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PROLOGUE

Geneva July 1816

‘The ghastly image of my fancy.’

Introduction to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

It was barely five on a summer afternoon but already eerily dark. The candles were lit and shivered in response to the wind and rain pounding against the large panelled windows. Mary took up her scribbled pages and found her voice.

‘With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs ...’

She stopped reading to take a breath and took a quick glance around at the listeners in the cavernous and ornate Louis Quinze drawing room. They were too quiet. There should be interjections. None of this company was usually so silent. She cleared her throat and continued defiantly.

‘How can I describe the wretch I had formed from forged body parts with such infinite pains and care? I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His lustrous black hair and pearly white teeth only formed a more horrid contrast with his yellow skin and watery eyes in dun-white sockets, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health, but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room ...’

Mary crumpled the edges of her paper and trailed off, feeling anxious in face of the serious silence. What did Shelley think of it? What did Albe think of it? She examined their faces and mentally prepared her defence, that it was merely the retelling of a strange

dream. She hated the feeling that they saw her as a balloon filled with creative literary gases, distilled from talented parents, which had so far failed to rise.

Then Shelley was laughing and talking, his voice high with excitement.

‘Mary, that’s the most marvellous gothic story,’ he said, coming over and coiling his tall frame to look over her shoulder, kissing the back of her neck in passing. ‘The ambition to create life, to be God-like. I adore it ...’

‘You would, Shiloh, you atheist,’ interrupted Lord Byron, his baritone almost drowned out as the enormous mastiff curled at his feet leapt up and barked loudly to join in the excitement. ‘Quiet, Mutz.’ He snapped his fingers and stared commandingly at the dog, which subsided in the face of the blue-eyed gaze. Byron’s attention shifted to the young girl with the high forehead and deep-set, serious eyes, sitting firmly upright, clutching Shelley’s hand where it rested on her shoulder.

‘Mary, it is brilliant, and it has so much of modern philosophy and natural science. You were thinking of galvanism of course, and the experiments to animate frogs with electricity that we were discussing last night ...’

‘And Rousseau – the creature would vindicate his philosophy,’ added Shelley. ‘It would be his Natural Man, fully formed but child-like and uncorrupted by society.’

Mary blushed with pleasure at the enthusiasm in their voices. Polidori took longer to react, having watched Byron for his cue.

‘I suppose you were thinking of my tales of grave-robbing when I was a medical student in Edinburgh?’ he said slowly, looking, as usual, to where he could draw credit for himself.

She nodded at him distractedly, her eyes turned up to Shelley. His approval was always acclamation enough.

‘I also thought about the story we heard when we were traveling up the Rhine and came across Castle Frankenstein. Do you remember, Shelley? We saw it from the river — the two great ruined gothic spires — and the boatman told the story of the scientist who lived there with a reputation for stealing bodies for experiments.’

‘I do remember,’ answered Shelley, thoughtfully. ‘He was known as an heretic.’

The fifth person in the room, Claire, clapped slowly. She was arranged with her legs curled under her white muslin skirts, set to advantage in the frame of a formal striped sofa, a little back from the rest of the group. Nestled in her lap were two of Byron’s Persian cats, purring gently. Looking towards Byron she said, with a sneer, ‘Now Albe will have to concede that a woman has as much of a brain as a man.’

He glared back at her, angrily.

‘When I suggested our little diversion of creating ghost stories, did I not say that hers should be published with mine? I have great confidence in Mary. The genius emerges.’

Mary felt herself glowing and hoped her excessive satisfaction wasn’t too obvious. Even Claire had failed to find fault for once. Mary briefly wondered why.

‘So, Maie, what happens next?’ chuckled Shelley. He stood and staggered across the room, his long limbs contorted into an exaggerated stumbling gait, his fingers curled and his eyes wide and staring, his wild yellow hair completing the mime, so that Claire shrieked.

‘What happens to the student’s creation?’ he continued, putting on a croaking voice. ‘Or shall we call it Herr Frankenstein’s creation? Does it fail to take root in this earthly abode? Is the student chastened? Does he try again?’

He flopped at Mary’s feet, staring comically up at her, hands out in supplication, and she laughed and pushed him away. As he gave up his mime and sat down again, she answered thoughtfully. ‘No. I think the creature stays alive and pursues his creator, and the student is never free of him. Think what it must be to be made new and then rejected as hideous. The creature will be physically strong but will have no way to learn human morality. I know you idolise Rousseau’s philosophy, Shelley, and he thinks that man is naturally good, but I think this monster will want revenge on the creator who abandons him.’

She said the last words in low and menacing tones and, as she did so, there was a clap of thunder and lightning which illuminated the balcony and reflected on the darkness of Lake Geneva beyond. A shriek and a banging outside completed the gothic scene and Claire leapt to her feet, throwing off the cats, which then added their voices to the cacophony. She rushed, arms outstretched, towards Shelley's chair but on almost reaching it saw Mary watching her. She checked herself and huddled on a stool near his feet instead, trembling. The two monkeys on their perch in the corner ran back and forth in agitation, their chattering turning to thin screams and Byron got up languidly to soothe them and peer out into the rain.

'It is one of the guinea hens escaped and terrified,' he said, smiling. 'Tonight is not the night we will have our throats cut, Claire.'

