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Writing from Start to Finish

THE SECRET RIVER

KATE GRENVILLE

CANONGATE

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STRANGERS

The *Alexander*, with its cargo of convicts, had bucked over the face of the ocean for the better part of a year. Now it had fetched up at the end of the earth. There was no lock on the door of the hut where William Thornhill, transported for the term of his natural life in the Year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and six, was passing his first night in His Majesty's penal colony of New South Wales. There was hardly a door, barely a wall: only a flap of bark, a screen of sticks and mud. There was no need of lock, of door, of wall: this was a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water.

Thornhill's wife was sleeping sweet and peaceful against him, her hand still entwined in his. The child and the baby were asleep too, curled up together. Only Thornhill could not bring himself to close his eyes on this foreign darkness. Through the doorway of the hut he could feel the night, huge and damp, flowing in and bringing with it the sounds of its own life: tickings and creakings, small private rustlings, and beyond that the soughing of the forest, mile after mile.

When he got up and stepped out through the doorway there was no cry, no guard: only the living night. The air moved around him, full of rich dank smells. Trees stood tall over him. A breeze

shivered through the leaves, then died, and left only the vast fact of the forest.

He was nothing more than a flea on the side of some enormous quiet creature.

Down the hill the settlement was hidden by the darkness. A dog barked in a tired way and stopped. From the bay where the *Alexander* was anchored there was a sense of restless water shifting in its bed of land and swelling up against the shore.

Above him in the sky was a thin moon and a scatter of stars as meaningless as spilt rice. There was no Pole Star, a friend to guide him on the Thames, no Bear that he had known all his life: only this blaze, unreadable, indifferent.

All the many months in the *Alexander*, lying in the hammock which was all the territory he could claim in the world, listening to the sea slap against the side of the ship and trying to hear the voices of his own wife, his own children, in the noise from the women's quarters, he had been comforted by telling over the bends of his own Thames. The Isle of Dogs, the deep eddying pool of Rotherhithe, the sudden twist of the sky as the river swung around the corner to Lambeth: they were all as intimate to him as breathing. Daniel Ellison grunted in his hammock beside him, fighting even in his sleep, the women were silent beyond their bulkhead, and still in the eye of his mind he rounded bend after bend of that river.

Now, standing in the great sighing lung of this other place and feeling the dirt chill under his feet, he knew that life was gone. He might as well have swung at the end of the rope they had measured for him. This was a place, like death, from which men did not return. It was a sharp stab like a splinter under a nail: the pain of loss. He would die here under these alien stars, his bones rot in this cold earth.

He had not cried, not for thirty years, not since he was a

hungry child too young to know that crying did not fill you belly. But now his throat was thickening, a press of despair behind his eyes forcing warm tears down his cheeks.

There were things worse than dying: life had taught him that. Being here in New South Wales might be one of them.

It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real, something only imagined. His eyes were set so deeply into the skull that they were invisible, each in its cave of bone. The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks. Without surprise, as though he were dreaming, Thornhill saw the scars drawn on the man's chest, each a neat line raised and twisted, living against the skin.

He took a step towards Thornhill so that the parched starlight from the sky fell on his shoulders. He wore his nakedness like a cloak. Upright in his hand, the spear was part of him, an extension of his arm.

Clothed as he was, Thornhill felt skinless as a maggot. The spear was tall and serious. To have evaded death at the end of the rope, only to go like this, his skin punctured and blood spilled beneath these chilly stars! And behind him, hardly hidden by that flap of bark, were those soft parcels of flesh: his wife and children.

Anger, that old familiar friend, came to his side. *Damn your eyes be off*, he shouted. *Go to the devil!* After so long as a felon, hunched under the threat of the lash, he felt himself expanding back into his full size. His voice was rough, full of power, his anger a solid warmth inside him.

He took a threatening step forward. Could make out chips of sharp stone in the end of the spear. It would not go through a man neat as a needle. It would rip its way in. Pulling it out

would rip all over again. The thought fanned his rage. *Be off!* Empty though it was, he raised his hand against the man.

The mouth of the black man began to move itself around sounds. As he spoke he gestured with the spear so it came and went in the darkness. They were close enough to touch.

In the fluid rush of speech Thornhill suddenly heard words. *Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly.

This was a kind of madness, as if a dog were to bark in English.

Be off, be off! He was close enough now that he could see the man's eyes catching the light under their heavy brows, and the straight angry line of his mouth. His own words had all dried up, but he stood his ground.

He had died once, in a manner of speaking. He could die again. He had been stripped of everything already: he had only the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place. He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans in the hut behind him. He was not about to surrender them to any naked black man.

In the silence between them the breeze rattled through the leaves. He glanced back at where his wife and infants lay, and when he looked again the man was gone. The darkness in front of him whispered and shifted, but there was only the forest. It could hide a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths.

He went quickly into the hut, stumbling against the doorway so that clods of daubed mud fell away from the wall. The hut offered no safety, just the idea of it, but he dragged the flap of bark into place. He stretched himself out on the dirt alongside his family, forcing himself to lie still. But every muscle was tensed, anticipating the shock in his neck or his belly, his hand going to the place, the cold moment of finding that unforgiving thing in his flesh.

PART ONE

LONDON

In the rooms where William Thornhill grew up, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, no one could move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother. Light struggled in through small panes of cracked glass and the soot from the smoking fireplace veiled the walls.

Where they lived, down close to the river, the alleyways were no more than a stride across, and dimmed even on the brightest day by the buildings packed in hugger-mugger. On every side it was nothing but brick walls and chimneys, cobblestones and mouldering planks where old whitewash marked the grain. There were the terraces of low-browed houses hunched down on themselves, growing out of the very dirt they sat on, and after them the tanneries, the shambles, the glue factories, the maltings, filling the air with their miasmas.

Down beyond the tanneries, turnips and beets struggled in damp sour fields, and between the fields, enclosed behind their hedges and walls, were the boggy places too wet to plant in, with rushes and reeds where stagnant water glinted.

The Thornhills all stole turnips from time to time, running the risk of the dogs getting them, or the farmer hurling stones. Big brother Matty bore a scar on his forehead where a stone had made a turnip less tasty.

The highest things were the steeples. There was nowhere to go in all these mean and twisted streets, even out in the marshy low ground, where some steeple or other did not watch. As soon as one of them was hidden by the elbow of a lane there was another staring down from behind the chimneys.

And under the steeple, the House of God. William Thornhill's life had begun, as far as his own memory of it was concerned, with the grandest house that God had: Christ Church beside the river. The building was so big it made his eyes water. On the gateposts there were snarling stone lions that his mother lifted him up to look at, but they made him cry out in fear. The vertiginous lawn seemed to engulf him as he stood in its emptiness. The bushes stood guard in a line, and tiny insects of humans laboured up the vast steps of the entrance far away. He was dizzy, lost, hot with panic.

Inside the church he had never seen such a vault of ceiling and such light. God had so much space it could frighten a boy from Tanner's Lane. Up at the front were complicated carvings: screens, benches, a great construction that towered over the people sitting in the pews. It was a void into which his being expanded without finding a boundary, all in the merciless light that blasted down from the huge windows and left everything cold, with no kindly shadows anywhere. It was a place with no charity in its grey stones for a boy with the seat out of his britches.

He could not understand any of it, knew only that God was as foreign as a fish.

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From the time he knew his own name, *William Thornhill*, it seemed that the world was crowded with other William Thornhills. For a start, there was always the ghost of the first William Thornhill, the brother who had died when only a week

old. A year and a half later, in 1777, a year with a bit of a ring to it, he himself had come into the world, and they gave him the same name. The first William Thornhill was a handful of dust in the ground, and he was warm flesh and blood, and yet the dead William Thornhill seemed the first, the true, and himself no more than a shadow.

Over the river in Labour-in-Vain Court, there were some distant cousins, and more William Thornhills. There was Old Mr Thornhill, a shrivelled little head nodding on top of some dark clothes. Then there was his son, Young William, a man altogether hidden behind black beard. At St Mary Mounthaw there was a William Thornhill who was a big boy of twelve and pinched the latest William Thornhill whenever he got the chance.

Then when the wife of Uncle Matthew the sea captain had a new baby, it was William Thornhill too. They visited with the baby and said its name, and everyone turned to him, smiling, expecting him to smile too, and he tried. But his sharp sister Mary, the oldest, saw his face fall. Later she punched him on the arm. *Your name is common as dirt, William Thornhill*, she said, and the anger rose up in him. He punched her straight back and shouted, *William Thornhills will fill up the whole world*, and she had no comeback to that, smart and all as she was.

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His sister Lizzie, too young to hem sheets but old enough to carry a baby on her hip, had the care of the little ones. As a six-year-old she carried baby William to keep him from the mud, so that the smell of Lizzie, the coarse texture of her unruly hair coming out from under the cap, was more motherly to him than his mother.

He was always hungry. That was a fact of life: the gnawing feeling in his belly, the flat taste in his mouth, the rage that there

was never enough. When the food came it was a matter of cramming it into his mouth so his hands could reach for more. If he was quick enough, he could grab the bread his little brother James was lifting to his mouth, break a piece off and get it down his gullet. Once it was swallowed no one could get it back. But Matty was doing the same, ripping the bread out of William's hand, his eyes gone small and hard like an animal's.

And always cold. There was a kind of desperation to it, a fury to be warm. In the winter his feet were stones on the end of his legs. At night he and the others lay shivering on the mouldy straw, scratching at the fleas and the bedbugs, full of their blood, that nipped them through their rags.

He had eaten the bedbugs more than once.

There was one blanket for the two youngest Thornhills, and each other's smelly bodies the best warmth. James was older by two years and got the best of the blanket, but William, though smaller, was canny. He forced himself not to sleep, waiting for James's snores, so he could pull most of it over himself.

You were forever hungry, his mother told him when he asked about himself, but had to stop for her cough, an explosion that ripped through her body. It sometimes seemed as though her cough was the only strong thing left in her. *Greedy little bugger you was*, she whispered at last, and he went away ashamed, hearing his empty belly rumbling even then, and something in him going stony from the dislike in her voice.

Lizzie's story was the same, but different. *Greedy*, she cried, *my word you was, Will, and look at you now, great lumps of boys don't come out of thin air.*

Her voice did not say that being such a great lump of boy was a bad thing to be, and when she said, *Hollow legs, we called you*, she said it with a smile.

Lizzie was a good sister for a baby to have, good with a sugar

rag, strong at carrying. But when William was not yet three, the mother grew big and fretful, and another baby replaced him as the youngest, the one that Lizzie carried around on her hip. William, already haunted by the dead William Thornhill he had replaced, was now haunted by this other brother, John. It seemed he would forever be squeezed tight before and after.

Below him was John, and on top of him were Lizzie and James, the biggest brother Matty, and Mary, oldest of them all, scary with her shouting voice always scolding. She sat with the mother, crowding in around the little window sewing the shrouds for Gilling's. Then there was Robert, older than William but younger too. Poor Robert never had more than half his wits, and less than that of his hearing, after he had the fever when he was five and nearly died. William had heard his mother scream one day, *Better if you had died and been done with it!* It made him go cold inside, for poor Rob was a kindly boy, and when his face lit up at some little gift, he could not wish him dead.

Pa worked at the cotton mill, the maltings, the tanneries, nowhere for very long. His cheeks were hollow with points of red on them as if he were angry, and he crept about half asleep, always weary. When he spoke or laughed, the words or the mirth became a long wet rattling cough. *Victualler* was how he had described himself at John's baptism, but victualler meant nothing grander than a few gloomy men from Mr Choubert's tannery, gathered together in one of the Thornhills' two rooms, drinking ale out of dirty wooden tankards and eating pies the mother had made: too much pastry, not enough filling. When the tan-pits froze over in the winter there were no customers and the room was bleak, smelling of old ale in the floorboards and the cold chalkiness of ash in the fireplace.

Then it was lean times for the Thornhills. At five, William was old enough to go with Pa round the streets at dawn with a

stick and a sack, gathering the pure for the morocco works. Pa carried the sack, young William was the one with the stick. Pa walked ahead, spotting the dark curl of a dog turd from his greater height. If none could be found, then there was nothing but brown water from the river as a belly-filler. But when Pa saw one, it was the boy's job to push it into the sack with the stick, trying not to breathe in the stink. The worst was when the dogs chose the cobbles at Tyer's Gate with the wide gaps between, so the stuff dropped into the gaps and he had to gouge at it with the stick, or even with his fingernails while Pa stood coughing and pointing.

A full sack of pure was worth ninepence at the morocco yard. He had never asked what they used it for, only felt he would rather die than go on scraping the stuff off the cobbles of Southwark.

Except that the ache in his belly was even worse than the stink of the shit.

Ma was willing to risk less smelly ways to buy a loaf of bread. They watched her one day from behind a cart, William and Lizzie and James. Thornhill thought she looked obvious, lurking and slinking and tight-faced. Hold your head up, Ma, he wanted to call. And smile!

They saw her approach the trestle of books. The bookseller was inside her shop and it was hard to see if she was watching. William wanted to run across the road and lift the book himself, she was taking so long and looking so black about it, fingering the books and flipping their pages when she knew no more of her letters than the man in the moon. Then at last she slipped one into a fold of her apron, but looked at it as she did it, and used both hands so she nearly dropped the baby: it was clumsily done.

Suddenly the shop woman was there beside her, shouting,

Now give me that, if you please, Missus, and they heard Ma cry out, too shrill, *What! I have nothing of yours!* but clutching at the book in the folds of her apron so it gave her away. The shop woman, a stringy old boiler, jerked her arm so Ma fell down on her knees and the book fell and the baby too, rolling onto the cobbles and setting up an almighty roar.

The shop woman pounced on the book, and, while she was stooping for it, Ma from her knees gave her a clout across the back of the head. Old and all as she was, the woman was up in a trice and hit Ma on the shoulders with the book—they could hear the thwack of it from across the street—all the time hanging onto her and yelling, *Thief! Thief!* Ma was up now, the baby under her arm, and she began to kick out the legs of the trestle and claw all the books till they lay in the mud.

This was the signal for the children behind the cart to rush over and grab at the scattered books. William got one in each hand, right under the woman's feet, so she let go of Ma to grab them back, and when he stepped away, Ma ran and now the woman was spinning from one to the other in a dither. Two gentlemen stepped out of the Anchor to come to her assistance, but by then the Thornhills were gone like a lot of rats up the alley.

