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THE ABANDONED

Elizabeth Ivey

I didn't always know what I was, but I knew I was different.

It was as though I had simply sprung into existence, sprouting from the gritty front steps of St. Agnes's. The matron found me pounding on the dense oak door in the driving rain, drenched in blood, and sobbing inconsolably. I was a pale, skinny lad whose hunger couldn't be satiated. I couldn't sleep at night, and I preferred to hide away in the dank hallways rather than go outside on those rare, sunny days. They thought perhaps I was mad, or consumptive, or both.

They thought perhaps I was thirteen years old. I didn't know myself. I couldn't remember anything; not my name, who my parents were, or where I had come from.

St. Agnes's Charitable Home for the Orphaned and Destitute was a hulking five-story monstrosity that had been a grand edifice when it was built. Now half the rooms had been closed off due to the continual lack of funds needed for coal. The decrepit building had lost its sense of grandeur and skulked, mostly forgotten, between two abandoned warehouses.

I didn't grow or age in the two years I stayed at St. Agnes's. I wasn't the only one. The orphanage was poor. Many of the children I lived with were smaller and thinner than they ought to be, too. I kept to myself. For a long time I was able to avoid the scuffles and scrapes that happen between children who spend too much time together.

If you have read the works of Mr. Dickens, you will have some idea of what our life was like at the orphanage. Victoria was the only bright star in that murky sky. Victoria was not her real name, of course. She, like I, had arrived at the orphanage with no memory of who she was or if she had family. She had been renamed for the Queen, in hopes the name might bring her better fortune. She was quiet, maybe eleven years old, with strawberry curls and huge, haunted, dark eyes. She kept to herself, as did I. She didn't speak a word for nearly two months after her arrival. Her first words were to me.

"You can't sleep at night, either?" she asked me one day in a whisper so soft none of the other children could have heard it. Victoria suffered terrible nightmares. She could only sleep after the dreary light of dawn seeped through the curtain and chased her monsters away. I, on the other hand, simply did not sleep at night. I was often groggy during the day. I would fall asleep at inconvenient moments – at meals, in lessons, even in the midst of the drudgery of our daily chores. When this happened, I slept like the dead and no one could rouse me, not even with the threat of a beating, until nightfall.

Victoria and I were the two least-wanted in a building full of unwanted children, and we gravitated toward each other. We were companions, for lack of a better word. We never played, and spoke only rarely. We would sit in silence together for long hours, perfectly satisfied to be left unmolested.

Then came the day that I discovered the strange truth of what I really am.

Gregory, one of the older boys, had stolen Victoria's doll. Most of us had no possessions, except those that the orphanage had given to us in charity. Victoria's doll was one of the few things anyone had that we did not owe to the matron or the sisters. The matron said Victoria was

too old to be clinging to dolls, but somehow never did try to take it from her. It was a sad bedraggled thing - hardly more than a rag with two knots of blue thread for eyes. Gregory snatched it from Victoria when she wasn't looking and held it over her head. He taunted her to jump to try and get it, but always kept it just a little out of her reach.

An anger I didn't remember having felt before boiled up inside of me. I expected to be pummeled into bits, but I couldn't stand by and do nothing. I bolted at him, fists swinging. He seemed to stand still, like a stuffed beast in a glass case, his eyes open but uncomprehending. The cocksure expression on his face slowly dissolved into shock like sugar dissolving under a steady stream of absinthe.

I bowled him over easily. It didn't occur to me until later that he out-weighed me by two or three stone. I pounced at the doll and held it out to Victoria in one swift, fluid motion.

For a moment, I didn't realize anything extraordinary had happened. Then Gregory screamed and ran, shrieking to the heavens that I had gone mad, was possessed, and should be put out immediately. In his haste to get away from me, he knocked Victoria over, and her elbow skidded along the baseboard. My sensitive ears heard the scrape of the joint against wood, heard the soft sound of tearing skin. It was a thousand times fainter than ripping silk. I was immediately at her side, kneeling next to her as tears rolled from her eyes. I could suddenly smell the most delicious scent I had ever smelled. I looked down as Victoria cradled her arm. She was staring in dismay at her elbow, a scarlet string of blood spilling from her split skin.