Mary saw his look of slight disgust and wondered if he felt his liaison with her stepsister, Claire, to be worth it as the price of the company of Shelley and herself. There were plenty of other willing candidates for his attention, in particular among the dozens of young ladies who regularly jostled on the opposite bank of the Lake. They waited in all weathers with muddy feet and telescopes, hoping for a glimpse of him, the fashionable and notorious poet, whose wife had left him and accused him of unmentionable acts.

He pulled one of the thick bell-ropes which hung on either side of the marble fireplace.

'Rescue the fowl from the balcony, Braydon,' he said, as the servant bowed in. 'Or if it's dead, use it for the servants' supper. You'd better put the peacocks in the coach house too, and check on the badger and bring the other dogs inside. You may as well draw the curtains.'

'Yes, it could easily be night-time,' shivered Claire, as the butler drew the long silk curtains across each of the six casement windows, all of which were rattling as if part of a strange skeleton dance. 'It should still be light at this hour, but we've had only candles and firelight since noon. This weather,' she moaned, going back to her sofa for her shawl and drawing a straight backed chair closer to the fire. 'It's July and there has been no sun for weeks, just endless storms.'

Shelley went to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of water. He raised an eyebrow to Byron, who nodded, so he filled another

glass with Vin de Grave and seltzer and took the drink across the room. Then he stopped to glance at some newspapers laid out on a side table.

‘Look here, these papers that came from London yesterday are saying there are reports of spots on the sun causing all this strange weather, and mobs in France and England are predicting the end of the world.’

Byron took a swig of his drink, lit another cigar and said dreamily, ‘Morn came and went — and came, and brought no day; and men forgot their passions in the dread of this their desolation; and ... and all hearts were chill’d into a selfish prayer for light.’

‘That sounds like the beginnings of a tragic poem, Albe,’ Shelley observed in a tone of genuine admiration.

‘A few lines so far. I’ve been thinking about men’s fear of this darkness. What would happen, Shiloh, if the darkness were to remain? If there were never again a sliver of sun or moon? How would people behave?’

‘Not well, I think. The apocalypse would come not from Divine intervention, but from man’s own nature, as with all things. There would be despair, riots, food would run out. The animals would die. People would need to keep warm, to make fires. They would have to burn everything.’

‘They would fight tooth and nail over the dwindling resources of the earth.’

‘I agree it would be bloody,’ said Shelley sadly. ‘Even my best hopes for human nature would be severely tested.’ For a while the only sound was the still driving rain.

‘Talking of blood, metaphorically, we also have the *Aeneid* magazine arrived from London,’ said Mary, deliberately cracking the silence. She picked it up from the table beside her and held it up. ‘It prints what it calls a ‘*Monstrous, Deformed, Titanic Rumour*,’ saying we four are unbridled libertines, living in an incestuous foursome: Claire and me and Albe and you, Shelley.’

‘Which annoys you most, Albe, the libertine or the deformed part of the libel?’ giggled Claire.

Byron blushed, glancing down at his club foot disguised in its heavy boot, and slightly wide-ankled pantaloons. He reflexively crossed his unwithered calf over, pulled across his velvet smoking jacket and shot Claire a look of hatred. He had thought her handsome enough, with her flashing eyes, until she had proved to be not just outspoken but sarcastic and often hysterical as well. It didn't help that she saw his admiration of Mary, whom he pointedly referred to as a calm beauty. He would casually remark on her hazel eyes or the richness of her golden russet hair, and Claire would toss her own dark curls in frustration.

Mary knew he was still suspicious about why she and Shelley had taken Claire with them when they eloped. Even though Shelley had given Byron his word it was not a ménage, she saw that the underlying hostility between her and Claire made him wonder.

The butler called supper and they moved to the dining room, chilly in spite of a blazing fire, and sat to the usual plates of vegetables.

'You brought me here as your physician, so I think you should take my advice that your constitution would be better served if you ate meat occasionally,' commented Polidori to Byron, sighing.

'Nonsense, Polly Dolly, don't fuss,' responded Byron. 'Look at Shelley. He's been on the vegetable diet for years with no harm.'

Mary wanted to support Polidori's plea, but held her tongue. In her opinion, Shelley's frequent illnesses, his ethereal pallor, his too lean frame and his weak lungs was partly a result of this diet. But the vegetable diet was his passion, and Shelley's passion was part of what she admired in him. It was different from the obsessive anxiety about his weight that caused Byron to limit what he ate or purge it out after every meal. Shelley's commitment was based on belief, the belief that eating animals was wrong, and only the fruits of the earth were man's intended consumption.

She left her meal half finished. 'I must go and feed William,' she said, rising, feeling an irrational urge to hold her baby, not yet six months, to be reassured of his wellbeing by his newly learnt smile. She wondered if this was common to all mothers, or was it stronger in

those, like her, who had lost a baby? She was only eighteen, and her own mother had died giving birth to her. There was no-one to ask.

She pretended not to notice Claire's little cough and mockingly raised eyebrows in Shelley's direction, implying that Mary was fussing. In this though, she knew Claire had it wrong. Shelley was gazing at Mary with admiration. Unlike most in European society, he believed that mothers should feed their babies themselves and not use a wet nurse. His first wife — still wife — Harriet had refused to breast-feed their daughter and he had never forgiven her.