They got a book each. William's was the best, red leather with gold lettering, good for a shilling at Lyle's, no questions asked.

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He grew up a fighter. By the time he was ten years old the other boys knew to leave him alone. The rage warmed him and filled him up. It was a kind of friend.

There were other friends, of course, a band of boys who roamed the streets and wharves together, snatching cockles off the fishmonger's stall at Borough Market, scrabbling in the mud

at low tide for pennies tossed by laughing gentlemen.

There was his brother James, a whippy boy who could climb a drainpipe quicker than a roach, and poor simple Rob smiling at everything he saw. There was bony little William Warner, the runt of a litter on Halfpenny Lane, and Dan Oldfield whose father had drowned, being the passenger in a wherry trying to shoot London Bridge at low water, the boatman half-stupefied with liquor at the time. Dan was famous for his ability to steal roast chestnuts from the pedlar in Frying Pan Alley, enough to be able to share them, hot out of his pocket, with the other urchins. One frozen morning at Dan's suggestion he and William had pissed on their own feet: the moment's bliss was almost worth the grip of cold that came after. Then there was Collarbone from Ash Court with the red mark across half his face. Collarbone liked Lizzie. *She has skin like a nun*, he told Thornhill, wonderingly, and then, perhaps thinking of his own livid skin, blushed red to the roots of his hair.

They were all thieves, any time they got the chance. The dainty parson could shrill all he liked about sin, but there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly.

Rob came to the other boys in their little rat-hole by Dirty Lane one day with a single boot that he had taken from where it hung outside a shop. He would have got the other too, he said, but the bootmaker saw him in a looking-glass. The man ran after him, and caught him, Rob said, but he was old, and the boy was able to get away. William hefted the boot in his hand and said, *But what is it worth to you, Rob, just the one?* And Rob thought long, his face creased with the effort, then through his loose rubbery lips, on a spray of spittle, cried out, *I will sell it to a man with one leg! It is worth ten shillings at least!* and it was as if he already had the money in his hand, his face fat with satisfaction at his scheme.

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When Lizzie played mother to John, and then to baby Luke after that, Lizzie's friend Sal from Swan Lane became sister to William. Sal was the only fruit of her mother's womb. Had been a bonny baby, but she had cursed the womb as she left it, for every baby after her sickened and died within the month.

Her family was a notch up from the Thornhills, for Mr Middleton was a waterman, as his father had been, and his father's father before that. They had lived in the same street in the Borough for as long as anyone could remember, in a narrow house with a room upstairs, a fire of coals in the winter, glass in the windows, and always a loaf of bread in the cupboard.

But it was a sad house, filled with the tiny souls of those departed babies. With every promising son who had sickened and died, Mr Middleton became a sterner and more silent man. His trade was his consolation. He was out every morning, the first of the watermen to be waiting at the steps. He rowed all day and came home when darkness fell, never speaking, as if looking inward to his dead sons.

Sal's Ma and Da were gentle with their precious child. The mother would hold the girl against herself, putting a hand along the side of her face, calling her *poppet* and *sweet thing*. Within the means of the household, Sal was indulged with every delicacy she could desire: oranges and sweetbreads and soft white bread, and for her birthday a blue shawl of wool as fine as a cobweb. It was another way altogether of being a Ma and a Da, and William—whose birthday was not even remarked—looked on wondering.

Sal flowered under such care. She was no beauty, but had a smile that lit up everything around her. The only shadow in her life was the graveyard where her brothers and sisters were buried. They haunted her, and made her puzzle, the way they had no life while she, deserving it no more than they, had all the love

that should have been shared out. That shadow made her soft in a way new to William. He knew no one else like her, who could not bear to watch the head cut off a hen, or a horse beaten in the street. She had run at a man whipping a little dog one day, shrilling at him, *Leave off! Leave off!* and the man had shrugged her away and might have turned the whip on her, except that William pulled her, gripping her arms tight until the man and the cringing dog had disappeared around the corner, when she turned her face into his chest and cried angry gusts of tears.

It was easy to wish to belong in this house, number 31, Swan Lane. Even the name of the street was sweet. He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. It was not just the generous slab of bread, spread with good tasty dripping: it was the feeling of having a place. Swan Lane and the rooms within it were part of Sal's very being, he could see, in a way no place had ever been part of his.

If he was haunted by the presence of so many brothers and sisters, Sal was haunted by so many absences, and the two of them found a comfortable common ground. They slipped off together, away from the mean smelly streets, striking out between the fields of turnips and cabbages, jumping over the ditches in which water lay all year, down to the patch of waste ground at Rotherhithe that they thought of as their own. There was a spot where bushes curved around in which they made a little hovel to shelter from the wind. Down there the big pale sky, the sheet of dun water, the sounds of waterbirds cawing, was a different place altogether from Tanner's Lane, and William felt himself become a different kind of boy. He loved that place, its emptiness and its clean windy feel. No houses, no alleyways, nobody watching, except now and then the gypsies passing through, but they were soon gone and the place was theirs again.

When it started to rain, softly, evenly, persistently, he and Sal would still linger, a bag over their heads, watching the grey river dimple under the rain, not looking at each other, but staring out side by side, the rain a reason not to disturb the arrangement, a reason to go on sitting wedged up close together, watching the white puffs of their breath mingling.

Something about her face made him want to keep watching it. There was no remarkable feature to it, except perhaps the mouth, a top lip that was full all the way along, not thinning thriftily towards the corners the way most people's did, so there was an impression of generous eagerness, as if at any moment she was about to smile and speak. He loved to watch that mouth, waiting for her to turn to him with a thought in her eyes that she would share with him, so they could laugh together.

With Sal there was no need to be a fighter or guard himself every moment. A boy could be a boy, and do foolish things, such as showing her how far he could spit. They watched the glittering gob fly through the air and land on the grass. When she tried, William watched her mouth as she pursed it up, gathering the spit, and shot it out. She could not spit as far as he could, but he let her think she could, so the pleasure of the moment would continue.

He loved the way she called him Will. His name had been used by so many others that it was stale with handling, but Will was his own alone.

At night, being kicked in the back by James, hearing Pa and Ma coughing in their sleep, Rob snoring and snorting beside him, the rats running through the rotting thatch, feeling the gooseflesh on his legs and his belly growling from having nothing but watery gruel in it all day, he thought of Sal. Those brown eyes, the way they looked at him.

Thinking of her, he was warmed from the inside.

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During his mother's last illness, the year William turned thirteen, the lions on the gateposts at Christ Church haunted her. She re-lived, over and over again, a memory from her childhood of climbing up onto the fence and reaching out to pat them. He could see how her body felt it, again and again, being snatched away as her father whipped her off the railings, and the pain of the cuff around the ear he gave her. *I were just reaching out,* she said, and smiled with her death-pale lips, remembering. *I were as near as near. Then—whoops!—down I go.* Her skinny arm, roped with sinews, the skin papery, stretched out towards the dirty whitewashed wall, her gnarled hand opening, and her face lit by the sweet yearning smile of that long-ago girl.

She died soon after. There was no money for the parson to say a prayer over her—she went into the common hole. By way of remembrance, the next day William took a clot of muck under his coat wrapped in a bit of rag, and went down to the church. The lions stood there still, that haughty look on their faces just the same as when his mother had smiled and reached out for them. He got the muck out from under his coat and hurled it at the nearest one, a thick black gobbet smack in the middle of that smug snout. Wipe the smirk off your face, that did, he thought, and was heartened by the memory on the long walk home. He never saw the lion again without a glow of satisfaction, because all the rain in the world had never got out the mud from one of its nostrils.

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Soon after that, Pa died too, coughing his way into another hole in the damp ground of Bermondsey. That left the family without

a head. Big brother Matty had gone for a sailor-man on the *Osprey*, had been away now for four years. They got word he was in Rio de Janeiro, then a year later that he had been shipwrecked off the Guinea coast and was on the *Salamander*, bound for Newfoundland, and hoped to work his way back to them, but nothing had been heard from him for two years.

James had gone over the river one day when he was fourteen and not come back. Sometimes they heard things: how he had got away with a silver candlestick out of an open window, or climbed down a chimney to relieve a gentleman of his watch while he slept. It was on the shoulders of William that the survival of the others seemed to depend.

For a while he took his father's place at Mr Pott's Manufactory, but the cotton dust, the din and the pounding of the machines was unbearable, and, on the day he saw a little shrimp of a child stamped to bits by the engine when he was sent crawling underneath to clear a jam, he left and did not return. He worked then at White's tan-yard, humping the reeking skins on his back in a stench of blood gone bad, from the carts over to the vats where the stained men sourly eyed him. It was his greatest fear to have to become one of them, plunging up to his waist in the pits, hardly human.

When there was no more work there, he worked with a shovel at the maltings, scooping up the waste malt that the goodness had been soaked out of, so that what was left was a vile-smelling mass of fibrous stuff the colour of a baby's shit.

For a while he was at Nettlefold & Mosers, his job being to sweep up the swarfings from underneath the lathes, shovel them into sacks, and lump them up into the wagons. He was all day up and down the ramp with a hundredweight of swarfings on his back, hanging onto the ears of the bag over his shoulder with all his strength, keeping himself focused so as not to fall. He felt

that his back would break, but at least swarfings did not stink. In bed at night afterwards the muscles of his legs would twitch, still labouring.

The best work, when he could get it, was being a lumper down on the wharves. Down there the wind came in fresh off the river, and the ships tied up three and four deep at the wharves told him there was a world beyond Bermondsey. There was a man down there on Sloane's Dock, a beggar who had once been a sailor-man, with a green parrot that travelled on his shoulder so there was a long streak of white down his back. The thing stepped from claw to claw, nibbled at his ear, screamed when anyone came too close. It was a bird out of a dream. Yet here it was, its colours gaudy on the man's shoulder.

He loved the docks for their excess. So many casks of brandy, sacks of coffee, boxes of tea, hogsheads of sugar, bales of hemp.

With such a quantity, how could a little be missed?

William came across a group of men one day in a corner of the warehouse, up on the third floor, irons in their hands. It was the work of a moment to lever the lid off the nearest hogshead. The wood came up with a splintering noise that seemed to fill the whole place, except one of the men had a coughing fit to cover the noise, and there inside was the dull brown sparkle of the sugar. The sheer mass of it made it seem another substance from the way he had only ever known sugar before, as a precious twist in a bit of paper. Looking at it, the spit rushed into his mouth.

Well, one of the men said, *what a shame, the cask is broke*, and another spoke up with the straight face of a parson: *Waste is an abomination, saith the Lord.* William thrust his hand in with the rest of them, laughing to feel sugar in fistfuls, and crammed his mouth full of it, the sweetness starting up a savage craving so he could not stop. The others meanwhile filled up little bags

they had dangling inside their coats, and were gone while William was still licking the sugar off his palms.

Overhead he could hear the rumble of the barrows over the floor, the squeal of the pulley as loads were drawn up the side of the building and manhandled in, and closer at hand there were footsteps. He glanced around, but the pile of casks and packages hemmed him in.

He had no little bags hanging inside his coat, only his greasy old felt hat, so he whipped it off and began to fill it, shovelling the sugar with both hands, and when the hat was full he tried to get some into his pockets, but the stuff stuck to everything it touched, would not pour, only clung and clogged.

And now there were footsteps just on the other side of the bales of hemp, coming closer. He put the hat under his arm and started to make for the back corner where he could hide it somewhere until the end of the day, but even as he turned, even as he tucked the hat under his arm, he was right up against the striped chest of Mr Crocker the gangsman. *This is a pretty trick, Thornhill*, he shouted. *A feed for the nits, eh?* and struck the hat away from under his arm so the sugar scattered across the floor. *Make a monkey of me, would you, Thornhill?*

But William Thornhill had his story ready. *It was broke open, sir, when I come across it*, he said. *As Jesus is my saviour.* The words felt no lie. He could see it all in his mind's eye: himself, coming around the corner of the hemp parcels, seeing the hogshead there, the splintered top, the sugar lying scattered. *There was a deal of the sugar between the hogsheads and the wall, sir*, he said. *There were a man there bid me take it, it seemed no wrong, sir, as God is my witness.* He could hear his voice rich with conviction.

But Crocker did not listen to the story, did not even bother to hear him out. Crocker's was a plain world in which a boy

found with a hat full of sugar, in the vicinity of a hogshead of sugar broken open, was a thief.

All hands stopped work to watch as Thornhill was whipped a hundred yards along Red Lion Quay.

Crocker pulled Thornhill's shirt off and dragged his britches down to his knees, and shoved him in the back to start him off. The flail landed smack on the skin of his back so he could think of nothing but getting away from it, but the britches hobbled him and Crocker was there beside him for every step that he stumbled along.

The lesson, he learned, was do not get caught. Collarbone showed him how to tap a cask of brandy with a screw, nice and clean so the loss would not be noticed. He gently tapped one of the hoops towards the tapering end of a cask, and used his gimlet to bore two small holes through the wood where the hoop had been. Then he produced a tin pipe, made in two sections to fit neatly into his pocket, and drew off the brandy into a bladder he had hanging inside his coat. Thornhill breathed deep of the hot heady fumes of brandy. Just the smell was enough to warm a person from the inside. Collarbone offered it to him. *Bit of a waxer, Thornie?* Thornhill took a gulp, then Collarbone seized it back and took such a deep drink Thornhill could hear the fluid going down his throat.

When both of the bladders had been filled and hung back on the loops in the armpits of his coat, Collarbone got out a pair of splines he had already made, tapping them into the screw holes. Then he hammered the hoop back down over them. *What the eye don't see, Thornie,* he said with a wink. *Eh? Like it says in the Good Book.*

~

There was one morning every November when he woke to a quilted silence. The room was lit as from below, the split and

sagging timbers of the roof, the shingles black with years, painfully illuminated. Even with his head under the blanket he knew it was there waiting for him: snow. It smoothed over the piles of filth, stopped the stinking tanneries in their tracks, covered the smells under its whiteness. These were good things.

But the winter he turned fourteen, the river froze over, stone-solid for two weeks. Down on the ice there was a frost-fair, with Irish fiddlers and dancing bears, chestnut stalls and every man and woman loose-mouthed with gin. For those without the pennies to pay for the chestnuts and liquor, though, the fair was a time of being pinched hard. With the river froze over, there was no work on the ships, no work at the tan-yards.