Something took over. It was a primal hunger, true, but not the ravening frenzy you may have read about in those gothic penny dreadfuls. Something so precious, so pure and life-giving, must not be wasted. A deep and desperate desire came over me. Without even understanding what I was doing, I gently and reverently bowed my head over Victoria's arm and began to

tenderly lap the warm blood from her wound. It was rich, velvety, and seemed to hold all that was good and wholesome on this earth. I was lost in wonder.

She jerked away from me. I was shocked as I watched her topple back, scuttling as far from me as she could get; a tiny banshee screeching to wake the dead.

I didn't understand why they were calling me a monster. I didn't understand why the matron called it an unprovoked attack on my two defenseless school mates. The matron and the sisters called me mad, uncontrollable, even feral. They said they would summon the constable to drag me off to prison or the asylum. They locked me in the attic. It was a long, thin room at the top of the building, with one tiny window looking out over the alley. They said I would stay there until the constable, doctors, or maybe even a priest could come to subdue me. They didn't realize what I had discovered when they laid hands on me; I could have thrown off the matron and the two nurses and bolted through those heavy oaken front doors with ease. It was not the women's feeble attempts to overpower me that kept me shackled. It was the look of fear and betrayal in Victoria's eyes. I allowed myself to be led to the attic and thrown in. I didn't try to force down the locked door. But I was not going to wait for the bobbies, either. I was devastated. I had terrified my only friend, and the others, who had always been suspicious of me, now hated me outright. I sought to take my fate in my own hands before the law could intervene.

I crossed the long, narrow attic in the blink of an eye, barely noticing the squeal of the nails that protested and gave way as I flung the small window open. I was not thinking of escape from the orphanage, but escape from life. I was at the very top of the fifth floor, and the cobbled alley below was littered with splintery crates, reeking bottles, and refuse of all kinds. I imagined

I would be killed on impact. I closed my eyes, spread my arms, and leaned forward until gravity took hold.

I rolled gracefully, flipping effortlessly one, two, three times, and came to rest softly on my feet, more easily than a cat jumping from a table. Most folk on discovering they could perform such feats of acrobatic skill might be amazed or elated. I was disappointed. I'd meant to kill myself and hadn't even been able to manage that.

Disgraced, depressed, I sat down in the moldering rubbish and began to weep. The fog had lowered and eventually turned to a light drizzle, soaking me to the skin. I thought to just sit there and wait for the constable after all. Maybe I would let them take me away. Maybe I would beg them to hang me. Would that even work, I wondered, when jumping from the window had not?

Lost in my desolation, it took me a moment to recognize the scent again. Not the same person, to be sure, but the same scent of ebbing life, of fear, of someone in need. I stood, following the scent through the alley, past boarded windows, down another winding street, before I found her. I could hear her weak breath and smell the salt trickle of tears before I rounded the corner. A young woman, maybe eighteen or nineteen, lay face-down in the gutter, bleeding from a deep slash to the throat. I knelt beside her and, following my instincts, rolled her over gently. She was barely breathing now, though tears still trickled from her eyes. I lowered my lips to the terrible wound, gently licking the blood, reminding myself of a mother cat I had once seen bathing her kittens.

I pinched the gash together with my fingertips as the flow became a trickle and eventually stopped. Her breathing was steadier now, more like someone sleeping than someone dying. I sat back on my heels and watched her for a long time. Eventually her eyes opened. It

seemed to take her a moment to focus on my face. Her hand came up and touched her throat, finding it whole, though the bright scar would be visible for quite some time. She opened her mouth and it seemed to take her a long moment to find the words.

“Who are you?” she finally asked, hoarsely.

“I found you,” I said simply.

“What do you want?” Her voice fluttered like a frightened bird.

“I just wanted to help,” I said softly. I almost turned to go again, but her hand caught my sleeve.

“You saved me.” It wasn’t a question. I nodded and smiled shyly at her. “Thank you,” she said, returning the smile. I stood and offered her my hand. She took it. I pulled her gently to her feet. She swayed for a moment, but I kept an arm around her and she steadied. The falling curtain of night draped down around us as we began our new journey away from the orphanage, and away from the gutter.

THE END