saved one small candle for herself and began to read, catching a gleaming scrimshaw comb that fell out of the envelope:

*My Dear Molly,*

*If I were a meeker person, I would ask your permission to be bold. I am not, so I **will** be bold: I want to kiss you between your legs and make you sigh with delight, you adorable girl. It was so painful when you had to go, but I couldn't find my boldness with you then. Would Abe mind if we somehow were to spend time together again? I'm being so naughty... but let me know what you think....*

*Beatrix*

Molly lowered the letter, a tremor in her hands. It seemed surreal; beyond passing thoughts she'd quickly subdued, she never imagined anything like this could happen to her. Almost without realizing it, she found herself starting to imagine what it would be like to know Beatrix so intimately; her daring smile, a gentle embrace, skirts lifted and Beatrix descending –

Molly found, with astonishment and shame, that she was undeniably wet and breathing heavier. She felt the familiar flush warm her face. The only other times she'd felt that way had been with Abe in his stronger days and alone in the dark nights, after she was sure her sister had fallen asleep.

The feelings, names, and images blurred softly into a labyrinth of questions. Abe would be expecting her... she started to walk back down the corridor, letter and comb in hand, then rushed back to leave through the kitchen door.

A warm breeze picked up as she stood on the hill near the house, powerful enough to gingerly lift her feet and push her along. And for a moment, as she stood there trying to calm her breathing, she was once again a child disobeying her mother and running outside before a storm; she felt the humid wind whip through her hair as she waved a fistful of flowers and weeds, pretending to be a fairy rising through the air.