'Bring the child down for me to kiss goodnight afterward, Dormouse,' he said with a fond smile, and Claire's lips tightened. 'I don't think his vaccination has had any adverse reaction, has it Polly?' he turned to the doctor.

'The child seems very well,' reassured Polidori assuming his professional voice. 'I ordered the best quality cowpox lymph for the vaccine. I think you are very wise. Smallpox has declined in the past twenty years and it is the vaccine that has done it, despite the scaremongering of the Anti-Vak movement. I have yet to see a person develop cow horns!' He drew a gold watch from his breast pocket as he spoke, tapped it and nodded to Shelley. 'And this is good payment for my services.'

Later, after dinner, over green tea in the music room, Polidori asked Shelley if he had thought of a ghost story.

'I have nothing more than the images that overcame me three days ago, when I almost fainted from the vision ... the girl whose nipples became eyes. As to how this strange situation should come about, I have not yet found a story for her, or a meaning.' Shelley sounded faintly exasperated. 'It was probably just because we were sitting in the half dark reading *Christabel*. Coleridge's lines have a powerful resonance. But at least that made Albe throw out the challenge of ghost story making, and now we have Mary's wonderful idea. I will be a tyrant and make sure she writes it in full.' He smiled, turning to Mary next to him on the sofa and feigned a whip, which coiled into an embrace.

‘You can’t be any more of a tyrant than you are already. Perhaps now you’ll give me a rest from learning Greek.’ Mary laughed and wriggled free. ‘Anyway, I’ll start now. I will sit at the bureau by the window, with the thunder and lightning as my muse, and leave you two to continue your discussion of Plato and the Trinity.’

‘Stay here, Mary, by the fire,’ urged Byron, softly.

Mary laughed. ‘I know your opinion of women philosophising, Albe. I have heard you say that you only need to give a woman a looking-glass and a few sugar plums to keep her happy. Well, tonight I will pander to your prejudices and absent myself – but not to sugarplums, to a sweeter labour.’

Claire moved towards the piano. ‘Shall I sing, Shelley?’ she asked, hesitantly.

Shelley contemplated her, nervously fiddling with the cameo at her throat. It was unlike Claire to ask. She knew her voice was good and that it always pleased him to hear her sing. She would normally just begin, but he also saw Byron’s face become taut and he wanted to provoke no more tension. Claire needed to stay in the background. He had seen Byron getting more and more irritated with her. Shelley failed to understand how anyone could bed someone he so clearly disliked. He knew that he never could. For himself there had to be love — if not marriage. They needed to get Claire away from Byron for a while. Maybe a trip around the lake.

‘I think, sadly, the noise of the storm is too loud tonight, Claire,’ he said gently.

Claire moved on, towards Byron’s side.

‘Well then, is there more of your poem, *Childe Harold*, to copy, Albe?’ she asked.

Why, Mary wondered, as she observed this exchange, was Claire being so unusually demure?

‘Yes, on the pile there.’ Byron, not turning to look at Claire, indicated the strewn sheets of manuscript on the chaise longue. Claire gathered them up and sighed as she glanced at the blotted and crossed lines, some spattered with wine or cigar ash. She took them to a little drum pedestal table in the corner, where there was fresh paper and an inkwell set out, and the room settled to the sounds of

the scratching pens of the girls and the arguments and laughter of the young men.

It was two a.m. before Shelley, Mary and Claire wound their way down the rocky path to Maison Chapuis, their little cottage on the lakeside, wrapped in blankets against the night chill. Byron's Villa Diodati stood high above the lake, its three stories commanding a magnificent view but vulnerable to the icy winds of the past weeks. Maison Chapuis, because it was lower down on the lakeshore and surrounded by trees, was more sheltered, and they reached their porch with relief. Claire had not tried to hang back to be alone with Byron as she so often did, and he had made no attempt to detain her.

The rain had made the short descent to the cottage treacherous and they arrived cold and dishevelled. Claire took off her shoes by the door, the thin white leather and velvet trim clogged with mud.

'Ugh. These are ruined. I hate this weather.' She pulled on some slippers and tried to brush the dirt off the hem of her skirt.

Mary went to check on William, who had been brought back earlier and put to bed by the nurse, Elise. Claire drew Shelley into his study.

'I need to talk to you. I'm pregnant,' she said, unceremoniously.

Shelley staggered slightly, then managed a weak smile.

'That's wonderful, Claire. And Albe ... is the father?' He tried to keep the question out of his voice, but failed enough for Claire to step up close and poke him disgustedly in the chest.

'You, of all people, should know that it could only be his.'

'We must tell him. Have you told Mary?' As he said this, Mary came in, looking between the two, suspicious.

'What is it?'

Shelley told her, while Claire went to face out of the window, looking for light in the darkness, keeping her back to them.

Mary pulled Shelley to the far corner of the room and exploded, hissing into his ear. 'Oh yes, now she has it all. She has achieved her ambition to be just like me. She has the poet, and now the poet's child.' Her voice got louder, so that it became audible to Claire. 'Except that it won't be that poet,' — pointing back up towards the Villa Diodati — 'who takes responsibility for it, I'm sure of that,' she

rasped. 'It will be this poet.' His already dishevelled shirt suffered another poke. 'The drain on our limited resources will not just be for my stepsister, as it is now, but for my stepsister's child as well, who everyone will say is yours, and our lives will be even more complicated and hateful.'

