

Praise for Soft Belly Days

Wonderful story-telling. This book draws you in and takes you on a journey – the past interwoven with the present. Powerful images, compelling and disturbing. Intensely readable.

Alex Larson, *Personal Assistant*

The style and atmosphere are what grab you; there is a sense of foreboding that draws you on a journey to a place where guilt and innocence become inseparable.

Pat Lewis, *Retired Librarian*

A compassionate and heart-rending story of an ordinary family coping with loss. Deeply moving, funny and poignant.

Debbie Mann, *Case-coordinator*

Carly writes from the heart to the heart.

Karen Long, *Office Manager*

An obsessive, evocative, page-turning good read.

Sue Owen, *Artist*

A haunting tale, imaginatively told. Peppered with belly-aching moments of laughter and pathos.

Trevor Curtis, *Registered Nurse*

The depiction of family life is so well described I forgot I was reading fiction. Loved it.

Christina Deaken

Soft Belly Days

Carly Nugent

MPress books

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Author's note

I have taken a few liberties with the landscape. There isn't a Tinner's Arms in Carn Brea village, and I moved St. Uny Churchyard so it was just an eight-minute run from South Crofty Mine. For this I apologise, and I wish no offence. (And I suspect someone could do it in eight minutes.)

Acknowledgements

The characters, situations and opinions expressed in this work of fiction are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening.

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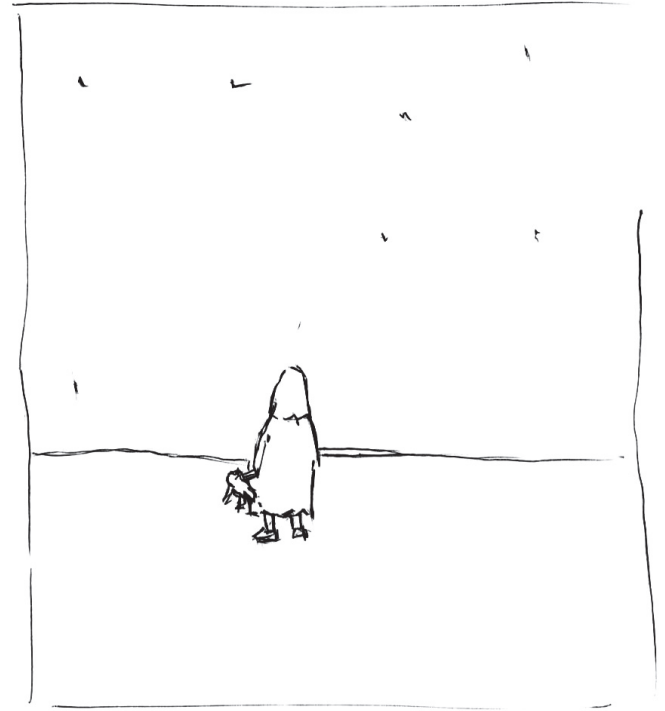
Finally, I have to thank Paddy and Eileen Nugent who were the inspiration for the characters Jack and Ruth.

Soft Belly Days

by Carly Nugent

For my sister Debbie Nugent

In the silent mind lies the master of life, within this stillness its mysteries are revealed. Seek to be still and know who you are, for beguiled by emotions we are blind.



It's 3am. November cold and a little eerie without the squawking gulls. I take off my boots and socks and walk across Carbis Bay beach, sinking my feet into the cold, acquiescent sand. It is as fine as caster sugar, and as I lift my foot the sand momentarily wraps around my ankle, tightly holding on before reluctantly letting go.

In the distance, on the black rocks, Godrevy Lighthouse flashes like an indolent firefly. The waves break, white as soap suds, edging black velvet with intricate crochet, as they lift then spill, lift then spill.

I'm here tonight and have been here every night for the past six weeks because my father is dying. I come here, driven by helplessness, to appeal to the good nature of any god or angel prepared to listen to grant us more time. Hope, for me, has become one shooting star, one match struck in the heavens to assure me that my father is still invincible. I have a heart filled with hope.

My father's name is Jack. Jack Tangye. I am Rachel. This is our dance. This is our coming together and our parting.

And there is someone else. Someone else who keeps me from my warm bed and the wondrous anaesthetic of sleep: there is Abigail, Abigail Daylight.