In the little room off Mermaid Court, the Thornhills were starving. Mary was stitching away at shrouds as if her life depended on it, her fingers too cold to work properly, but the window that gave her light had no glass, so it let in the wind as well. Lizzie, taken with the quinsy, lay abed groaning and panting, John was out trying to lift potatoes from Tyrrell's stall with young Luke watching out, and there was Rob mooning about smiling, poor loon, when there was nothing to smile about.

It was Mr Middleton, that gloomy, though kindly man, who saved him. One more baby had died, yet another son who would not grow to learn his father's trade and inherit his father's business. Something had shifted in Mr Middleton, some hope finally died. *He is gone very stern, Will,* Sal told Thornhill. *Says there will be no more babies.* After a long silence she went on: *No sons. Only me.* He heard how she tried to keep her voice light, airy, saying words of no consequence, but he could hear the misery in it.

But then Mr Middleton told Thornhill that he would take him on as apprentice. *No thieving, mind,* he warned him. *Any thieving and you are out on your ear.* For the sisters, Mr Middleton

knew a man who needed plain sewing done, which would keep the wolf from the door.

~

On the hardest freeze of the year, a day in January when the pearly clouds themselves seemed made of ice and the air was painful to breathe, Mr Middleton took Thornhill up St-Mary-at-Hill to the Watermen's Hall for his binding. A door led into a draughty passage flagged with worn stone, and here boys waited to be bound over. The bench they had to sit on was hard, and too narrow for a bottom, and the cold from the flagstones froze his feet in their wooden pattens, but he felt that on this day his life might lunge forward out of its rotten past. Mr Middleton sat puffing beside him from the steep climb up the hill and Thornhill felt breathless too, with the possibility of a future better than anything he could have hoped.

If he could get through the seven years of the apprenticeship he would be a freeman of the River Thames. Folk always needed to get from one side of the river to the other, and coal and wheat always had to be got to the docks from the ships that brought them. As long as he kept his health he would never outright starve. He swore to himself that he would be the best apprentice, the strongest, quickest, cleverest. That when freed in seven years he would be the most diligent waterman on the whole of the Thames.

With a trade behind him, he could marry Sal and keep her. By and by Mr Middleton would need a strong son-in-law to help him in his business and, in the natural course of things, inherit it. All the closed doors of his life might spring open from this day forward.

The stairway was out of a dream, curving upwards like a coil of orange peel around a slender rail, towards the radiance pouring down from the skylight. At the top he hung back, had to be

almost pulled by Mr Middleton into the grand room and stand on the Turkey rug under the glitter of the chandelier, feeling the fire blazing away, staring at the dark solemn pictures on the walls.

He stayed in the lee of Mr Middleton, who looked sterner than ever, his shoulders held back like one of the guardsmen at the Palace, as he faced a vast mahogany table behind which sat half a dozen men in robes. One, weighed down with a great bronze chain over his shoulders, said, *Morning Richard, and how is Mrs Middleton?* And Mr Middleton spoke back in a wooden sort of voice, *Middling, Mr Piper, we can't complain.*

Thornhill had never heard anyone address Mr Middleton by his first name, or seen him like this, tight with anxiety and humility. He saw that these men sitting behind their mahogany table were as far above Mr Middleton as Mr Middleton was above him. He had a sudden dizzying understanding of the way men were ranged on top of each other, all the way from the Thornhills at the bottom up to the King, or God, at the top, each man higher than one, lower than another.

The man with the chain asked, *Who is this lad, Richard?* And Mr Middleton answered in the same stiff way, *This is William Thornhill, your lordship, and I am here to vouch for him.* Another of them asked, *Can he handle an oar?* And a little one on the end chimed in, *Has he got his river hands?*

Mr Middleton's voice was happier now, on solid ground as he answered, *Yes, Mr Piper, I had him row from Hay's Wharf to the Sufferance Dock and from Wapping Old Stairs to Fresh Wharf for this past week gone.* The man with the chain cried, *Good man!* in the sort of way he might have spoken to a boy, but Mr Middleton stood quiet, not seeming to think it cheek to be spoken to in such a way, which made Thornhill all the more apprehensive.

The flames were becoming uncomfortably hot on his behind. He had never been near such a roaring in a fireplace, had never

known what it was to be too much heated, but he could feel the glow of it piercing his britches. His bottom was just about on fire, but he could not move forward without seeming impertinently close to the gentlemen in their robes. It all seemed part of the ordeal, something he must endure, along with the glances of these men who could reject him if they fancied.

Mr Piper was saying it again, *Good man*, but he was an old trembly sort of man, and it was clear that he had forgotten who was a good man, or why, patting his own arm as if congratulating himself.

Then a bald man said, straight to Thornhill, *Blisters healed yet, sonny?* And Thornhill did not know whether to say yes or no, or even whether he should speak at all. His palms were still puffed up from all the heavy rowing Mr Middleton had been making him do, but they were no longer bleeding. He held them out without speaking, and there was a general laugh.

The bald man said, *Good lad, they have the look of a waterman's hands already, eh gentlemen? License granted, I would say,* and it was done.

~

Mr Middleton was a good master. For the first time in his life, Thornhill was not always hungry, not always cold. He slept on the flags of the kitchen on a straw mattress, rising and sleeping with the tide.

The tide was a tyrant. It would not wait, and if a lighterman missed the flood to get a load of coal up the river, even strong William Thornhill could not row against it, and would have to wait twelve hours to the next.

His blisters never got a chance to heal. They grew till they burst, then they formed again, burst again, bled again. The oar-handles of the *Hope* were brown with his blood. Mr Middleton

approved of that. *Only way to get your river hands, lad,* he said, and gave him a knob of fat to rub on them.

Seven years seemed a lifetime, but there was a lot to learn. The sets of the tide from Wapping over to Rotherhithe, where the tide swept onto Hay's Roads and the eddies would drag a man down in a second if he fell overboard. How at Chelsea Reach the currents pulled and pushed at the boats because, they said, a set of fiddlers had been drowned there years before, and the river had been dancing in that spot ever since. How an oar, four times as long as a man, could take charge of its owner. How to shift the oar from the rowing crutch in the bow, canting the blade with a turn of the wrist, then running along the narrow gunwale with the oar as far as the quarter and with a quick weigh-down on the handle flinging it against the stern post.

Sometimes he forgot that he'd ever had to learn all the things he knew.

He learned other things, too, about the gentry. How they would make a meal of every farthing of the fare before they got in, arguing with long sentences full of *my good man*, and beating him down if there was a crowd of boats at the steps, and fares in short supply. How in the end he might take a fare from Chelsea Steps to St Katherine-by-the-Tower for a couple of pennies, just so as not to go home with nothing for the day. The way the actors on their way to the theatres at Lambeth dallied at the steps, keeping the boatman waiting there in the water holding the boat steady for as long as they pleased, getting in with never a glance at him, and practising their lines the whole journey as if they were alone in the world, the boatman nothing more than part of the landscape.

He discovered that the gentry had as many tricks as a rat to dun a poor waterman. He took a fellow across the water, who told him to wait, for he would return shortly to be taken back

over, and would pay him then for both trips together. Thornhill waited five hours, unwilling to lose the shilling he was owed, before he realised that the cheating shark must have cozened another waterman for his boathire back again.

Trusting gentry was not something he did twice.

But a waterman also needed to learn their whims and fancies: when they would arrive at Whitehall Stairs, wanting to be taken across to Vauxhall Gardens, and when they would want to come home again. To know when the whiting were running and they would want to go down to the Friend in Hand or the Captain, to sit out in the yard there beside the river and gorge themselves, and whether it was worth a waterman's while to wait there or to row back up to Cornish Stairs where there might be a gentleman wishing to be taken to his country house at Richmond.

As the best prentice on the river, Thornhill had a way with the gentlemen, a loud cheery thing that he did, that rode above the plaintive cries of the others. *This way!* he roared. *Step right down to the Hope, sir, finest vessel on the river!* He would whip off his old hat. His head of thick glossy hair was, he knew, better than any hat: with such vigorous hair, who could doubt the vitality of the rest of the system? He gestured grandly as he'd seen them do at the music hall, *Finest boat in Christendom, sir, not a boat on the river can come to her!* and pointed to the Doggett's badge on his sleeve, that showed he had won the apprentice's race. *Here to Gravesend in four minutes over the two hours, sir, I'll have you to Billingsgate before you can get your snuffbox out.*

The gentry seemed another species, more enigmatic than any Lascar, and it came upon him as a surprise that they might be driven by the same impulses as any other human animal. He was up to his thighs in the water one day, holding the boat up to the ramp, so his fares could get in without wetting their feet. He

hardly glanced at them as they hailed him, being concerned only to get enough fares for the day and go back to Mr Middleton's warm kitchen. His legs were numbed, but the upper part of him was frozen, wet from the recent shower of rain, and whipped by the wind. He could smell his own hair, damp under his cap from the rain, a doggy sort of smell, and the wet old wool of his blue coat, and the red flannel waistcoat that had been a gift from Mr Middleton, whose frame could no longer be accommodated within it now that he had such a strong apprentice to do the work for him. The boat was bumping against his legs, driven in by the sharp wind that was whipping the surface into waves, and he was gripping the gunwale with both hands, busy steadying it, when he heard the plummy tones of the gentleman. *Be cautious, my love,* he said. *Don't expose your leg to the boatman!*

He was a white-faced, thin-chested fellow with a little pink rosebud mouth, his curls falling down his cheeks from under his hat, all care as he took his lady by the hand and around her back. His glance at Thornhill, standing in the mud and the water, his hands frozen in shape gripping the gunwale, was not so much one of scorn as of triumph. *Look at me, fellow, and what I have got!* It was a look that said that the white silk legs, and everything attached to them, were his property, in a way there was nothing in the world that was William Thornhill's property, excepting only his black cap, shrunk in so many rains, that sat on top of his head like a pimple on an elephant's behind.

The gentleman looked as though he would not know what to do with a female leg, and although he touched her, there was no pleasure in the touch: the woman, white stocking and silk slippers and all, was a thing he took pride of ownership in, but there was no love in that *my love.*

And there was the leg, level with the boatman's eyes as its owner got herself over the gunwale, close enough, had he wished,

to reach out and touch its silk surface. The slipper on the end of the leg was a miracle of frivolity, down here at Horsleydown Old Stairs, on the muddy ramp. It seemed impossible that such a substantial person as this woman could be supported on two such tiny slips of poison-green silk. There was no back to the thing, but a little heel that gave her ankle a special fineness, and as she placed the slipper on the bow, the foot was turned outward so the curve of the ankle, the back of the foot, the daintiness of the heel, were all proffered for Thornhill's close inspection.

Up past the leg was her face, and the mouth in the face said that she thanked her husband kindly, *my love*, for his care, but the face said she did not expect much fun from him, only this namby-pamby gallantry.

She did not look at Thornhill, and yet her leg spoke to him, its exposure meant for him. Did she hope to provoke the bloodless husband, by showing leg to a mere boatman? Or was it for her own satisfaction, to remind herself that there were other kinds of men in the world, ones who knew what to do with a leg when they saw one?

In the next moment, the gentleman had pulled the skirt down, interposed himself between them: had somehow got them both into the boat, his bottom at one stage brushing Thornhill's face as he climbed in. Thornhill had his hands full holding the boat, so inept were his passengers, and when he got in himself, feeling his wet legs weak with cold, hardly under his instructions, his passengers were sitting in the stern and the white skirt was well down, the green slippers out of sight.

But the owner of the leg spoke: *Henry dear,* she said, *I am afraid my slipper is all but ruined.* She extended her leg out in front of her, and indeed the poison-green silk gleamed with riverwater, and the little furbelow on the front hung sad and bedraggled. Her skirt was hiked up almost to the knee so that north of

the slipper was the leg again, and beyond that the shadows where a man could guess at all her other charms.

My love, said the man more sharply, *you are exposing your leg!*

And now the woman definitely looked at Thornhill, and by God it was a sultry teasing look, though gone so quick no husband could find anything to blame. The glance that passed between them was the glance of two creatures, male and female of the same species, recognising each others' blood.

The dandy put his arm around his wife's shoulders now, although not to Thornhill's eye in a way that promised anything of an interesting nature when they got to the shrubbery of the Vauxhall Gardens.

In any race for survival with this Henry, Thornhill knew he would have been the victor, lad though he was—shipwrecked, for instance, the dandy would have pined and drooped and died, while he himself would have known how to prosper. And yet, in this particular desert isle of London, this jungle full of dangerous creatures in the year 1793, Thornhill was at the mercy of such mincing pansies, who looked at him as if he were of no more account than a bollard.

Not all the gentry were of that ilk, however, and he had his few regulars who spoke to him like another man the same as themselves: Captain Watson, for instance, who always asked for him at Chelsea Stairs, and with whom he had a steady arrangement of a Wednesday forenoon when he visited his ladyfriend over in Lambeth. He'd hold the boat up on the ramp for the captain, a stout sort of gentleman, to make it easy for him to step aboard, and never mind how hard it was to launch again off the ramp with his portly behind in the stern, because he was a good fellow and did not haggle with a poor man over a few pence.

A waterman's brain was exercised from the moment of waking, when even without rising from the bed he could guess the state of the river, the tides, the wind. These were his books: the colour of the sky at dawn, the cries of the birds over the river, the set of the waves at the turn of tide. From them he could tell where he would best find his fares.

After a time the mud-choked water and the ships it carried, thick on its back like fleas on a dog, became nothing more than a big room of which every corner was known. He came to love that wide pale light around him out on the river, the falling away of insignificant things in the face of the great radiance of the sky. He would rest on the oars at Hungerford Reach, where the tide could be relied on to sweep him around, and stare along the water at the way the light wrapped itself around every object.

~

Of a Sunday, Mr Middleton did not always require him to work, and he and Sal found time to be together. He loved to be with her, watching the thoughts dancing beneath the skin, and would not have tried to explain it to anyone else. He had the feeling he could say anything to her, any confession, any shameful truth. She would listen, and answer with some cheerful kindness.