From the window came the sob of someone who was not prepared to allow herself to sob. Or someone who knows that a restrained sob can be more wrenching than an overt one.

'She is right in one thing,' said Claire, turning to face them. 'Albe won't want anything to do with the child, because he no longer wants anything to do with me. I will go away. I'll go to ... I don't know, Russia, and earn my living as a governess, and leave the baby with a nursemaid. I don't want to be any more of a drain on you, Shelley, and I don't want to face Mama back in London. It was bad enough me refusing to go back home after running away with you both. This would kill her, and yes, she and everyone else will assume it's yours. What a mess! Ten minutes of happy passion, and it discomposes the rest of your life.'

Shelley looked at Mary, worry and appeal distorting his features. He was choosing to ignore her bitter and vindictive explosion. In a situation like this, she was resigned to knowing that compassion would be his strongest emotion. This man who could not comfortably walk past a beggar without tossing a coin, who sought out orphans to subsidise, this man could only see distress, not justice.

Yet again I must maintain the image of Mary that he has constructed, she thought tiredly, the calm and in control Mary who can soothe her distraught stepsister, hiding the angry and insecure Mary who more often finds her stepsister selfish and manipulative.

So she went to Claire and enfolded her, while Claire stared piteously at Shelley over her shoulder.

'I'm sorry, Claire, it was a shock. We will look after you, of course, and Shelley will talk to Albe for you.' Mary was conciliatory and Shelley nodded, vigorously.

'We will demand that he acknowledges the child and takes responsibility for it,' he said firmly.

‘But he will not acknowledge me, so how is that to be managed? He has already said he wants me to leave.’

Mary was also wondering just how Byron was to be made to take responsibility for Claire’s child. He would feel no compassion for Claire and would need to be assured that the child was his. Perhaps he could be appealed to as a potential father, since Lady Byron never allowed him to see his legitimate child. Perhaps he would do it out of friendship for Shelley. Shelley would be prepared to support Claire and her baby as much as he could, but, as things stood, his father barely gave him a decent allowance, and if he were thought to be responsible for a child by yet another woman he would be completely disowned.

‘Not, of course that I would ever want to be married. Hateful institution,’ Claire went on, defiantly.

Mary felt the surging hatred of Claire that ebbed and flowed, but whose peaks had become continually higher since they had allowed her to come with them when they eloped, two years ago. Shelley had adopted responsibility for her, since he and Mary were supposedly at fault in Claire’s tumble from the rickety heights of respectability, but Mary constantly worried that it was not only duty that drove him. She saw that Shelley was drawn to Claire’s freethinking attitudes, which were more extremely liberal and careless of what society thought than her own. It unsettled Mary that Claire knew her secret, that her true nature was essentially modest and conservative. And Claire knew just how to use that knowledge.

Since Mary had first met Shelley in the St. Pancras churchyard, in North London, she had learnt to share many of his passions and admired him for those she could not quite endorse. The problem was that he expected her, the daughter of two radical thinkers, to lead him in liberality, while in reality she felt she was desperately trying to keep pace. With Claire always on her heels, threatening to overtake and overcome.

PART ONE

London 1814

1

‘Is there such a feeling as love at first sight? And if there be, in what does its nature differ from love founded in long observation and slow growth?’

The Last Man, Mary Shelley

‘Mary Godwin!’

She was sitting with a book of poetry in St. Pancras churchyard by her mother’s grave. It made her feel close to her mother, and she loved it there – the peace, the willow trees, the lawns and crocuses, the little pathways between the scattered graves. She imagined her mother’s care and wisdom emanating from the large memorial that covered her remains.

The young man who had been calling to her came bounding across, breathless, yellow hair wild, buttons on his striped waistcoat carelessly undone, necktie loose. He barely brought himself up short as he reached her side.

‘Mr. Shelley?’ she asked. She knew from her sisters’ description that this could only be Shelley, and couldn’t help smiling at him and his disarray.

‘Mary Godwin?’ panted Shelley, looking at her quizzically. ‘I took it to be you, here by Mary Wollstonecraft’s grave. I’ve come with a message from your stepmother, that you are needed back in Skinner Street. What are you reading?’

She blushed and got up quickly, trying to conceal the slim volume in her skirt, but as she did so, it slipped from her fingers and he caught it deftly. The ground was wet from the morning rain, and the embroidered hem of her dress was stained with damp. There was no escaping his glance at the book he had rescued and he saw it was the copy of his own work — *Queen Mab* — which he had given to her father.

‘Well, well,’ he said, with a grin, looking at the slim volume, ‘I see you spend your time idly!’

‘You are too modest, Mr. Shelley.’ She took the book from him and pointed to the verse she had been reading. ‘See, these are some of my favourite lines, about the pure spirit:

*Custom, and Faith, and Power thou spurnest;
From hate and awe thy heart is free;
Ardent and pure as day thou burnest,
For dark and cold mortality
A living light, to cheer it long,
The watch-fires of the world among.*

‘Are you trying to change the way the world thinks?’