I haven't thought about her for years, but lately I have caught her in my peripheral vision. Staring at me with those black eyes, those myopic black eyes, and I turn to confront her – as I never could as a child – but like a spectre she vanishes. Each time I'm left wondering if I've simply made her up.

As I stare out to sea I am paralysed by a feeling that somewhere, deep in the ocean, rests something in the sands which stirs in response to the tides and the more subtle currents which tease at its anchor and loosens its chains . . . and I wonder if I'm ready? If I'll ever be ready, for the wreckage that will come floating towards me? Spilling flotsam from my mind . . .

One

The Bus Journey

Abigail Daylight struggles through the bus; she has black shoulder-length hair that is beginning to whiten at the temples. The twisted and tangled hair reveals lice clinging to their hostess like nobody's at a somebody's party. Abigail has blackened blood beneath her fingernails where she has scratched at her scalp. Her dark eyes are enormous behind her thick lenses, glued into thick black frames: they're man's glasses. She wears a man's overcoat too, buttoned to the neck. The hem skims the floor, brushing aside flattened cigarette butts.

Abigail Daylight carries her emptiness with her, marked out with black ink upon blue Basildon Bond. These are her love letters to Johnny, and scrunched into soft paper balls they slope her shoulders with

the weight of granite stones.

Abigail carries this load everywhere in carrier bags; two made from nylon and three made of paper, with handles of string.

Dearest Johnny,

There are things I need to tell you that I never said out loud. Things I should have said but the words became stuck somewhere between my heart and my head, like a crumb breathed in instead of swallowed.

I do not remember the moment when the ivy first entwined about my neck, choking the honeyed voice that whispered into first your right ear and then your left . . .

Abigail drifts backwards in her mind, an entire decade, to 1955, to the room of whitewashed walls, to a sumptuous satin quilt the colour that of a full-bodied Bordeaux.

Back to her lover's unfathomable brown eyes and his pale white skin, untouched by the sun.

Back to the room where she remembers the whisper, "Fill me up Johnny, fill me up." Back to where shadows play on the walls and the oil burns in the lamp and where, touched with his tongue, she is made beautiful.

Seated on the same bus is Rachel. Rachel is eight

years old and this is her first ever journey without an adult. She is nervous but not afraid.

She is a long way from the woman she'll become, the woman of her future, who strides across the frosted sands trying to accept her father's dying, trying to make sense of her past . . .

A frightened Rachel squirms in her seat, not quite believing who she has just seen. The short journey, barely a mile, from Redruth to Barncoose had gone better than she had dared hope. She has done all that her mother asked of her: got straight off at the main bus stop, walked quickly to the department store where she had handed over an envelope containing a small book and some money, and then patiently waited while the lady with bright red purse-string lips and scarlet fingernails had counted the notes and wrote in the book. This was an important task; it meant that they would be keeping their furniture. And Rachel had taken back the envelope, returned to the bus stop, and not once talked to a stranger.

Everything had happened exactly as her mother had told her it would, except that her mother hadn't mentioned that Abigail Daylight used the bus.

Abigail Daylight, the local bag lady. Abigail Daylight, the local witch. The local witch who cast spells and who cast them (according to her brothers any-

way) on little girls. Just girls.

Abigail Daylight, who could take out your beating heart just by looking at you, used this bus.

On seeing Abigail, Rachel squeezes her eyes tightly shut and tries desperately to make the image disappear. For a brief moment she succeeds, opening her mind's eye to watch as the hem of a white robe worn by Jesus skims over rose petals and a woman so pale her skin is a translucent blue reaches forward and dares to touch this hem as it teases Jesus' sandalled toes. The woman at once blushes pink, and pearly tears slip over salted cheeks, quenching dry lips so that they may kiss once again. She smiles a tremulous smile and Jesus smiles and moves on.

However, it is not Jesus. It is Abigail. Rachel rushes towards the door and presses the STOP bell, a red rubber button. The conductor stands over her, spitting saliva through his long, grey, nicotine-stained moustache. "Touch that again and I'll chop your fingers off." Startled by this unfamiliar tone of voice Rachel steps backwards, straight into Abigail Daylight, where indeed, with just one look, Rachel's small beating heart shifts up inside of her, clogging her ever-tightening throat. For the first time in her life Rachel feels real fear. Not the scary anticipation of what her brothers might do to her next – she knew her father would always take her side over them,

and just their knowing that always saved her – but something different, something visceral. This was an acute aliveness that made her think she might die. Soon.