That first winter she took it into her head to teach him his letters, as her mother had taught her. To please her he agreed, but he was not sure about it. Marks on paper seemed to sap the power of the mind. He had seen Sal write things down in order to remember them: a list for going to the draper or the grocer, where he himself would have simply carried such a thing in his head. Numbers, too. He had seen many a gentleman need to get out a pencil and scrap of paper from his pocket to work out the fare to Richmond and back, two passengers one way, one the

other, plus a packet one way and the Sunday surcharge. He, ignorant waterman, had meanwhile done the sum in his head, added the ten per cent for goodwill and the sixpence for the Benevolent Fund, before the gentleman had even found a flat place to rest the paper.

They did it at the table, sitting squashed together on the same side, with a candle in its holder casting a sputtering light. He could smell the fruity femaleness of her, a thing like the memory of strawberries left in the wood of the punnet, that sweet flowery fragrance. She leaned in to him and said, *No ink to start with. Just hold it—see?—like this*, and held up her own small hand, showing.

When he tried, it was maddening, pernickety, unnatural. The way his hand worked with an oar made sense. His fist closed around it and his thumb kept it all in place. This holding of a feather was a contortionist's trick, pincering in with fingers and thumb, twisting the whole hand sideways, the quill rolling in his grip. Only his desire to please her made him persist.

When they added ink to the nib and he scraped the feather down the paper, the nib snagged and spattered. Black droplets and smears were bold on the modest white surface. Sal laughed and he nearly tipped the whole table over there and then and hurled out of the room, down to the river where he was master of himself. He could row to Richmond and back against the tide. He had won the Doggett's Coat and Badge, rowing against a foul wind, straining to keep a boat's length ahead of Lewis Blackwood the whole way. He had not let his mind go anywhere but into his arms and his hands. Pulling across the line ten yards ahead of Blackwood, he had felt that any feat of strength or endurance would be within his grasp.

Just not this squibby business squeezed in tight against a table.

Seeing his face, Sal seemed to understand that this was not a laughing business. She dried the ink off the table, the paper, the nib, his fingers, and dotted out a T on the page. *Just go over them dots, Will,* she said. *We will leave the W for now.* He approached the nib gingerly to the line of dots, controlling the runaway tip with all his power. The first time he overshot: a wavering horizontal line cut through the dots and beyond. He tried the second line, watching the trail of ink. A wobble in the middle, but there it was: two lines, a letter T.

He became aware that his tongue was far out of his mouth, helping the tip of the quill along. He pulled it back, licked his lips, laid down the pen, heard his voice rough as he said, *Enough for tonight.* Sal looked at the page with the marks. *Look, Will,* she said. *How good you are doing it now, against them you did at the start!*

He rubbed at his hand where it was cramped. To his eye the marks he had made were shameful, nothing more than foolish scratches. He wished to crush the page to pulp. But she was nudging him with that elbow of hers, that arm that liked to alight along his, and saying, *I promise you*—but lightly, it was a promise hardly necessary to make—*I promise you that by next Sunday you will write that W, fair as ever was.*

Winter wore away, and there it was at last, his whole name: *William Thornhill,* slow and steady. As long as no one was watching, no one would know how long it took, and how many times the tongue had to be drawn back in.

William Thornhill.

He was still only sixteen, and no one in his family had ever gone so far.

~

Love came upon him so gradually that it was not even given the name. As the years of his apprenticeship wore away he knew only

that, out on the river where the wind cut keen through his old coat, he was warmed by the thought of her, sitting with her mother, threading the needle for her and stitching away at shirts or handkerchiefs. He marvelled at her efficient fingers, doing the edges of the white squares with tiny deft movements too quick to be seen. One moment there was the ravelling edge, the next it was rolled under, turned in, magicked into a tidy scroll of fabric in the time it took her mother to squint at a needle.

He did not know what it was that melted something in him, so he felt his face grow smooth with thinking of her, could even drift away into a dream of her that stayed with him all day, until he trudged up the steps at night hearing the water squelch in his shoes. Lying on his straw in the kitchen, waiting for sleep, the knowledge that she was above him in her room under the roof made something thicken in his throat. Sometimes, coming across her by surprise, he found he could not quite breathe for a moment, or find the words to answer her greeting. *Why Will!* she would always exclaim, quite as if it were a surprise to her that her father's big-shouldered apprentice was filling the doorway, stooping to save his head from the low beam. She was a one for touching, would take hold of him when she spoke, and he would feel it there long afterwards: her little hand on his arm, speaking to him through the stiff fabric of his coat.

Rotherhithe was being grown over now with tanneries and knackeries and rows of tenements where there had once been those marshy spots where two children could find a place of their own. Even the gypsies had been chased away. But they found that the yard of Christ Church at the Borough, where it backed onto the river, was a hospitable place in fine weather. Among the tombs two people could find a little privacy.

Dawdling in the pleasure of being together, whispering,

crouching behind one of the stone boxes, Sal read out the writing along the side, one slow word at a time. His job was to keep track of the words she had already read, so she could concentrate on the one at hand, because it was too hard to read and to remember all at once.

Sal's voice was especially sweet getting her tongue around the knots of words: *Susannah Wood Wife of Mr James Wood Mathematical Instrument Maker*, she said. *She was tapped nine times and had 161 gallons of water taken from her without ever lamenting her case or fearing the operation.* Thornhill blurted out, *Like a bladder of sack, sounds like*, and saw her trying not to laugh. *Oh Will*, she said, *think of the the poor soul, and us finding it a joke!* She took his hand so he felt how soft and small it was within the stiff claw of his own. Smiled, so he saw her dimple: just the one, her face itself winking at him.

He stared out at the river, where the tide was beginning to swirl the water upstream, trying to find the words to say what pressed up out of his heart. *There is something*, he started, and felt a fool, not being able to go on. He started again, heard himself loud and definite, *Soon's they make me a freeman, first thing I'll do is marry you*, then he thought she might laugh, a prentice from Tanner's Lane saying such a thing, but she did not.

Yes, Will, she said. *And I'll wait for you.* Her eyes searched his face, serious for once. He could see her looking separately at his eyes, his mouth, back to his eyes again, reading behind the words the truth that was written on his heart. He looked into her eyes, close enough to see the tiny copy of himself there.

He longed for the seven years to run their course. He had only to let time pass, and another life would be waiting for him.

~

They wed the very day of his freedom, just before he turned twenty-two. Mr Middleton let him have his second-best wherry by way of a wedding gift, and they took a room not far from Mermaid Row, where husband and wife could make free with each other in a way the place behind the tomb of Susannah Wood had never allowed.

It turned out that Sal was a saucy one in bed. That first night, she came up close against him. She was afraid, she said, of the dark. Took his arm, needing, she said, something by way of support. He felt the warmth of her, her noisy breath tickling his ear. They had to keep things quiet, for the walls were paper-thin. There was a man in the next room whose every cough was as clear as if he were in the bed with them.

What happened next was nothing loud or forceful. It hardly even seemed as decided as an action. It felt merely an unthought process of nature, a seed bursting out of the dirt or a flower unfurling from the bud.

The night became the best part of every day. Now they had a bed to themselves, she loved to curl around him, a candle guttering on the stool. Her breasts lolled out in a way that shocked and aroused him. She would peel a tangerine and feed him the segments slippery from her own warm mouth, and when they had done all the things with tangerines and mouths that could be done, and the candle had snuffed itself out in a pool of tallow, they lay together and told each other stories.

Sal liked to tell about Cobham Hall, where her mother had been in service before marrying Mr Middleton, and where she had gone with her mother for a month once when she was a girl. A few things stayed in her memory: the carriageway up to the entrance, a green tunnel of poplars. Starched damask on the tables, stiff as hide, even in the servants' quarters. And the proper ways of doing things. There had been a grapevine there, she said,

and once or twice the treat of grapes in the servants' dining hall. The housekeeper had scolded her for taking a single grape from a bunch. *Eat what you like, the old thing told me*, she said. *But never spoil the bunch, get the grape-scissors and cut a sprig.* She turned to Thornhill and whispered, *Fancy, Will, scissors just for nothing but grapes!* The only grapes Thornhill had ever known were the few he had picked up from the ground, broken and muddy, when the market was finished.

Thornhill preferred the stories they told each other about their futures. They would have children, naturally, and her strong husband, that Freeman of the River Thames, would make a good thing of life as a waterman, and later on he would go into the business with her father.

Thornhill could hardly believe that life had given him this corner to turn. Only the calluses on his palms and the ache in his shoulders reassured him that it was real. This was no fairy-tale, but the reward for a man's labour. He lay in the dark, listening to Sal wonder aloud whether she would like a boy first or a girl, and rolled his thumb over the calluses as if they were so many sovereigns.

Seven years of ferrying the gentry from one side of the river to the other had sickened Thornhill for that work. Once he was a freeman he chose to work on the lighters, rowing loads of coal and timber. Not everyone had the strength to manage a fully laden boat in the treacherous eddies of the Thames, but he did. He had never been afraid of hard work, and it was cleaner than truckling to gentry for a few extra pence.

It meant also that he could employ his brother to give him a hand. Rob was not up to much in the brains department, but he was the strongest man on the river, and biddable. Rob's calves would bulge, his arms strain and the placket at the back of his britches would open below the button, threatening to burst, as

he heaved up a sack of coal. But he could work all day for no more than what would keep body and soul together.

Together, the Thornhills made a good pair.

~

A year after they were wed, the child was born, a healthy boy. He lay crowing, crying, exclaiming, making prodigious amounts of fawn-coloured shit and great arcs of piss when unswaddled. They had him christened William, but he was always Willie. Another William Thornhill in the world was not too much, not when it was his own son.

The baby lay gesturing at Thornhill in a secret code, blinking slowly at the figure bending over him, pointing to his father's nose with a tiny finger as if to pronounce on it. The powerful little red mouth was never still, the lips pursing, puckering, spreading, pouting, the fists jerking at air, expressions flickering across his face as constantly as waves on the surface of the ocean.

He loved to pick his son up and feel the weight of him against his chest, his small arms around his neck, the innocent smell of his hair. Loved to watch Sal, sitting by the window smiling to herself as she stitched another tiny smock, or bent over the boy crooning. He heard her humming as she went about her tasks. She could not keep a tune, but for Thornhill that wavering melody became the sound of his new life. He went about smiling at nothing.

~

In the year of the boy's second birthday, winter came early and sharp. The winds and the clouds were such as Thornhill had never seen before. They were always enemies of the boatmen, and this year the hardness of the wind and the quality of the cold was all they talked about, up and down the river. It was going to be a bad winter.

When clouds scudded overhead and dropped a shower of rain, his coat, that could turn the water if it did not come down too heavy, was soaked through and the wind off the river sliced through the worn-out wool. It scoured his cheeks and made his whole face red, swollen, stone-like. He could bear it as well as the next man. He did not complain. It was as pointless to complain about the weather as it was to complain that he had been born in Tanner's Court in Bermondsey in a dank stuffy room rather than in St James Square with a silver spoon waiting to have his name engraved on it.

It was almost a relief when, in the small days of January, the pool above London Bridge grew a pearly skin like the cloud on old eyes. One morning it was no longer river but an expanse of rough grey ice, the boats stuck in it as fast as bones in fat. Then it was a matter of the three of them getting into the bed together to keep warm, stretch out the money they had put by for such a day, and wait for the thaw.

It was in that month of the freeze, with no money coming into any household by the river, that Thornhill's world cracked and broke.

First his sister Lizzie came down with the quinsy she had had as a girl, lying flushed and panting on the bed, crying with the pain in her throat. The physick cost a shilling a bottle, only a small bottle too, but it seemed to do little good, no matter how many shillings were spent on it.

Then Mrs Middleton slipped on a patch of ice outside the front door and fell hard against the step. Some part of her was broken, it seemed, and did not want to mend. She lay rigid and waxy-faced with the pain, her mouth stiff, her lips bloodless, refusing food. The surgeon was called several times, at three guineas a visit, but he was said to be the best man for that sort of thing.

Mr Middleton hovered by her bed, sweating in the room, kept as hot as an oven because that brought some relief to the poor woman. The new apprentice, who might have hoped for a rest while the river was frozen, was kept busy lugging coal up the stairs.

As the weeks passed, Mr Middleton grew gaunt, his eyes set in dark rings. A little nagging cough began to keep him company. When Thornhill and Sal went to visit they would hear the cough on their way up the stairs, and know him to be sitting by his wife's pillow, stroking her hair or patting her brow with a camphor cloth.

The only time his face cleared was when he thought of some delicacy that might tempt her to eat. Then he could not be still, setting off straight away and walking for miles to get brandied cherries in a jar, or figs in honey.

The Thornhills met him at the door one day, a day cold enough to crack the very cobblestones. He was setting off to walk to the apothecary at Spitalfields to get a concoction of oranges and cinnamon that someone had suggested. Sal tried to dissuade him, and Thornhill turned him around to point him back into the house, offering to go in his place. But there was a surprising depth of obstinacy in Mr Middleton, and he pushed his son-in-law's hand away. Sal and Thornhill exchanged a look in which they shared the thought that he probably could not bear to spend another afternoon dabbing at his wife's waxen face with the camphor cloth in her stifling room. To be striding along the frozen streets would give him a sense of doing something useful, at least until he returned with the oranges and saw his wife barely taste them before refusing more.

So they let him go. Thornhill watched him swing off down the lane, walking as fast as the hard frost would allow, his breath puffing out ahead of him. Nearly ran after him, he looked such

a small figure against the snow heaped on the pavement, but did not.

It was dark when he came home, silent and white in the face. The mixture was safe in his pocket and he did not even take his coat off before going upstairs to try his wife with a mouthful of it. She smiled her strained smile, lifted her head to take a taste off the spoon, then lay back exhausted and would take no more.

Sal got him down to the kitchen, got him out of his coat and muffler at last. He sat passively under her hands, staring into the fire. When she knelt to take off his boots she exclaimed—they were wet through, his feet mottled with the chill of them. He had fallen in a drift of snow, he said, and while he had waited for the apothecary, the snow in them had melted, and stayed melted all the way home.

He started to sneeze after supper and next day woke up flushed and sweating, shivering under four blankets, tossing his head on the pillow. The surgeon came again, for the husband this time. He cupped him and gave him something thick and brown in a small square bottle that made him drift into a kind of sleep from which he called out hoarsely and struggled to escape the bedclothes. In spite of the medicine, the flame of the fever consumed him. His cheeks were scarlet, the skin dry and hot to the touch, his tongue furred and grey, his eyes sunk back into their sockets.