The question was a hesitant compliment, one that Shelley dismissed with an airy wave of his hand.

‘The haphazard ramblings of a young and naive mind. But I still think there is so much that can be done to achieve the perfectibility of humankind.’

‘A great ambition, Mr. Shelley.’ She looked up at him with a slightly sardonic smile.

‘I don’t mean to sound arrogant.’ He was a little sheepish. ‘I know only too well that one man can do very little. When I started writing to your father for advice last year, he warned me of the futility of practical action, and I found he was right. I went to Ireland to try to support Catholic emancipation and to help in the slums of Dublin. All failures.’

‘But in your defence, at least you have a vision,’ said Mary, carefully arranging some flowers which were lying on top of the memorial, that had seemed to Shelley already perfectly bunched. ‘It seems to me the worst crime is to feel these things and not to try to do something about it.’

‘My feelings exactly, Miss Godwin,’ replied Shelley, surprised. ‘But now ... now I believe that it is through poetry that I can try to bring about change. I think that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.’

Mary looked thoughtful. ‘And in poetry you can stir the soul as well as the reason.’

Shelley felt unaccountably drawn to this tall, slight, very young girl — what was she, sixteen her father had said? — with the strong and confident voice of one much older, who seemed to understand so well. Of course her father was a great political thinker, which was why he had chosen him as a mentor. His daughter would naturally be imbued with his ideas. He wondered if she was just parroting her father or if she thought for herself.

‘Do you write poetry? While you were away in Scotland, when your father mentioned you, I think the words he used were something like ... strong-minded and talented.’

Mary blushed again and felt embarrassed at her reaction. She did not want him to see her as simpering, but wasn’t sure why it bothered her what he thought. She was not given to worrying about other people’s opinion, so she replied sharply.

‘I suspect that he mentioned strong-minded in front of my stepmother and stepsister, Claire, and talented when they were not there. On both counts he was wrong. Shall we set off to walk back?’

Ohh, thought Shelley, that is a topic to avoid. He had enough family politics of his own to cope with.

‘Do you believe in spirits, Miss Godwin?’ he asked as Mary turned to leave, trying to recapture some warmth.

‘Yes, when I am here I believe I feel my mother’s spirit,’ replied Mary, softening. ‘My father brought me here to remember her when I was a child. He taught me my letters by tracing the characters on this memorial.’ She traced them now with her fingers. ‘*Mary Wollstonecraft, Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women.*’ But her real, lasting memorial is her writing. I wish I had even a small part of her courage and insight, let alone the ability to express it.’

They set off along the path out of the well-tended cemetery and he pulled open the heavy ironwork gate for her.

‘And you, Mr. Shelley, do you believe in spirits?’

As they headed towards busy Euston Road, he glanced up at the old stone church, the dark eye of the bell tower glaring back in challenge.

‘I do, though my friends say because I am an atheist it is a contradiction, but they don’t understand me. I believe that there is a pervading Spirit, coeternal with the universe. There are many spiritual mysteries that we have yet to understand. I am only an atheist because I won’t follow Christianity or any formal religion that demands obedience to a set of man-made rules that defy reason.’ His tone was defensive, but Mary’s reply was matter-of-fact.

‘In our house we have certainly not been brought up to slavishly follow dogma. My father thinks that men should require no external help to behave as moral beings. I hope he is right, but surely history tells us we can’t rely on people behaving well.’

They had reached Grays Inn Road and turned towards Holborn. With his long legs he unconsciously set a rapid pace, and she worked hard to keep up and to talk without seeming breathless.

‘Tell me, Miss Godwin, have you read Rousseau?’

‘I have read his novels, *Emile* and *Julie*. I think he underrates women by seeing them as naturally weaker than men.’ She looked up briefly, challenging him before moving to safer ground. ‘But I was reading *Julie* while I was in Scotland, and the sublime Swiss scenery he describes, well, it was easy to imagine, sitting among the mountains. And my friend Isabella was in tears for days over poor Julie and her thwarted love.’

‘Yes, it made me want nothing more than to visit the mountains of Switzerland.’ She thought he was going to ignore her daring comment about women, but he nodded thoughtfully and stopped walking to face her. ‘I agree with you that girls’ education in particular, is given no attention in *Emile*.’ He continued, his voice rising, high-pitched with enthusiasm, his hands expressive. ‘But Miss Godwin, you must read his *Social Contract*. He makes one see that man in his natural state is a glorious creature. With encouragement and education the power of good will always assert itself over evil.’

Even while she was embarrassed to be standing stock still in the middle of a busy thoroughfare apparently being harangued by a madman, she felt excited by his idealism. Shelley’s passion and eloquence made him especially attractive, she decided. His ideals were not just an intellectual exercise. Compassion for the whole

world lit his face when he talked about them. She smiled at him with sympathy and turned to walk on, so that he had to follow.

As they neared Skinner Street, they were swept up in the crowds flocking towards Newgate prison. It seemed there was to be an execution that afternoon. Italian merchants with brightly coloured barrows were selling ginger pop and ice cream. Fathers carried children on their shoulders. There was an air of festivity and soon they were pushing through the throng. Shelley was beside himself with anger.