Rachel leaps off the bus, urine running down her legs, stinging the scratches of childhood as she runs and runs towards the enormous outstretched arms of her father, a giant of a man, a man who could slay any witch. Except her father is not there. He's not home yet.

Home. A small two-up, two-down cottage, the middle of three built in a row all with whitewashed walls and black window frames and doors. At the end of a short path leading off the easterly gable-end, placed behind a privet hedge, are three adjoining toilets. Rachel enters the middle one. She quickly rips off a piece of newspaper from its string, pulls down her knickers and wraps the paper around the gusset, squeezing it hard until she must let go. It would be very dangerous to have her brothers discover that she had wet herself. For now, she was safe: they would still be at school. But she did wonder how they would make her pay for having the day off, for going on the bus alone, for coming face to face with the local witch.

Suddenly empowered by the thought of what she had survived, Rachel skips around the back, pass-

ing quickly by Number Three, where David lives with his mum – but not with his dad.

Rachel is only mildly curious about David: he is too small to play with and, besides, he's a boy, and Rachel has enough problems with her brothers.

She enters through the kitchen door. A warm smell of baking greets her, rising on the thermals from the Cornish range. Shepherd's pie. Saffron buns. A filled kettle gently blows steam from its soot-stained spout.

Sputnik the black and white cat is intently focused on something underneath the Burco boiler. Rachel creeps past, up two stone steps, painted red, through the front room dominated by its new three-piece-suite, and past her father's enormous armchair, set at an angle to fully appreciate the fire, his rolled-up spools of newspaper, arranged like headless flowers in a vase, standing in the brass pot silently waiting to light his cigarette, waiting for the children to fight over whose turn it is to hold the paper in the fire's flame.

And on up the stairs. Tiptoeing. There are only two doors on the landing, the first into her parents' bedroom, where Ruth is asleep, two-year-old Mark, also asleep, nestled in her arms. Mark's soft, chubby cheeks shine like pink tomatoes.

Mum and son are nesting in the warm well cre-

ated by Jack on an eyrie of a bed with its three mattresses, feather bolster and pillows. Satisfied that all is well in her world Rachel returns to the kitchen, where Sputnik has cornered a mouse.

Her first instinct is to scream for help but she stops herself before she erupts, instead grabbing the cat – really digging her nails in – and somehow gets hold of the small creature, cupping it like a butterfly in her hands, its tiny heart beating explosions against her palms. Sputnik is livid. He claws with his paws up her bare legs.

Rachel prays for the prey as she desperately pushes it out through the letterbox. Then she rests, relieved, as Sputnik stands on his hind legs, bowing his spine so he can reach for the door handle. The mouse runs back in, underneath the door. This time Rachel kicks Sputnik out of the way and forces the mouse back out the way it came. Then she blocks the gap with her body and examines her war wounds. She squeezes the scratches hard until scarlet mushrooms travel like paw prints on sand up her bare white legs. She gives Sputnik a reproachful look; until this moment they had been friends. Sputnik is unimpressed; he's waving his tail, slowly from side to side, growling to be let out.

Rachel leans down and peers underneath the door to make sure that the mouse is clear away.

Sputnik does the same, brushing Rachel's face with his inflated tail. They both watch as next door's tabby spits the dead mouse onto the floor before sashaying out through the garden, tail erect.

Rachel flings the door wide open and shouts out through heated tears: "Get lost!" She picks up the strangely still but hot mouse and can still feel the echo of the heartbeat, feel the pulse of silence. And within this timeless stillness Rachel wonders what it means to be dead.

Rachel isn't sure what happened when she picked up the dead mouse but she feels as though, somehow, the mouse has given her something, and so as a gesture more of gratitude than anything else she steals, from the kitchen, a desert spoon in order to dig a grave. She finds her Sunday School Bible and wipes her face clean for this special duty. Their scrappy garden is small and henpecked, but Harry, who lives at Number One Stamps Lane, has a picturesque cottage-garden, the only garden in the entire area to have Wisteria dripping from its walls, a perfect heaven for a tiny dead mouse that will be buried with all the solemnity that Rachel can muster.