Within a week he was dead.

When they told Mrs Middleton she cried out once, a terrible hoarse sound. Then she turned her face to the wall and did not speak again. Sal sat with her all day and slept at the foot of her bed. The surgeon was called again and again, until the table by the bed bristled with bottles of potions and pills. But Mrs Middleton's slide towards death would not be stopped by anything the surgeon could do. With each day that passed she

shrank further into the bedclothes, her eyes closed as if she could not bear to see the world any longer, slipping away behind her skin.

At last a grey dawn came when she was stiff under the blanket. They laid her in her box at Gilling's, beside Mr Middleton's, waiting for the ground to thaw so they could bury them.

It was only after the ice on the river broke up, the hole dug and the prayers said over the two coffins as they swayed down on the undertaker's ropes, that the Thornhills realised everything was gone.

Mr Middleton had done all that any man could do. He had lived thriftily and put cash aside. He had put money into well-made boats and kept them in repair, had made sure his apprentice was honest and worked hard. His business had been good, his life cautiously prosperous.

But as soon as he was gone it fell into pieces with amazing speed. In that frozen month his savings were devoured. The surgeon had come every day, and hardly a visit passed when he did not prescribe some new cure that cost a pound the bottle. The uneaten jars of brandied cherries and figs in honey sat on the pantry shelf. Even though there was no work for him to do, the apprentice had still to be fed, and with the river frozen, all that coal he had carried up the stairs had cost five pounds the sack.

Worst of all, the landlord's man had still come by for the rent every Monday. Whether the river was frozen or not, whether a man could work or not, did not matter to the landlord's man.

To Thornhill, the house on Swan Lane had always seemed a fortress against want. Surely no harm could come to a man who owned such a thing as a piece of ground with a dwelling on it. If a man had a roof over his head he could batten down, no matter how hard times were, and wait for them to get better.

He had taken a long time to understand that the house had

not been owned, only leased. When he did, it was as if some vital part of himself had dropped away, leaving a void. The house on Swan Lane, always so warm, so safe, was now as cheerless as any of the tenements of his childhood.

The rent was in arrears, and the furniture had to be sold to pay it. Sal and Thornhill watched even the bed Mrs Middleton had died in, which seemed scarcely cold, being carted off. When that was not enough, the bailiffs came after the wherries, first the *Hope* that the apprentice worked, so he had to go and find another master to serve out his time, and then the second-best one too, that Thornhill could not prove was a wedding gift. The river had barely melted, Thornhill had done just a week's work, when he watched them take his wherry in tow. His livelihood disappeared away under Blackfriars Bridge. From now on he would be a journeyman, rowing other men's boats and never knowing when he would be told there was no work for him.

He sat for a long time on the pier at Bull Wharf watching the red sails of the sailor-men bellying out as they tacked from reach to reach. The tide was pushing in from the sea. Across the surface of the river, pocked, pitted, rough, ran another kind of roughness, a buckle in the water crossing from one bank to the other. Behind it pushed water of a different character, barred and furrowed: the sea. He watched the tide, and thought of how the river would go on doing this dance of advance and fall back, long after William Thornhill and the griefs he carried in his heart were dead and forgotten.

What point could there be to hoping, when everything could be broken so easily?

~

Sal pushed back against it all. She sat with her father during his illness, rubbing at his feet which in spite of the fever were as cold

as a corpse. When he died her mouth went grim, as if there was someone she wanted to punish. When her mother went, she walked to Spitalfields and back—as her father had done—for some fine red velvet her mother had always admired, and stood over the man from Gilling's until the coffin was lined with it just the right way. Her mother's face was chalky against the velvet, but it gave Sal some satisfaction, and until her parents were in the ground she kept going, bustling from room to room moving objects into cupboards and out again, taking every cup down in the kitchen and washing it, every saucer and every spoon, getting down on her knees with a pail to scrub the floors. It was as if she thought she could work her parents back to life.

When the first coffin—her father's—hit the bottom of the hole with a hollow knocking sound, like a knuckle on a door, she broke down, as Thornhill had known she must. Her cries were not so much grief as a kind of indignation at this thing that was happening. She pushed the side of her hand into her mouth, as she had in the throes of childbirth, and Thornhill was once more afraid she would split the skin.

But the tears finished something and she accepted the coming of the bailiff's men better than he did. As her father's armchair was hoisted onto the cart, Thornhill had to look away, but she did not. She watched until it turned the corner and was gone. *Well,* she said, and looked at Thornhill. *Thank the Lord he ain't here to see, Will, he paid seven pound for that chair off a man in Cheapside, I remember the day he brung it home.*

It was Sal who saw, before Thornhill, that they would have to give up the attic as extravagant. She went out in the lanes and alleys, the baby on her hip, inquiring for a cheaper place. When that, too, became too dear for them, she went out again until she found another, even cheaper. When they were on the bottom rung of the ladder of accommodation, with only the street itself

below them, she still kept looking for something cheaper but better, moving their few things while Thornhill was out on the river.

There was the basement room in Sparrick's Row, where the water came in from the yard and had to be kept out with a dam of rags; and a similar one around the corner in Cash's Grounds; from there across the river hard by St Mary Somerset, where the bells drove them mad; back across the river to Snows Fields, but they were robbed there so they went to Brunswick Lane near the maltings, in Butler's Buildings, where they came to rest. Third floor back, one broken window and a cupboard missing its door. Every Monday Sal counted out four shillings for him to take downstairs to Mr Butler, standing at the front door drumming on the floor with his stick to tell his tenants it was time to pay. It was robbery at that price, and the stench from the maltings nearly choked them. But it was dry, and the cesspit in the yard freshly emptied, and the chimney smoked only a little. *We will get used to the stink, Will,* she said.

He saw that he had married a terrier, and could only admire her, being himself in a trance of despair in which he blindly worked but could not find the will to care about a leaking roof or a stopped chimney.

We got each other, she reminded him on the pile of rags that was their bed in Butler's Buildings. He felt her shaking against him and thought she was crying, as she did sometimes, stormily, passionately, out of nowhere. But she was laughing. *Each other and all them fleas, that is,* she said. *We won't never be lonely here,* she went on. *Will we?* And was pushing up against him in the way she knew he could not resist, and finally calling out in triumph.

Butler's Buildings was what he had known through his childhood. Having once hoped for something better, and been within

reach of it, he could not face going back to it. Left to himself, he would have let himself slip under the surface of life like a man fallen into water that was too cold to fight.

She kept him going, even when hunger began to pinch. He had not forgotten how wearisome it was when the emptiness was always there. He was tired at the thought of it, would have turned his face to the wall, the way Mrs Middleton had, and given up. Had never thought that a Freeman of the River Thames could go hungrier than a prentice, could be as starving as ever he had been in Tanner's Lane. He tried to put a brave face on it, but he knew that hunger could last a lifetime.

Sal, perhaps from innocence, treated want as a temporary accident, something two people as quick as themselves could overcome. She took a couple of eggs off a stall one day, slipping them into the baby's shawl while everyone was watching a couple of dogs fighting. She made a good story of it to Thornhill that night: *I'd a got three, Will, only the bleeding dogs kissed and made up too soon.* She laughed, remembering, and he laughed with her, both of them warmed with the egg in their stomachs. *Started sniffing each other's arses, that weren't no good to me!*

It was her first theft and she was as proud of it as a child.

He told her what a clever thief she was, but his heart was heavy. His life was going backwards.

From the tiny window of their room they could see the fowls in Ingram's yard underneath them all day, scratching, bustling, flying at the crusts and peelings flung out the kitchen door by Ingram's cook. The Thornhills would have fought the fowls for those crusts, except that Mr Ingram's servant was always in the yard, and watched the Thornhills sourly, knowing what was in their minds.

It was Sal's idea. It was a matter of being Johnny-on-the-spot, she said, and keeping their wits about them. They waited

until they saw the servant staggering towards the privy one afternoon, undone by liquor. Thornhill dashed down and seized the nearest hen and got it under his coat and up to their room again. They had it out and were just about to wring its neck when there were feet on the stairs, and shouts of *Thief!* But quick-witted Sal thrust the thing out the window, where it landed on the roof of the little outhouse below and stalked about there clucking while they tried to shoo it off, back down into the yard. The stupid thing stood there cackling, and they could hear the servant yelling out, *I seen a fowl come out the window!*

When Mr Ingram came in, red-faced, in search of his hen, there was nothing there, only a feather on the floor. When he looked out the window he saw the hen on the roof below. But Thornhill claimed he had just woke up, was about to go down to the port to begin work, and Sal swore blind, *He has not left the room in the last six hours, and the damned fowl must have got up on the roof itself, we know nothing of it whatsoever, as God is our witness.*

When Ingram had gone, grumbling, the Thornhills laughed together. For having to be suppressed, their laughing went on longer than it might otherwise, because what was really so funny? Then there was a long silence in the room. Sal picked up a fold of her old skirt, the only one she had now, stained and patched and ragged round the hem, and said, *We are just about so our stomachs are flapping on our backbones, Will,* and all the fun had gone out of her voice. *That is the fact of it.*

He worked, day after day, for whoever would employ a journeyman with no boat of his own. He carried the gentry to and fro and came to hate them warm in their furs, their hands deep in their pockets, their eyes almost hidden by their caps, feet snug in big warm boots, while his bare ones were freshly wet a hundred

times a day and froze in between times while he waited for their pleasure.

When he could, he worked on the lighters owned by luckier men, and had only the wind and the tide to hate. With a load of coals or timber he pulled away at the oars, reduced to an animal, head down and mind blank. He felt like a man who had lost an arm, still waving the stump around. There was a great emptiness in him, which was the space where hope had been.

~

There were such things as honest watermen. The dour God-botherer James Mann at St-Katherine-by-the-Tower was one. He was steady, had his regulars who insisted on him, and did not waste money on a pipe of baccy or a mess of fried eel while he waited for fares, but cracked an abstemious walnut and made it last.

But a waterman with a wife and child could not live on what he could earn. Most watermen were thieves, although some went about it in a more businesslike way than others. Thomas Blackwood had a lighter, the *River Queen*, number 487, which looked the same as any other lighter until he raised the false bottom to reveal the compartment in which quantities of lifted objects could be spirited away.

In the general way of things only foolish men were caught—those too bold, working in daylight, or without having greased up the right men. But a man could be unlucky too. Collarbone was one of life's unlucky ones: to be born with that bright port-wine stain over half his face was already a cruel fate. But perhaps in his case some other man made a pound or two by informing. There was no shortage of men who would do that.

Collarbone had been a watchman on Smith's lighter at Customs House Quay, with thirty-three casks of best Spanish

brandy in the hold. He went on his watch at six, and at midnight another man came to relieve him, but as Collarbone stepped onto the dock the officer of the watch stopped him and rubbed him down and discovered the bladders in his coat pocket. Collarbone wrenched away, leaving his coat in the officer's hands, and pelted up St Dunstan's Hill, but another officer was waiting for him there and he was caught. Being of a fine quality, the brandy was worth more than forty shillings, so there was no argument but that Collarbone must hang.

The day before, Thornhill went to see him in Newgate. They sat together at the long table which was one of the luxuries of those condemned to die, and Collarbone told him the whole story. *Then I pull out the gimblet and the tube and I says, I suppose this is what you is looking for?* And grinned at the memory, as if it was nothing but a story.

But Thornhill could imagine it, was familiar with the choking feeling of thievery and knew it to be no joke. No matter how often he did it, there was that feeling of the breath already stopped in his throat by the fear of it, even before they got him and hanged him.

Collarbone had laughed, but now he went a greasy pale. Hid his face in his hands. When he looked at Thornhill again his eyes were wide, not seeing the man in front of him. It was as if he was trying to stare his way right out of this room, all the way back to that day two months before, when he had got up and eaten a slice of bread for breakfast, standing by the window in his small clothes, and had not yet laid a hand to the cask of Spanish brandy that had brought him to this place.

Being turned off was a nasty death but if you were lucky it was over in a trice. The executioner, having weighed you the night before and done certain sums, calculated the distance you had to drop to break your neck clean. The next morning at eight

o'clock, the trapdoor opened beneath the man with the rope around his neck and he fell a short distance as if jumping into the river off Lambeth Pier. If Mr Executioner had totted up the numbers right, he jerked up short, his head snapped sideways by the knot, his neck broken.

But such quick death was no spectacle. The crowd grew restive, threw peelings and bones at the body twirling on the end of the rope like a sack of coffee being hoisted up the side of Lamb's warehouse.

There, in the condemned cell, Collarbone begged Thornhill to buy him a quick death, and for old time's sake Thornhill did, doing the rounds of Warner and Blackwood and the rest, and putting half a crown in himself. He got the coins through the grille, into the outstretched hand attached to Mr Executioner's invisible body. It was all a man could do for a friend.

Sal had pawned the stool and their second blanket to provide the half-crown but would not go to witness the hanging. It seemed right, somehow, to keep Collarbone company on his last journey, so next morning Thornhill stood with Rob in Newgate Yard in the grey light of the dawn and watched his friend take the few awkward steps up to the scaffold. Mr Executioner stepped away and Collarbone fell.

But it seemed that Mr Executioner had done his sums wrong after all, or the coins slipped through the grille were not enough. The fall did not break Collarbone's neck, only tightened the thick rope around his windpipe. Thornhill could hear the gargling as he tried to breathe, saw how his feet kicked and kicked at the air, his shoulders writhed, his head in the canvas hood tossed desperately, twitching like a fish on a hook.

The crowd approved of Collarbone's death.

It was Rob's first hanging. He stared with his mouth open and when it was finished, poor Collarbone finally cut down, he

turned and spewed onto a little dog pawing at its mistress's skirt, and the woman screeched as raw as a Billingsgate fishwife in spite of all her fine silks.

Clean as a whistle, pet, he told Sal. *Never felt a blessed thing.* She looked away quickly and did not meet his eye again, only went on darning the heel of her stocking, darning the darn over the darn. She sighed and turned the thing around in her hand so she could come at it with the needle from another angle, and he did not know whether she believed him or not.

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Mr Lucas was a fat man with a striped waistcoat that made the most of his belly. He was the owner of several lighters and had a foreman, Yates, to employ such lightermen as he pleased. Yates was a fair man and spread the work around.