‘Governments that exert control by showing contempt for human life are not only morally deficient, they encourage the same contempt in their subjects.’

‘As we see from the joy of this rabble,’ answered Mary, equally disgusted, but a little distracted by Shelley’s need to circle his arm around her, to shield her from the jostling crowd.

‘All these self-righteous people seeing themselves as morally superior,’ he said. ‘Jesus was right in asking who is so unblemished that he can throw the first stone.’

Mary hated living so close to the prison. Her stepmother had chosen this part of Holborn to set up her publishing house because it was close to the city, and the house was cheap and large, with five stories. The suburb seemed likely to become an area for artisans, since many silk weavers plied their trade from the large, wide-fronted buildings, but it had never become either fashionable or a creative hub. The proximity of Newgate prison and the noise of the cattle being driven to nearby Smithfield Market in the early morning made for an unsettling existence.

That afternoon it was a relief to push past the throng and see the familiar door and huge rounded windows of her house, with the Juvenile Library on the ground floor and the stone carving over the door. It showed Aesop reading his fables to children gathered at his feet. Then, as they climbed the stairs to the drawing room, with each tread the murmurs of family dissonance grew louder. With Shelley at her heels, Mary hunched her shoulders, preparing herself for the embarrassment of becoming just another member of the Godwin household.

2

‘There is a meaning in the eye of love,
a cadence in its voice, an irradiation in its smile.’

The Last Man, Mary Shelley

Shelley had often been a guest at dinner at Skinner Street in the past month, while he tried to borrow money to give to Mary’s father and keep him out of debtor’s prison. Shelley the acolyte, the young man who wrote admiringly to Godwin about his ideas and hung on his advice, became Shelley the saviour, as Godwin appreciated that this son of a baronet was a promising and willing source of finance.

Dinner that evening in Skinner Street took its usual course: Godwin pontificated, Mrs. Godwin simpered. The boiled fowl, roast mutton and vegetables stood on the sideboard ready to be served. The wine was poured for all but Shelley, who drank only seltzer. Tonight, with Mary’s return from Scotland, there were three girls hanging on Shelley’s every word.

Mary found his appearance unusual, and a little exotic, especially as she had so recently been among the brawny men of the highlands. His pale skin seemed slightly translucent and his eyes were penetratingly soft. He appeared an ethereal being who might be expected to offer insight and empathy, and when someone attracted the full beam of his attention, she saw how he could make them blossom. But Mary suspected his deep appeal was more subtle. He had told Fanny, Mary’s half-sister, something that she had faithfully transcribed into her notebook and showed Mary: *that everyone should be treated as though they have the potential to be much more than they are*. That is what people saw of themselves, reflected in his gaze.

The long summer evening began to fade and the servant came in to light the candles. As the first course of trout was served, Mary glanced down the table at the other two girls. The candlelight flickered on her sisters’ faces, as if reflecting their insubstantial parentage. The two

years away had made her re-examine the complicated family in which she had grown up.

There was Fanny, three years older than Mary and also Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter from her mother's first, illicit love, before she married Mary's father. Fanny was listening modestly to the conversation and contributing rarely. She believed that Shelley understood her deep anxiety about her position in this household — the only child without a natural parent — which was why she was always determined to be useful and dutiful. He listened to her, she felt valued, and his eye never strayed to the pock-marked side of her face.

Next to her was their stepsister, Claire, boisterous and giggly as usual, thoughtlessly interrupting as something occurred to her. Mary could not understand how she never seemed embarrassed by her mother, the shrill and sycophantic Mrs. Godwin, Godwin's second wife—Mary Jane Clairmont as was. She still made Mary cringe whenever she spoke. Claire had not known her Swiss father but she would romanticise his fine qualities to anyone who asked. Mrs. Godwin had never married him though she had adopted his name, so Claire was known as Claire Clairmont. She saw herself as gay and carefree and was confident that Shelley appreciated her independent character and her creative soul.

Mary was conscious that, in contrast to her sisters, she was trying to seem thoughtful and assured. She was uncertain what Shelley might see as her best self — and if it was a view she would recognize.

'Of course, my situation is limited at present,' said Shelley, in answer to another anxious pitch by Godwin for financial assistance. 'While my father refuses me a decent allowance I have only my prospects of the baronetcy to fall back on. But we shall manage something, my dear sir. We will see the lawyers again tomorrow.'

This seemed to satisfy Godwin. 'You will not regret a connection with one of the most known men of the age,' he said pompously, gesturing for a refill to his wine. 'It will insure for you a great deal of respectability and recognition for your work.'

He gazed benignly around the table, barely missing Mary's disapproving and embarrassed look, which duty obliged her to disguise behind a cough and a napkin.

Since I have been away, my father seems to have become less prepossessing to look at and more dogmatic in manner, Mary thought, guiltily. Or is it that I never saw him clearly before — saw him only through the eyes of an uncritical child?

William Godwin, as the author of the renowned *Political Justice*, knew himself to be one of the great thinkers of the past decade. He was short and stout, with a large round head, high forehead and, as befitted one who lives in the mind, his dress was shabby and his beard unruly. He saw it as a sign of wisdom to be silent for long periods, then either embark on a long rant about the politics of the day or more often — and here he was most eloquent — a long complaint about how society failed to honour and support its great men, among which he counted himself.