Rachel is small for her eight years; she weighed in at only five and a half pounds. She has her father's blue eyes which, in the winter, can pale to

grey. The outer edge of the irises are ringed with a much darker blue and the lashes are black, and long. However, the look that gazes out from these eyes, the disarming innocence which can turn to candid disdain without a blink, unquestionably has slid down through the generations, passed on like a precious genetic recipe, from Granny Opie to Ruth and now to Rachel. And in truth, it is these 'Granny Opie eyes' that render the males of the family, with all their bullish strength, vulnerable. For whether it be a look of contempt or a look of love once caught in their spellbinding gaze, the men are both lost and found.

Rachel slides her spoon beneath the long green leaves of a yellow primrose and digs into the rich brown soil. It is the consistency that flour and lard takes when rubbed together, and when Rachel squeezes it tight in her fist it holds its shape. If she were making pastry, she would add water at this point.

These Silent Skills lie hidden amongst the threads of her mother's apron which, on Rachel, trails to the ground and wraps around her like a sneaky shroud, marking the end of her childhood. Rachel lifts the mouse and is about to lower it into the shallow grave when a sharp stinging slap on the back of her hand sends it flying up into the air.

“What you doing, girl?” Her older brother John (ten) demands while her younger sibling Matthew (seven) picks up her Bible and tosses it to John, who throws it back, and Rachel is at once piggy in the middle, torn between going to find the mouse and saving the Bible.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” Rachel is backwards and forwards, trampling the primroses that have become hot coals, branding their destruction onto the soles of her feet, and placing a memory there that she will never quite be free of.

She’d like to cry but because boys don’t, neither can she. If she cries she will never belong to their world and will be forced more and more indoors to polish furniture and stand with her hands on her hips, sighing as clouds pass over the sun and the rain means that the washing will not blow freely on the line but pile up in a bucket and hang from string like damp curtains all about the cluttered kitchen.

“I’ll tell God!” Rachel screams. “Give me back his book.”

“You’re weird girl!” Matthew throws the Bible back to John. The boys start their chanting, “Rachel is a weirdo, Rachel is a weirdo.”

Rachel stands still, places her hands on her hips, and fixes John with a look of imperial confidence.

“I’ll tell Dad.” She spins quickly and stares hard at Matthew. “I’ll tell dad – and you won’t sit down for a week.”

The boys, worried, look quickly at each other. Rachel turns, just as John hurls the Bible so that it catches her, not in her back – which was his aim – but directly over her heart. Rachel stumbles backwards, clutching at her chest like an Indian squaw who has just been shot by a cowboy. For a moment, in Harry’s pretty garden, all three children become grey statues each stilled by the wondering of whether this is trouble or not?

Matthew is the first to move. He picks up the Bible and rebukes John. “You didn’t have to throw it so hard.”

“It wasn’t me! Rachel moved.”

Rachel suddenly leaps up, snatching the Bible from Matthew. “You two are dead when dad gets home.” The boys are secretly relieved. Rachel’s dry eyes tell them that, despite the threat, she will not be eliciting Jack’s help. John is so grateful he immediately seeks out and finds the dead mouse. “Hey Rach, why’d you kill the mouse anyway?”

“I didn’t kill it, stupid!”

Very soon and not really understanding the ‘how’ or the ‘why’ John and Matthew are chief mourners at the graveside, their heads bowed as Rachel

reads from her Bible. "In my father's house there are many mansions . . ." She doesn't know what it means but the idea of a house filled with mansions both intrigues and delights her.

It is, for all three, their first funeral. And later that day, because Rachel 'didn't tell' and Rachel 'didn't die', John leaves on the pillow on her bed a cross, made from two lolly sticks and an elastic band, the word 'mouse' scratched along one length with his school pencil. A sense of honour and humility prevents either of them ever mentioning this small act of sibling love.



Abigail Daylight lives in a galvanised shack set in an orchard enclosed by granite stone walls. Rain dances off its tin roof and smoke leaks from the chimney.

Pear trees cling to the high walls and apple tree boughs bend to the ground. Raspberries and loganberries splash red across green bushes and strawberries hide under green leaves. A small lazy stream passes through lush, rabbit-feed banks and iridescent dragonflies hover in rainbows.