The word was, Lucas had his eye on being Lord Mayor of London. He was a pious sort of fellow, at least on a Sunday, because that was what got a man to be Lord Mayor of London, and he took a dim view of roguery on his boats. Other masters might turn a blind eye, letting the poor lightermen have a few perquisites, but not Matthias Prime Lucas. A man whose heart was set on being Lord Mayor of London needed every penny for the buying of grand dinners and the supplying of gifts, and it did not leave much for being generous to his workers.

John Whitehead had been foolish enough to be caught at Brown's Quay moving seventy pounds of hemp out of a lighter belonging to Mr Lucas. Whitehead had gone on his knees, it was said, and begged mercy of Mr Lucas, but Mr Lucas had spoken of making an example. Whitehead had swung.

In the beginning Thornhill was cautious, now and then helping himself to a bladder full of Portuguese sack, or a box of tea. He had one or two near misses, with the officers swooping down out

of nowhere. By the time he had been three years in Lucas's employ, he had learned the value of a moonless night and the importance of having a skiff close at hand to make away in. Whitehead had been caught because he had not slipped the marine police enough. Thornhill kept them well oiled with bottles of French brandy. The only thing a man could not guard against was the gabbers, those men who for five or ten pounds would inform.

Thornhill had his web of useful men. One of these was Nugent at Messrs Buller & Co, Shipowners, a clerk who appreciated a few shillings extra. It was Nugent who let him know about the Brazil wood, worth nigh on ten pounds the piece, arrived on the *Rose Mary.*

So when Yates the foreman told him to go down to Horselydown, to the *Rose Mary* of Mr Buller's line, and bring a load of timber up the river to Three Cranes Wharf, he was ready. He made sure the moon would not rise that night until near dawn, and told Rob to stand ready to join him down at the *Rose Mary.*

The evening before, he took the empty lighter down with the tide to Horselydown, arriving there at midnight. He made the lighter fast to the side of the *Rose Mary* and lay down in it for a few hours' sleep before daylight, when he would load the timber and wait for the tide to take him up to Three Cranes Wharf.

So far, he was as innocent as the driven snow.

He enjoyed these nights on the river, the comforting sound of the water against the hull. The *Rose Mary* beside him was nothing more than another texture of blackness against the blackness of the sky, where the stars were blotted out by cloud.

A man with a clear conscience did not need to fear the dark.

He thought of Sal, tucked up in the bed with the child. She had come to him, that very morning, and told him that there was another on the way: another mouth to find food for. She

had laughed at the way his eyes went straight to her belly. *It ain't showing yet, Will!* But had taken his hand and laid it on her pinny, over the place where his seed had planted itself, and smiled into his face.

She never asked too closely about where their money came from, was only pleased to have a loaf in the cupboard and clean milk for the child. She knew as well as he did that a lighterman who was too scrupulous was likely to starve. But he felt in her a turning-away from the truth of that, and he never shared with her those nights on the river when he fingered something or other that was not his own.

When day came there was no sign of Rob and he could not wait for him, so he had to hire a man called Barnes from the wharf, with hardly enough wit to know how to pick up the other end of a beam and lower it into the lighter. As he chivvied him, he grew angry with Rob, and with himself for thinking such a halfwit could remember his own name, let alone to meet him at the promised hour.

Mr Lucas came on board late in the morning to point and shout. By the time he got there, the bulk of the wood was already loaded onto the lighter, but Thornhill had not seen any Brazil timber, only deal, and was starting to think Nugent had been misinformed. He shouted up to Lucas, *We are just about full up, Mr Lucas, I take it there ain't no more to be got?* Lucas gave him a look, and held up his marking-hammer with a funny kind of smile. *Just a little more in the cabin,* he called down. *Six pieces of Brazil that I will put my mark on.*

Thornhill could feel an airiness in his body. It was the feeling he always had, no matter how many times he took the step outside of the law: a lightheaded mix of fear and need. But he made his face a rock so it showed nothing.

Lucas stood watching from above while Thornhill and Barnes

loaded the Brazil timber, four long planks and two shorter pieces. The lighter was already so full there was nowhere to put the Brazil other than on top of the rest. Even in its rough-dressed state, he could see how fine a timber it was, a rich red colour with a close-figured grain. As they put the shorter pieces in, Thornhill saw the marks Lucas had made on each piece: a little square hammered deep into each end.

For a moment he thought better of his plan. It was hardly an idea, just a trickle of cold water down the back of his collar. *He knows, do not do this.* His heart beat loose enough to shake his chest. He knew what this feeling was called: it was fear. But fear was not enough to stop anyone lifting objects from their owners. It was just part of a lighterman's life, like his wet feet. The problem was simple: fear did not pay the rent.

Lucas stood on the deck of the *Rose Mary* with his big hands on his big hips, watching each piece of timber onto the lighter. *I do not like that timber being uppermost, Thornhill,* he called down. *It is worth fifty pounds.* Thornhill stood in the lighter looking up at him. *Would you have us unload,* he said, *and lie it in the hold under the rest?* Lucas looked at him for a moment. *No,* he said. *But make sure no harm comes to it, man.* Thornhill squinted up into the brightness, where Lucas looked down at him. *Very good, Mr Lucas,* he called obligingly. *You can count on me.*

By three o'clock in the afternoon the lighter was loaded, but the tide was running out strongly so it was a matter of waiting. Thornhill had some food and sat on the load watching darkness fall. Around eleven o'clock he heard the change in the river's voice that meant slack water had arrived, the tide about to turn. He let go the lighter from the side of the ship and felt the flood tide carrying it upstream. He had only to guide with an oar.

He shot through the middle pier of London Bridge and

tended over towards the Middlesex bank. He could see nothing except a faint texture that showed him where the river was. By his speed under the bridge he judged the moment when he would come to Three Cranes Wharf, and swung the vessel around to where the shore must be, working her up into the tide until he was alongside the dock. The tide was running against the wooden dockside, but it was still too low to unload.

He could hear his skiff jerking on its painter at the end of the wharf where he had tied it up the day before. It was waiting to receive the Brazil wood. But until he set his hand to the timber, he was still an innocent man.

The watchman was in his little outhouse at the end of the wharf. Thornhill could see the tiny gleam of yellow light from the doorway. He would be tucked up tight in there with a drop of something to keep him warm.

Thornhill called softly as the lighter came alongside the wharf, *Rob, Rob are you there?* No one answered. He decided he must do it all himself, and was getting ready to leave the oars and spring forward to cast a line around the bollard, when there was Rob's voice in the darkness. *Will, here I am,* he whispered hoarsely. *Give us a cast on shore, man, for God's sake,* Thornhill called. He hurled the line up and by a miracle Rob got hold of it and fastened it, so the lighter rode the current quietly.

Thornhill climbed onto the wharf. *Damn your eyes, Rob,* he hissed. *Why ain't you come down to lend a hand with the lighter?* He could see it was his brother, but could not make him out and was spared the hangdog look on his silly face. *I come as soon as I could, Will,* he whined. *As God is my witness.* Trying not to shout in his exasperation Thornhill said, *Forget God, man, get yourself down and hand us up the stern sheet and be quick about it.*

He had just made the stern sheet fast to the bollard when he heard a sound beyond the lighter: a splash, the hollow wooden

knocking of an oar against its pin. It crossed his mind, nothing more substantial than the shadow of a bird's wing out of the corner of his eye, that something was not right. He peered and strained into the rustling darkness but saw only its tantalising shifts and textures.

They had to unload the Brazil wood into the skiff almost by feel. They moved the timbers down as quietly as they could, scraping them over the gunwale of the lighter, feeling the skiff twist under the weight. He could sense Rob take the weight, then the hollow noise as he eased each piece down. The small sounds seemed thunderous.

They had moved the fourth piece when suddenly at the end of the lighter there was a commotion, a clattering and thumping, several pairs of feet in several pairs of boots, running along the lighter to where Thornhill and Rob stood holding the flitch of timber. *Thornhill!* Lucas's voice shouted. *Thornhill, you rogue!* In that moment all the dread he had been feeling rose up to swallow him. He should have listened! Should have listened to that cool little voice that had said, *This time they will get you.*

Lucas had something in his hand. Thornhill saw a glitter of metal and knew it to be the short hanger Mr Lucas carried with him everywhere. He heard it slice the air near him, the sound of the blade through the air filling him with panic. He retreated onto the skiff, stumbling on the timber, a helpless blind man. *For God's sake do not!* he heard himself call out, feeling his flesh cringe from the blade, but Lucas was shouting, *Come here you blackguard,* and Thornhill felt a hand clutching at his sleeve.

He jerked up his arm and freed it, felt hands fumbling at his collar, and stumbled along the skiff with Lucas following him, but he heard Lucas trip on the oars and crash full-length. He heard the grunt as the wind was knocked out of him, imagined

that big striped belly squashed like a bladder. He got to the skiff, Rob already in it—slow, but quick enough when it came to saving his own skin—and undid the rope. As he pushed away from the lighter and began to row, he heard one of the pieces of timber slide off the gunwale into the water, sending the little boat rocking so they near capsized.

He was gasping with the fright of it, but also with a convulsion of the stomach that he recognised as having some relationship to laughing.

Rob seemed more aggrieved at the loss of his coat than the nearness of his escape, earnestly telling Thornhill, *My coat were there, my good thick coat!* And—each time remembering as if for the first time—*my wiper, how will I blow the snot, Will?* Then his phlegmy laugh came from out of the stern, his voice jumping. *My wiper, Will, think of that, Mr Lucas got my wiper for his very own.*

Rob's brain was a peculiar one, with pockets of sense in it like plums in a pudding.

He thought they were clean away, but there was Lucas's voice, roaring from the lighter, *Yates! Get them, man!* Turning around, Thornhill saw something moving on the shimmering blackness of the water: another skiff closing on them. He dug his oars in, so deep, so sudden, to turn the boat, that Rob was sent sprawling sideways.

As he had for the Doggett's race, Thornhill shrank his being down to nothing but his arms, his shoulders, his feet straining against the board. He rowed so hard he could feel his backside lifting off the thwart, and he thought he had left the skiff behind. A quick glance over his shoulder let him see the square bulk of the cathedral, and he made for Crawshay's Wharf just along from it, had got the oars shipped and was about to make fast when out of the splashing blackness another boat was upon him, and a big person scrambling from it into his own, making it rock

and tilt, and there was Yates panting, *I have got you, I will shoot you if you attempt to escape.* Even in this moment, Thornhill wanted to laugh and say, *Coming the high horse sits odd with you, Yates.*

Rob let out a yell, the boat lurched, and there was an almighty splash. His brother had gone over the stern and no more was heard from him.

Thornhill could see the bulk of Yates, smell the pipe he always had about him. Yates was not a bad man, had been a lighterman himself. Over the years, plenty of things had stuck to his fingers. *For God's sake have mercy, Mr Yates,* Thornhill pleaded. *You know the consequence!* He saw the bulk hesitate and he tried again. *You known me ten years, Yates, would you have me swing?*

And while Yates stood, not advancing on him, saying nothing, Thornhill made a lunge aft, athwart of the boat, and sprang over the side. The tide was but half in, so the water was up to no more than his thighs, and there was Yates's skiff bobbing alongside. It was the work of an instant to feel his way to the knot, slip it free, and pull himself into the boat. As Thornhill pulled hard away there was no sound from Yates.

Yates might have been a merciful man, but Lucas was not. A man who knew himself destined to be Lord Mayor of London was not one to turn a blind eye to a work of thievery. There was a reward advertised, not for Rob whose body was found washed up at Mason's Stairs, but for himself, William Thornhill. Who was going to resist ten pounds?

So they came and found him where he was hiding out up the river at Acre Wharf, next to the flour mill.

~

In Newgate the people were packed tight in stone cells with hardly enough room on the dirty pallets to stretch out at night. The

walls were blocks of fine-hewn stone, not a chink anywhere, of such a size they needed no mortar. Their mass alone was enough to lock them into place, and lock the people in behind them.

Sal had given up the room in Butler's Buildings and had joined Lizzie and Mary sewing shrouds. They all came to see him in the cell, pretending good cheer. Sal had brought Willie, holding fast to his little hand. He was four: old enough to be fright-ened at what he saw in Newgate, but young enough to be damaged by it. Thornhill loved to feel the child in his arms, against his chest, but told Sal not to bring him again, there was prison fever about.

They had brought such food as they could spare: a piece of bread and some splinters of dried herring. They watched while he took it. He could see the hunger in their eyes, and did his best to eat, to please them, but he could not seem to, his throat already closed up.

He tried not to think of their happy days. In Newgate that soft hopeful part of him was hardening over, becoming lifeless like stone or shell. It was a kind of mercy.

Sal took charge. She had worked it out. The thing that a man needed in Newgate, more than a loaf of bread and a blanket, was a story. There must always be a story, she insisted, no matter how red-handed a man was caught. And a man had to believe it himself, so that when he came to tell it, it felt like God's sworn truth.

He saw that she had gone to the heart of the matter. He had heard a boy in the yard saying over and over to himself, and to anyone who came near: *It is all a lie, it is all for the reward.* The boy tried it in different ways, with different emphasis, a child with broken front teeth who seemed little older than Willie. *It is all a damned lie, it is all for the damned reward.* He was like those actors Thornhill had rowed across the river. When the moment came, in the white glare of the limelight, the line would

be there, having replaced all other thoughts by nothing more than repetition.

The story had to take on such conviction that bit by bit the fact of the event—in the boy's case, some business of stealing a piece of bacon from a shop—was replaced by another one, the way an oyster might grow over a rock. Then it became nothing so crude as a lie. A person could tell the new one, in all its vivid reality, with the wide eyes of someone who was speaking the truth.

A man had come up to you and given you the coat. You had found the piece of carpet on the road. A man had said he would give you a penny if you took the box to Gosport Street. As God was your witness, you were innocent.

Sal had already worked it out for him. He had made the lighter fast, but owing to the lowness of the tide he had left it, planning to come back at high water to unload. He had trusted the watchman further up the wharf to keep an eye on the timber, but while he was away some person unknown must have come up on the river side, without the watchman hearing, and removed it.