Fortunately Shelley seemed entirely in sympathy with this point of view and agreed that men of fortune, like himself, had an obligation to support those whose only resource is their intellect. Gratiified, Godwin looked at his daughter.

‘Well, sir, and what do you think of my Mary, come back to us almost a woman? I have always been anxious that she should be brought up like a philosopher, even a cynic. Her desire for knowledge is great and her perseverance in everything she undertakes almost invincible. She is bold, too, my dear Shelley, and she can be imperious. Take care, that you do not run foul of her.’

Shelley replied with a soft, ironically complicit smile at Mary. ‘I will, though I am glad to have met Miss Godwin at last. Do we hope for some writings from her pen that will echo her mother’s? A child of yourself and Mary Wollstonecraft has a powerful inheritance.’ He addressed Godwin, but his eyes were still on Mary.

‘She has tried her hand at some childish stories, and we certainly hope for more mature offerings. But I fear there will never be a woman who excels in the field of literature — or at least, till the softer sex has produced a Bacon, a Hume or a Shakespeare, I will never believe it.’

‘Oh, but surely ...’ Shelley leapt to the defence of womankind. He seemed startled at this incongruous declaration by Mary’s father, who had after all married her mother — a celebrated champion of women. His challenge was cut short by an interjection from Mrs. Godwin.

‘How is dear Harriet, Mr. Shelley?’ she asked in an oily tone. ‘We hear your wife is enjoying the company of her father and sister at Bristol. We miss seeing her here at Skinner Street. She is so lively with such good conversation, is she not, Claire?’ she smiled, turning to her daughter.

Claire answered her mother’s remark carelessly. Her mother’s inappropriate manner upset her less than it did Mary and Fanny.

‘I’m sure that Mr. Shelley knows his wife is always welcome at Skinner Street when she comes back to London, Mama. She did indeed teach me much about ways to tame my unruly curls, though I am not sure I have the perseverance to act on her advice.’

Claire was handsome rather than pretty. Her animation in conversation, so quick to contradict or confirm with a toss of her thick black curly hair, made her features seem alive and that added enormously to her attractiveness. She was one of those girls who flirt without the consciousness of it. The idea of Shelley, his intellect, his passion, so clearly appealed to her that her mouth almost hung open when he spoke. She was only eight months younger than Mary, but seemed naïve in her adoration — a puppy with a new master.

‘I hear your wife keeps a carriage now, Mr. Shelley,’ cooed Mrs. Godwin. ‘And do tell, are the horses black, and are the fittings of brass or iron?’

‘She does keep a carriage, though I can ill afford it,’ replied Shelley, rather tight-lipped. ‘I have no idea of the quality of the fittings.’

Mary had tried all her life to forgive her father for her stepmother, or at least to understand. Mrs. Jane Clairmont married William Godwin when Mary was three. She had brought two children of her own to the marriage, Claire and Charles. Mary had heard the tittle-tattle, that she had stalked Godwin, obsessed with achieving bohemian respectability. William Godwin’s obsession had been someone to care for Mary and Fanny. To be fair, the children’s book publishing house Mrs. Godwin set up had kept the Godwin brood from being totally cast adrift amongst the sharks of London’s debt collectors, but it was a close-run thing. With the birth of the Godwins’ own child, William, it became a household of seven souls. Though, to his credit, Godwin took responsibility for them all, he

had no financial acuity. He survived by borrowing money or calling in favours from rich patrons. They were always on the brink.

With her newly distanced perspective, Mary wondered if her father ever regretted his marital bargain. Mrs. Godwin's preferred method of getting her way was with a tantrum, her big bosom and chubby jowls wobbling with anger at a supposed slight or the lack of obedience of one of the children. Claire had her mother's temperament, and hysterics were often heard vibrating the four stories of Skinner Street. It was not a calm atmosphere for a thinker. Mrs. Godwin's venal curiosity and shallowness also repelled many of Godwin's admirers, and they came less often to drink gin and water in the Godwin drawing room.

Mrs. Godwin seemed oblivious to Shelley's cold response. 'Do you think her father will make some extra provision for your little baby girl — Ianthe, isn't it? — and Harriet, while you are temporarily impecunious? I would like to think a father would help all his daughters,' she added with emphasis, looking directly at her husband as she gestured to the maid to pass him the plate of meat. 'More mutton, Mr. Godwin? Try the new Harvey's Sauce that I ordered from Elizabeth Lazenby's warehouse in Portman Square.'

Mrs. Godwin then smiled broadly at her family and her guest and avoided Mary's eye, though her smile tightened with resentment. She felt that she had done her best with 'that girl' for thirteen years. She failed to understand why Mary should be considered the intellectual, better than her Claire. Claire's virtues, like her singing voice and her French, were never, to her mind, properly appreciated.

Fanny had been quietly attending to the needs of the company, ensuring the ham and mutton found their way to everyone's plate and the glasses were filled, and in particular that Shelley was served enough bread and vegetables to satisfy his needs. Now she sensed the underlying tension and changed the subject.

'We have been quite gay while you were away, Mary. There have been many good performances at the theatre that we have been able to attend. Do you visit the theatre, Mr. Shelley?'