Children's chatter and laughter travels on the wind from beyond and yet, and yet, Abigail Day-

light sits in the dim light cast by one oil lamp and a spitting log in the pot-bellied stove, her head bent towards the letters laying in her lap, her heart dried up like a prune.



We used to come to Carbis Bay beach for our Sunday School tea-treats. I was probably about four years old when I first remember it. A coach filled with entire families – children, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins – and massive hampers of home-baked food. And crates of dandelion and burdock.

We'd driven no more than fifteen miles but we might as well have flown to the Bahamas. We were used to an industrial landscape with disused mine buildings and giant chimney stacks that stood proud above stretches of bramble-covered wasteland. We had small, terraced houses with (mostly) unkempt gardens, where chickens pecked and dogs on chains occasionally stood up to have a bark. Yet here we were suddenly driving through detached, villa-style bungalows with palm trees and Yucca plants in the gardens and glorious displays of flowers everywhere and not one set of onions to be seen. We were somewhere where the road

was edged with membresia, growing wild. We were somewhere that seemed so extravagant. That still does.

I clearly remember being awed by it. I would not have known the word 'exotic' but I drank in the exoticism. And although it's changed, and there are now high-rise holiday apartments, too many second-home tourists, and it's known locally to be a place for 'newly weds and nearly deads', I would not live anywhere else.

At 3am the beach is all mine – except occasionally for the night fisherman. All searching for stillness in this chaotic world.

I am trying to remember something, but it's elusive, like a dream. It might be to do with Abigail, but I'm not sure. I do not know why she should be haunting me after all these years . . .

Wishing her dead is not the same as killing her. Finding her dead is not the same as killing her. Even so, she taunts me. And I do not really know if I believe in ghosts. I think it is some sort of displacement.

Rather than think about my father's illness, my mind has given me something else to worry about. I'm very good at displacement.

I do not remember the moment I became afraid of Abigail. I can't even recall a time when I wasn't

afraid of her. We were all afraid of her. Weren't we? Us kids, I mean. At least I think the others were afraid. She was like a mythic creature, a female bogey man. She was so different and she seemed so ugly.

I know now that she wasn't ugly, just beaten. Did I fear becoming her? It would not have entered my head. I wanted to be like Sarah . . .

Sunday School Prize-Giving

Today is Rachel's day to shine. Even her father is coming and he is strictly a 'funeral and wedding' man. She saves him a seat next to hers, next to the aisle. It is the only free space left and Rachel places her tiny gloved hand on top, thus securing it. It should be a throne bedecked with flowers, but it's a small stacking chair which, at the end of the day, collapses down to fold.

Rachel is dressed in a pale lilac duster-coat and dress, made especially for her by Mrs. Reed her piano teacher. It is the only thing she has which fits perfectly, and within the soft spun cotton, through a process of osmosis, Rachel too is made perfect. She views the rest of the congregation through her new smugness and at once sees their ill-fitting hand-me-downs,

their Jumble Sale Sunday-best, and a heavy sense of 'unbelonging' lowers her head with the shame of such unholy thoughts. And like this she remains, aping prayer. And Ruth, sitting next to the aisle, trying to control Mark, who is bored and wriggling in her lap, looks upon her pious daughter, aching to understand why she is always so serious.

In the space that separates mother from daughter sit John and Matthew, contentedly splatting the backs of people's necks with chewed newspaper missiles aimed with precision from their slingshots, each too busy to notice that they are filling a gap. Ruth smiles at her naughty boys and thinks of her husband Jack and hopes he will leave the pub on time. Leave the pub in a straight line. Leave the pub.

Entering, from a side door, into this humble gathering, steps Sarah. Sarah, the Sunday School teacher. Rachel lifts her head and watches intently as the willowy figure with auburn hair steps onto the small stage, bringing with her into this musty gloom the sweet scent of Chanel No. 5. She is dressed in a tightly fitting black suit with a white scooped neck collar and three quarter-length sleeves trimmed with white cuffs. She carries with her, like a clutch bag, a white leather-bound Bible with a zip around it. Sarah sits and crosses her legs, dangling a black patent leather court shoe from her silk-stockinged toe. Rachel, unconsciously,

pulls up her off-white socks and eases off one red plastic sandal to dangle from her toe. Who better to aspire to becoming than Sarah?