It was a sound story, with no gaps or leaks. He loved her for her wit in seeing it so clear, and giving it the words that made it the truth. *You will get out of this, Will,* she whispered, embracing him as she left. *They ain't going to get you, not if I got anything to do with it.*

Her love and her strength gave him heart, were a kind of wealth, he saw, that others did not have. When his wife and sisters had gone, he stood straighter, walked taller, looked the turnkeys in the eye. *I made the lighter fast, meaning to come back to her later.*

The next day word went round the yard that a man called William Biggs, accused of stealing two ducks, value twenty-five

shillings, had that day told the court that he was as innocent of the crime as the child unborn, and had been acquitted. In Newgate Yard, with the murmured stories of injured innocence all around them, the idea caught on like cholera. *As innocent as the child unborn*, Thornhill heard the man next to him muttering. *I am a soldier, I had just come off duty, there was others in the house besides me, I am as innocent as the child unborn.*

He added it to his own story as he rehearsed it to himself. *I made the lighter fast meaning to come back later to unload, I am as innocent as the child unborn.*

~

The court of the Old Bailey was a bear-pit. Down in the well of the court there was a great curving table full of crow-like barristers in their black gowns and their grey periwigs, and standing humbly around them the mass of witnesses waiting to be called, and the ushers lounging against the panelling.

On the next layer up, the jury men sat along one wall, four by four, packed into dark-panelled pews, too far away to make out their faces in the dimness of this vast space. Opposite the judge, the witness was pinned into a little box with his back to the light coming in from the high windows.

Those tall white windows, full of light, were cousins to the ones at Christ Church. They showed, if Thornhill had doubted it, that the judge was gentry, the same way God was gentry.

Above the witnesses a mirror tipped the daylight from the window full onto their faces. By that cold dull light, that gave faces a metallic look, the judge and jury could peer into the soul of the person on the stand. Behind the witness there was another, smaller mirror, and a man in a periwig like the barristers' with an inkwell and a big ledger in front of him, in which he wrote down each word.

That was almost the worst of it, that anything anyone said, be it never so false or condemning, was there forever, with no margin of forgetfulness where human mercy might step in.

Way up near the ceiling were the public galleries, cut off from the court by a high wall of panelling and columns that held the restless public in behind them. He stared up, hoping to find Sal, but could only see a vague restless mass of people. Now and then an arm dropped down in front of the panelling or there was the flash of a shawl flung over a woman's shoulders. He saw a straw hat bent down over a head by means of a scarf tied under the chin. Sal had a hat she wore that way, and perhaps that tilt of the head was hers as she craned past others to see down into the court.

He heard a distant cry, a woman's voice. Was it calling, *Will! Will!* and was that her arm waving to him?

It was, he thought, and he loved her for it. As the prisoner at the bar he did not dare call back. That would be as bad as calling out in church. In any case, she was in the other world, the one he was leaving. She was dear to him, but down here he was on his own.

He stood up in the prisoner's dock, a high pedestal where he was on display as if naked to the whole court. His hands were tied hard behind his back, forcing him to bow his head. He kept trying to straighten up, to look his fate in the eye, but the pain in his neck forced him again to hunch. Up so high, he could feel the rising vapours of those below him in the court: all those bodies encased in their clothes, all those chests breathing in and out, and all those words, passing around through the air.

He was struck by the power of the words. There was nothing going on in the court but words, and the exact words, little puffs of air out of the mouth of a witness, would be the thing that saw him hanged or not.

It took him some time, when he was first pushed up onto his pedestal, to see the judge behind his carved bench: a tiny grey

face, dwarfed by his full-bottomed wig, by the layers of his robes, by the lapping collar with the gold edging, until there was no trace of the human within.

~

Mr Knapp, the lawyer who had been assigned to speak for him, was a languid sort of a gent, and Thornhill held out no hope from that quarter, but Mr Knapp surprised him. Mr Lucas had said his piece, and then Knapp was speaking to him, in a weary sort of way, so that Thornhill did not at first realise he had found something of a chink: *I understand you, Mr Lucas, to have said it was a very dark night, and therefore the only opportunity that you had of knowing who was the man, was that it was the voice of Thornhill?*

But Mr Lucas saw where this was going and coughed into his fist before saying stiffly, *I knew him by his person, when I got to him*, and Mr Knapp still seemed to pay no attention, asking casually, *But you knew him only by his voice?*

A man with his sights set on the gold chain of office was not going to be confused by any half-asleep barrister and Lucas answered crisply, *I believed that the person I saw in motion was the prisoner, and when I got to him, I knew him to be the prisoner at the bar.*

Now Thornhill was fully listening, and for the darkness of the night he began to give the greatest thanks. Knapp set a little trap, saying, *That is, in other words, you knew Thornhill when you got up to him?* But Lucas coughed again, shifted, rubbed an eye, could see the problem advancing towards him. *I identified him by his voice repeatedly before*, he said impatiently. Mr Knapp shot back, giving him no time to think, *From that you were led to suppose it was Thornhill—you were not certain of it until you came up, and found that it was so?*

Lucas was too clever to be caught. He gripped the counter in front of him, sunlight falling across his shoulders and the eerie light of the mirror full on his face. When he spoke he seemed to be reading off the dust eddying in the shaft of sun. *I did not hear any voice at the time the wood was in motion. At that time, if I had been asked, I could not have sworn to the person of Thornhill.* He paused to pick his way between the words, then went on very steady and slow as if spelling something out for one of the Robs of this world: *I can now swear that one of the persons that I saw, when the wood was in motion, was Thornhill, that I could not then swear to. When I got near him, that person was Thornhill, and I never lost sight of him, because I saw the very person that was moving the wood was Thornhill.*

Even Mr Knapp could find no chink in that masonry of words.

When it was Yates's turn, Thornhill saw how unhappy he was. He kept glancing across the well of the court at him, squinting against the light from the mirror, his big white eyebrows moving up and down, his hands busy fiddling with the edge of the counter in front of him as if to fiddle away so much trouble.

Mr Knapp looked up at the far-off ceiling as he said, *You had no opportunity of observing the face of the man—it was much too black a night to observe countenances?* He was almost speaking to himself.

Yates began to smooth the counter as if stroking a dog. *It was, I allow*, he said. *I will speak by the voice, the shape and make of the man.*

And now Mr Knapp came to life, snapping out his words so Thornhill could see how Yates cringed. *What, speak to the shape and make of a man on a dark night?* Poor Yates began to bluster. *I do not say that I can*, he said, *unless I was particularly well acquainted with him.* His bushy eyebrows were a semaphore of

distress as he floundered on. *I do not mean to say directly I can, or cannot speak to the facts in this case.*

Down at the witness table in the well of the court, Mr Lucas stared up at him. Even from the prisoner's bar, Thornhill could see the beads of sweat appearing on Yates's domed forehead. Mr Knapp insisted, *It being a moonless night, you cannot make out that you knew him by shape and make?* Thornhill thought, are those little words, shape and make, going to be the difference between life and death?

Poor Yates, glancing from Lucas to Thornhill, began to mutter and stutter. *I should be sorry to say anything that is an untruth,* he said, but Mr Knapp had no mercy, and kept coming on. *That was a hasty speech, that you knew him by shape and make? You mean that you could not?* And now Yates was broken, uncertain of all his words, continually glancing at Mr Lucas. *I was in the act of closing with this man,* he mumbled. *It was impossible but I must know him from his speaking to me. I knew him by his voice.*

He glanced quickly at Thornhill. *I might have hastily spoke about his shape and make,* he said, and then stood stiff as a bit of wood with his hat squashed under his arm, the wan light from the mirror falling full on his face, furrowed with misery.

~

The moment where Thornhill was allowed to tell his story was upon him so abruptly that he found the words he had gone over with Sal had evaporated from his mind. He could only think of the start of them, saying *I tied up the lighter meaning to come back to her later,* and he knew there was more, but what was it?

He found himself staring at Mr Lucas as he blurted out, *Mr Lucas knows there is no lighter on the river can come to her,* but even as the words left his mouth he knew they had nothing to do with the case at hand, and he called out desperately, *I am as innocent*

as the child unborn, but the words had no meaning after so much rehearsal.

In any case the judge, way up behind his bench, was not listening. He was shuffling papers together and leaning sideways while someone whispered in his ear. Lucas was not listening either, his hand feeling for the watch in his pocket. Thornhill saw the silver lid spring open, saw Lucas glance at the face of the watch, press it closed again, tweak a nostril with thumb and fore-finger. His own words, which had sounded with such conviction in Newgate Yard, fell hollow and were swallowed up.

Now the judge was fiddling with the black cap, sitting it carelessly on the long grey wig so it hung over one ear. He began to speak, in a thin high voice that Thornhill could barely hear. Down in the body of the court one of the lounging ushers, a corpulent gent in a bulging dirty white waistcoat, caught sight of someone he knew across the room and made a mincing wave and a little smirk. A barrister fiddled with the grubby ruffles at his neck, another got out his snuff-box and offered it to his neighbour.

It seemed the court could scarcely be bothered to listen as William Thornhill, in the time between two heartbeats, was found guilty and sentenced to *be taken from this place and hanged by the neck until you are dead.*

He heard a cry, from the public gallery or from his own mouth he did not know. He wanted to call out, I beg your pardon, Your Worship, there has been some mistake, but now the turnkey was grabbing him by the upper arm, forcing him down the steps, and through the door into the tunnel that led back to Newgate. He turned his head towards the public gallery. Sal was up there somewhere, but invisible. Then he was back in the cell with the others, but without his story, stripped naked of his tale of injured innocence, stripped of everything but the knowledge that his

moment of hope had been and gone, and left him now with nothing ahead but death.

~

Sal came to see him in the condemned cell. Even her footsteps on the bare wooden floor told him that she had not given up. Behind the carefree girl he had married there was another person, he saw now with some wonderment: no girl, but a woman. Her humour had not been extinguished, only darkened and thickened by this other thing that had always been there waiting to be needed: a stubborn intelligence as unyielding as a rock.

She had been making inquiries, she said. Had asked around, found out what a man did who was condemned to die. *It is letters, Will,* she told him. *You send letters up the line is how it works.* There was a chilly briskness to her, although he saw that she found it hard to meet his eye, as if afraid she would see something there to break her resolve. Despair, he was learning here, was as contagious as fever, and as deadly. *You got to get that creeping Jesus to write to Captain Watson,* she said. *No good me trying, I don't know them sorts of words.* She did not look into his face, but reached across the table and took his hand, squeezed it so hard he felt her bones. *Today, Will, not a minute later.*

He trusted her, and went to the man she meant, a man whose legs were twisted and wizened and who crept from cell to cell. If a person had any item of value about him that he was prepared to part with, this man would write any kind of begging letter he wished.

He gave the creeping cripple his thick woollen greatcoat. It was like cutting off an arm, for without it he would never live through a lighterman's winter again. But it was a good coat, worth a good letter. And he would never be a lighterman again, unless this man could write the letter that might get him out of this place.

When the cripple had done, he read it out to him.

It was as if written by Thornhill himself to Captain Watson, his regular from Chelsea Stairs, the only man of standing Thornhill knew. It told how sorry Thornhill was for what he had done, how it was the first offence, and how earnestly he prayed to God to be spared. It enumerated Thornhill's dependants, his idiot brother, his sisters all alone in the world, his helpless wife and babe, and another on the way in his wife's guiltless belly.

Thornhill held the paper in his hand, staring at the black loops and swirls of the cripple's clerkly hand, so different from Sal's careful letters. He could not make sense of any of them. To his eyes these were nothing more than marks such as a beetle might make, crawling through a puddle of porter spilt on a table. He despaired that his life depended on such flimsy things.

Miraculously, the letter spawned another. Captain Watson wrote his own letter up the line to a General Lockwood, who apparently had the ear of Mr Arthur Orr, who was by way of knowing Sir Erasmus Morton, who was second secretary to Lord Hawkesbury. Lord Hawkesbury was the end of the line. In his hands lay the power to reprieve, or not.

Good man that he was, Captain Watson had sent a copy of his letter to Sal. She tried, but could not decipher the fancy letters, so they got the cripple to read it out. He read fast, showing off how well he could do it: *Whereas William Thornhill convict bows and prays with humble submission depending on your Lordship's clemency and charity to spare his life, while he and his will ever pray that you and yours may ever flourish like the green bay tree that grows by the water, praying may the Sun of Joy shine round your head, and may the Pillow of Peace kiss your cheek and when the light of time makes you tired of earthly joys and curtains of death close the last sleep of human existence may the Angel of God attend you.*

And so on, so many flowery words Thornhill lost the thread of them. When the cripple had finished and crept away, they both sat in silence. Sal smoothed and smoothed at the edge of the thick paper, where it had got dog-eared. Thornhill thought she probably felt the same coldness at her heart that he did. It was impossible that the thick hempen rope could be unknotted by such persiflage as this. He feared that Captain Watson had not judged right. Why had he gone on about the Pillow of Peace when what was surely required was a speech of what an upstanding fine man he was, a reliable provider for his wife and child?

He and Sal nodded at each other and even found it in themselves to smile, but he could see she thought he was as good as dead. Her eyes slipped sideways as she spoke, as if he was becoming transparent, no longer a person in the world.

Sal was ailing, although she denied it. She had lost flesh and grown wan. Lizzie had got them a job of sheets to hem, two dozen, and Sal did them with Lizzie and Mary, but the price of thread had gone up and the price of hemming had gone down. There was a man wanted Willie for a sweep, needed a boy that size to send up the narrowest flues, but the boy cried with fear at the thought of those dark tubes. And now, Sal said, no more work was to be had. She had begged Mr Pritchard, but there were no sheets to be done, and Mr Pritchard had said there was no call for handkerchiefs neither.

There was a little silence between the two of them then, but then Sal cried out, *If no one is blowing their damn noses, are they snotting in the gutter then?* Her laugh sounded forced in the quiet room, but it broke the moment where they had both lain down under the burden of life. He made himself laugh too, and looked into her eyes. She took his hand again and did not look away.

She would have to go on the streets. They both knew that.

He looked at her with the eye of a customer and saw that she would have to brighten herself up, rouge her cheeks, curl her hair, set a brazen look on her face. For her sake, he forced the smile of a living man onto his mouth.

Sal had committed no crime, but she was sentenced, just as surely as he was.