‘No, I am not a lover of plays. I think the acting is often not up to representing what the playwright means.’

‘That’s a shame, Mr. Shelley,’ said Claire, with a great, pouting show of disappointment. ‘I was hoping to have your advice on my play.’

‘Your play, Claire?’ asked Shelley, politely.

‘Yes, it’s called *The Idiot*,’ said Claire, grandly. ‘I have been working on it for months. My ambition is to have it produced at Drury Lane.’

Mary wondered if her family could possibly be more embarrassingly self-important. Perhaps she could avert what must certainly be Shelley’s poor opinion by making it seem like just one of Claire’s juvenile fantasies.

‘I think you would prefer to be acting at Drury Lane, would you not, Claire? Fanny wrote to me that that this is your new ambition.’

Claire’s jaw tensed, her black eyes flashed and she stood up and glared at her stepsister.

‘So, we cannot all be budding geniuses of philosophy, can we? Because of our brilliant parents, can we? Some of us have to work hard on our own natural talent.’ She turned and flounced out of the room.

‘You can see, Mr. Shelley, that Claire would indeed be a good actress. She loves drama.’ Mrs. Godwin laughed uncertainly. Now she was less confident of her victory in getting Mary packed off to Scotland, while Claire stayed at home and enjoyed lessons in French conversation. Mary had returned mature and self-assured and, in contrast, Claire seemed even more of a spoiled child.

Mary trembled, at this moment not feeling in the least self-assured. I should never have taken on Claire, she thought. She is so much more ruthless. Her jabs into the soft underbelly of my self-esteem are always harder and deeper than my soft scratches to her ego. Only she guesses how vulnerable and sensitive I am about my ability and how I constantly doubt whether I have any of the genius that is supposedly my heritage.

Claire’s outburst dampened the mood. Shelley tried to restore Mary’s composure by quizzing her about Scotland and her stay with Isabella Baxter, and drew from her descriptions of rambles among

the sublime scenery and a confession of some romantic scribblings in praise of it.

‘Will I be allowed to see them, Mary?’ he asked.

She hesitated. ‘One day, perhaps, when I know you better.’ She bit her lip and fell silent. That was a coquettish remark, she thought, worthy of Claire but totally unlike herself. Claire had unsettled her. Did she, somewhere deep inside her carapace of calm, have a need to best Claire in those skills which were Claire’s alone? Vivaciousness, flirtatiousness. If so, she was making a poor job of it, as Shelley seemed unaffected, merely smiling politely.

As in dining rooms throughout the country, the discussion turned to France.

‘Do you think the Treaty of Peace will finally be signed in Paris, Papa?’ Mary asked.

‘A peace has been offered to them three times already. All of the Allies acknowledged the necessity of leaving France great and powerful, but the ambition of Napoleon made negotiations ineffectual. The Allies are not even asking for reparation, and they have offered France their 1792 borders. This time with the Allies actually holding Paris the French will have to accept, and ship the tyrant off to Elba.’

‘We must hope so,’ agreed Shelley. ‘Though I regret the return of Louis XVIII. We’ve enough of bad kings here, with mad George III, and the libidinous Regent. It would have been a better world if the principles of the Revolution had not been compromised.’

‘At least Louis has to accept a constitution that gives a strong parliament — votes to ninety-thousand people, freedom of religion and the press,’ Mary said. Then she added with excitement, ‘What is most important, they have promised us to abolish the slave trade!’

Shelley was enchanted by such political vehemence in one so young. ‘True! But I am afraid there will need to be a much longer struggle to actually stop slavery in the world.’

Their accord was startling and the ectoplasm of future hours stretched across the table between them, briefly obscuring the company.

‘Do you not think, Mary, it will be nice to be able to visit Paris at last, and again be free to travel through France into Switzerland?’

Mary's reply was lost as little William came tumbling in to say goodnight.

'Tell Mary about the Frost Fair,' he demanded, climbing on Fanny's lap and pulling at the ribbon on her dress.

'Ten year old boys need to be in bed,' laughed Fanny, kissing the top of his head.

'But we actually walked across the Thames,' William protested. 'I had a donkey ride and a swing on the ice and we watched a sheep being roasted, right there on solid ice, and we ate the meat on bread, and, you'll never guess, they had an elephant to walk across, from one side of the river to the other ...'

'And you ran so fast to get a good view your feet skated from under you and you got a very wet rear!' interrupted Fanny, and they all laughed.

'I wish I'd seen it,' said Mary. 'I must say though I'm not sorry that the weather turned a little milder in April. One of the things I was looking forward to, coming back to London, was my daily walk to St. Pancras. Goodnight William.' She kissed his cheek as he came around the table. 'You will have to make a little lecture on the subject of Frost Fairs for delivering to father's friends. I'll help you.'

Soon afterwards, Godwin took Shelley down to his study to drink strong gunpowder green tea and, Mary supposed, to discuss his dire financial straits. The others went to the drawing room and Claire returned to the company, sulkily, but unable to resist the opportunity to sing for them. Mary suppressed her resentment and read aloud from *Political Justice*, the chapter on *Self Love and Benevolence*, trying not to emphasise the passage that preached against rivalry.