Joining her on stage, in an aura of self-importance they can't quite manage, is the minister, clothed in a brown, ironed, shiny suit, and, as quickly, his wife, in blue crimplene. Their presence stirs the congregation to stand to sing, and with one rendition of All Things Bright and Beautiful, the prize-giving has no sooner begun. Without Jack.

Who is not too far away.



The Tinnens' Arms is owned by Betsy Tremberth but, because she is a widow, many of the village men assume a kind of honorary co-ownership; they may change a barrel, stack crates, chop wood and complete various tasks which fall under the general heading of 'man's work' and Betsy rewards them generously with an extra pint, or bottle of stout to take home to the wife, or a bag of crisps and a bottle of pop for the disconsolate children (sent by their mothers to bring their fathers home) who sit on the cold stone stoop.

Betsy can manage all of these tasks herself. She is a proud, strong woman with an impressive, upholstered bosom. But it is in her nature to be gracious to

those who wish to please, especially hard-working simple folk who are more honest than they are ingratiating, more thoughtful than they are obsequious. And thus it falls to Jack Tangye to deal with awkward customers.

So while Rachel twists in her Sunday School seat to make better her view of the chapel doors, Jack downs his pint – the last third in one easy swallow – and slips off his rugby club blazer and hands it over to Harry, his neighbour, his work mate and devoted friend.

Harry smiles as he takes the blazer; he knows all too well what is about to happen to the man at the bar who is belligerently insisting that Betsy pour him another pint, although she has told him quietly and firmly that the last orders bell has sounded.

Jack is too tall for the low-beamed ceiling, so he shrugs his neck deep inside his wide shoulders and in two strides is at the bar. Betsy relaxes. Other drinkers drain their pints and throw their cigarettes onto the dark slate floor, grinding them to ash with their shiny Sunday shoes.

In a whirling smog of grey-white smoke the awkward customer turns in response to Jack's question. "Did you not hear the lady?"

Jack has a smoker's voice: slow and lazy as a smoke ring; rich and smooth as chocolate soup; and

loud enough to travel the full length of a rugby pitch. But on occasions such as these he lowers his voice to a whisper, compressed through very tight lips. "Did you not hear the lady?"

While the awkward customer strains to listen, Jack's right fist has already clasped the baffled man's collar and, in another moment, with a straight arm lift, his legs are kicking beneath him, like the last quick steps of a hanged man.

After a measured while, Jack turns to Harry. "What do you think mate, shall us let him go?"

Harry is a very small man, indeed he is a model man, a miniature of the real thing, built like a jockey. And he spends his life basking in the light that shines out of Jack. Harry does not know this, would doubt it if he were told it, but he is Jack's conscience. And while this is inconceivable to Harry, Jack depends on him like a miner depends on his Davey Lamp.

Awkward customer has stopped kicking; his face has turned from red, bloated drunk, to pale grey, back to red, and now blue.

Harry takes his time enjoying the deference which Jack bestows upon him and also knowing that, in Jack's mind, Jack is counting: "One – one thousand, two – one thousand, three – one thousand, four . . ."

The current record for a straight arm lift of an awkward drunk is thirty-eight seconds. Harry judges this

man to be lighter than the last, and so waits. Waits. And goes on waiting. Waiting for the head of the suspended man to slump forward.

Harry nods.

Jack lets go.

Awkward customer hits the floor.

There is a long loud silence followed by a gasping inhalation and in something approximating empathy, the other customers too breathe deeply.

Jack is triumphant. "Fifty one!" Only Harry understands what this means. He hands back the blazer. Betsy pours two whiskies and the awkward customer crawls towards the door. Jack and Harry chink their glasses and, in unison, knock back the shots.

"Cripes Jack, look at the time! There'll be ructions." Jack looks at the jaundiced ceiling, whistles, and pats his friend firmly on the back. "We're for it – little Rachel's gonna kill me," he says laughing.

"Not to mention what Ruthie will do," responds Harry. They both laugh a little more nervously, wave their goodbyes, and leave in their wake the awe and wonder that a straight arm lift never fails to inspire.



Abigail Daylight wore her lover's coat because she loved him.

Loved him.

Loved him with a passion so deep that after he left her she crawled inside his coat, inhaled his masculine muskiness, felt his silk-lined charm, and got lost in the enormous folds of him. She took with her a bottle of gin and she didn't come out alive.