~

One morning the turnkey came to the cell door and bawled out his name. Thornhill expected the worst and called out, *Not yet! Friday sennight they said!*

The turnkey looked at him, did not hurry to reply. *Do not piss yourself, Thornhill,* he said at last. *Listen, man.* He stood back for the clerk to come to the doorway and read from the piece of stiff paper in his hand, his voice barely audible: *Whereas William Thornhill was at a session holden in the Old Bailey in October last tried and convicted.*

He was gabbling as fast as he could, his duty only to read the words, not to make sure anyone could follow them. His scratchy voice could not penetrate the various noises of the room: the talking, the spitting, the coughing, the shuffle of wooden pattens on the flags. Thornhill pushed further forward and was in time to hear his crime, those familiar words that made him flinch inwardly every time he heard them: *Tried and convicted of stealing Brazil wood from a barge on the navigable River Thames and had sentence of death passed upon him for the same. We in consideration from favourable intercessions humbly represented unto us on his behalf are graciously pleased to extend our grace and mercy unto him.*

Not sure what he was hearing, Thornhill made himself go stony, one huge ear, to hear the next words: *And grant him our pardon for his said crime on condition of his being transported to*

the Eastern Part of New South Wales for the term of his sentence, viz, for and during the term of his Natural Life.

There was more, but Thornhill had stopped listening. His hands and feet had gone very cold, his knees weak, but he had to make sure. *I am to live?* he asked, looking from one face to the other, and the turnkey shouted impatiently, *Yes mate, but if you would rather swing just say the word.* The clerk, shuffling out another piece of paper with a blob of sealing wax on it, said, *There is more,* and started to read again. *I am directed by Lord Hawkesbury to desire that you will permit...*He stopped and glanced at Thornhill quickly, then away, as if afraid that the glance of a condemned man might turn him to stone. *What is your wife's name?* he asked, but Thornhill felt that words, thoughts, knowledge of anything in the world except the fact that he was to live, had left him. What did his wife's name have to do with anything?

The turnkey was shouting now. *Your wife, man, what is your damn wife's name?* and Thornhill answered, feeling his stiff lips shaping the words, *Sal, Sarah Thornhill.* The clerk went on, *That you will permit Sarah Thornhill the wife of William Thornhill convict who is to be embarked on the Alexander transport, commander Captain Suckling, to have a passage with her husband in lieu of Mrs Henshall who has declined accepting that indulgence and also the infant of the said William and Sarah Thornhill.*

The turnkey snorted. *Meaning that your wife has the pleasure of a sea voyage along with you, Thornhill,* he shouted. *And may God have mercy on her soul!*

PART TWO

SYDNEY

It was a sad scrabbling place, this town of Sydney. The old hands called it The Camp, and in 1806 that was pretty much still what it was: a half-formed temporary sort of place.

Twenty years before it had been one of the hundreds of coves hidden within a great body of water as complicated as a many-fingered hand. One hot afternoon in the January of 1788, with big white birds screeching from the trees by the shore, a captain of the Royal Navy had sailed into that body of water and chosen a cove with a stream of fresh water and fingernail of beach. He had stepped out of the boat and caused the Union Jack to be hoisted on a spar leaning crookedly upright, and declared this place part of the extended territories of King George III, Sovereign of Great Britain, Defender of the Faith. Now it was called Sydney Cove, and it had only one purpose: to be a container for those condemned by His Majesty's courts.

On the September morning that the *Alexander* dropped its anchor in Sydney Cove, it took William Thornhill some time to see what was around him. The felons were brought up on deck but, after so long in the darkness of the hold, the light pouring out of the sky was like being struck in the face. Sharp points of brilliance winked up from water that glittered hard and bright. He squinted between his fingers, felt tears run hot down his face,

blinked them away. For a moment he glimpsed things clear: the body of shining water on which the *Alexander* had come to rest, the folds of land all around, woolly with forest, blunt paws of it pushing out into the water. Near at hand a few blocky golden buildings lined the shore, their windows a glare of gold. They swam and blurred through the spears of light.

Shouting beat at his ears. A sun such as he had not imagined could exist was burning through the thin stuff of his slops. Now, on land, he was seasick again, feeling the ground swell under him, the sun hammering down on his skull, that wicked glinting off the water.

It was a relief to be sick, neatly, quietly, onto the planks of the wharf.

Out of this agony of light a woman appeared, calling his name and pushing through the crowd towards him. *Will!* she cried. *Over here, Will!* He turned to look. My wife, he thought. That is my wife Sal. But it was as if she was only a picture of his wife: after so many months he could not believe it was she, her very self.

He had time just to glimpse the boy beside her, pressed in against her leg, and the bundle of baby in the crook of her arm, when a man with a thick black beard was pushing her back with a stick. *Wait your turn you whore,* he shouted and clapped her with his open hand on the side of the head. Then she was swallowed up in the press of faces, their shouting mouth-holes black in the sun. *Thornhill! William Thornhill!* he heard through the muddle of noise. *I am Thornhill,* he called, hearing his voice cracked and small. The man with the beard grabbed at his arm and in the remorseless clarity of the light Thornhill saw how the beard around his mouth was full of breadcrumbs. From the list in his hand the man bawled, *William Thornhill to be assigned to Mrs Thornhill!* He was shouting so hard that crumbs fell out of his beard.

Sal stepped forward. *I am Mrs Thornhill,* she called above the din. Thornhill was stunned by the light and the noise, but he heard her voice clear through it all. *He is not assigned to me, he is my husband.* The man gave her a sardonic look. *He might be the husband but you are the master now, dearie,* he said. *Assigned, that is the same as bound over. Help yourself dearie, do what you fancy with him.*

The boy clutched a handful of Sal's skirt and stared up at his father, big-eyed with fear. This was Willie, five years old now, grown taller and skinnier. A nine-month voyage was a quarter of a lifetime for a lad so young. Thornhill could see that his child did not recognise the hunched stranger bending down to him.

The new baby had been born when the *Alexander* put in at Cape Town in July. Sal was lucky they were in port when the pains started. They let him see her afterwards, but only for a moment. *A boy, Will,* she whispered. *Richard? After my Da?* Then her white lips could manage no more words, only her hand pressing his had gone on speaking to him. A moment later they took him back to the men's quarters, and although he could sometimes hear the babies beyond the bulkhead, he had never known which might be his.

Now he did not need to strain to hear him. The baby's cries were sharp painful blows in his ear.

Will, she said, smiled, reached for his hand. *Will, it is us, remember?* He saw the crooked tooth he remembered, and the way her eyes changed shape around her smile. He tried out a smile in return. *Sal,* he started, but the word turned into a choked gasp like a sob.

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His Majesty's Government issued Mrs Thornhill, master of the assigned convict William Thornhill, with a week's victuals, a

blanket or two, and a hut up on the hillside behind the wharf. That was the extent of what His Majesty felt obliged to provide. The idea was, the servant William Thornhill would work for his master, in this case his wife, at whatever employment might be found. He was in all respects a slave, obliged to do his master's bidding. The felon would thus remain a prisoner, but the master would do the work of a guard. In the case of a family, it meant that the whole household would be able to support itself and come off the Government Stores.

His Majesty's mercy, saving so many from the noose, was made possible by this ingenious and thrifty scheme.

From that first afternoon, then, the Thornhills were on their own.

Steep and bony, bristling with slabs of rock, the hill where their hut had been pointed out to them was inhabited by humans as a cake might be by ants. A few lived in huts, but most had made dwellings beneath the overhanging rocks that stepped up the slope. Some had hung a bit of canvas up by way of wall, others had leaned a few boughs against the opening. The Thornhills' wattle-and-daub hut by contrast was grand, even though it provided no luxuries beyond the mud-caked walls and the floor of damp earth.

The three of them stood at the doorway looking in. None seemed in any hurry to enter. Little Willie had got his thumb into his mouth and stared glassily, avoiding Thornhill's glance. *Least it ain't a cave*, Sal said at last. He could hear the effort in her voice, a pitch too high. *Not a worry in the world*, he made himself say. The boy twisted his head to look up at him, then buried his face, thumb and all, into her skirts. *Snug as anything.* To him his words sounded as hollow as a man talking in a barrel.

The sun was slipping behind the ridge and damp air was beginning to shift down the hill. A man and a woman came along

the hillside from another cave towards the Thornhill family. Th man sported a huge matted beard but was otherwise quite bal the woman had a sunk-in toothless mouth and a skirt that hun in shreds around her calves. Both their faces were dark with di and they staggered with drink. The man carried a smoulderin stick, the woman a kettle. *Here*, the woman said. *We brung you this, lovey, help youse out.*

Thornhill thought it was a joke, because the kettle had wooden bottom. Laughed in the woman's face, but she did n laugh back. *Dig a hole*, she started. A hiccup that jerked her who chest stopped her. *Light the fire. Round it.* She had to close h eyes from the force of the hiccups. *Good as gold*, she cried. Can right up to Thornhill to lay a hand along his arm, so he smell her, rum and filth. *Good as fucking gold!*

The man was so drunk his eyeballs were swivelling arou in his head. He shouted in a booming voice, as if the Thornhi were half a mile away, *Look out for the poxy savages, matey*, a laughed a gusty laugh full of rum. Then he grew serious a bent at the knees, staggering, to peer at Willie. *They's partial a tasty bit of victuals like your boy there.* He bent to knead Willi chubby cheek with his hard fingers, so the boy began to cry a the woman, still hiccupping, dragged the man away.

They cooked the rags of salt pork on sticks in the fire a laid them out on pieces of bark by way of plates. Having pannikins, they drank the tea that the woman had given th straight out of the spout. The bread fell apart in their hands they picked up the crumbs from the ground and ate them, feel grains of dirt crunching between their teeth.

The baby, sucking noisily on Sal's tit, was the only Thorn to finish the meal with a full belly.

They sat on the ground outside the hut in the dusk, look down at the place they had come to. From up here on the hill

the settlement was laid out plain. It was a raw scraped little place. There were a few rutted streets, either side of the stream threading its way down to the beach, but beyond them the buildings were connected by rough tracks like animals' runs, as kinked among the rocks and trees as the trees themselves. Down by the water was the wharf, and a few grand structures of brick and stone pressed in along the shore. But away from the water the buildings unravelled into hovels of bark or daub, nothing more than sticks plastered together with mud, set in mean yards enclosed by brushwood fences. Hogs rolled in the pale mud beside the stream. A child naked but for a clout of rag between its legs stood watching a pack of dogs snapping at a hen with its chicks. A man dug in a patch of ground behind a fence leaning all skewiff.

It all had an odd unattached look, the bits of ground cut up into squares in this big loose landscape, a broken-off chip of England resting on the surface of the place.

Beyond was mile after mile of the woolly forest. It was more grey than green, tucking itself around the ridges and valleys in every direction, uniform as fabric, holding the body of water among its folds.

Having never seen anywhere else, Thornhill had imagined that all the world was the same as London, give or take a few parrots and palm trees. How could air, water, dirt and rocks fashion themselves to become so outlandish? This place was like nothing he had ever seen.

For every one of the years of his life, this bay had been here, filling its shape in the land. He had laboured like a mole, head down, in the darkness and dirt of London, and all the time this tree shifting its leathery leaves above him had been quietly breathing, quietly growing. Seasons of sun and heat, seasons of wind and rain, had come and gone, all unknown to him. This place had been here long before him. It would go on sighing and

breathing and being itself after he had gone, the land lapping on and on, watching, waiting, getting on with its own life.

Down below Thornhill could see the *Alexander*. With a sick lurch he remembered the hammock, the knot in the beam above his head, an always-open eye watching him while he woke or slept.

Night after night, lying there, he had thought of Sal until the memory of her had become stale. But that was her hip pressed in against him now. That was her thigh stretched out alongside his. If it were not for Willie, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, making himself small, he would be able to turn and see her eyes, her lips, feel her warmth against him as they embraced.

Up the hill behind them, a bird repeated a sad regretful cry, *Ah, ah, ah.* But it was the only sad thing in the whole world.

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It was hard to leave the fire and go into the cheerless hut. Thornhill went in first with a burning stick to light the way, but it only flamed for a moment, then choked them with the smoke, so he threw it outside. They spread the blanket out by feel and laid the baby down on it. He gave a sigh as if the ground underneath him was a feather bed, and was asleep at once.

At first Willie could not be got to lie down beside the baby, although he was exhausted, close to tears, his voice gone high and querulous. Thornhill had hoped that he and Sal would be able to go back to the fire and talk, stitching up the nine-month's gap in their lives, but the only way Willie would go to sleep was with Sal beside him, so the three of them lay down side by side. Sal had the last edge of the blanket.Thornhill was on bare dirt, listening for Willie to become quiet.

At last he felt Sal shift against him. *He's gone off, Will,* she whispered. *Poor little bugger.*

They had not touched, other than that touch of leg against leg, up till now. He felt a kind of shyness: Sal had had her own voyage, invisible on the other side of the bulkhead, and who knows where she had arrived?

He thought she might be feeling the same. Her shoulder pressed against his and her leg was lining itself up alongside his, but diffidently, as if by accident. He could feel the warmth of her, her flesh and skin. He felt her hands moving over his chest and up to his face, working to remember the husband she knew.

Thank you Mrs Henshall for declining the indulgence, she cried, trying to whisper but blurting it out on a laugh, and in that moment she was with him again, that cheeky girl, his Sal, finding poor Susannah Wood funny. He laid a hand along her thigh, turned to her so he could dimly see her face, that he loved so well. He knew that she was smiling.

And Mrs Thornhill, he said. *I got to thank her too, pet.* Her fingers threaded themselves into his and squeezed hard. He heard that she was crying: but smiling too, crying and smiling both at once. *Will*, she whispered, and tried to say more, but the touch of their hands was all the words they needed.

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The first morning, Thornhill wondered if the black man he had confronted in the darkness had been only a dream. By daylight, the memory of their conversation—*Be off! Be off!*—was hard to believe.

It was easier to turn to the familiar, this speck of England laid out within the forest. Sydney looked foreign, but in the ways that mattered to the Thornhills it was the Thames all over again. It had no means of surviving except for the thread that bound it to Home. The authorities hoped for crops and flocks eventually, but in the meantime the settlement turned inwards, towards

the ships that brought the necessities of life. Between the wha
and these ships full of flour and pease, nails and bonnets, brand
and rum, the boats of the watermen plied backwards an
forwards just as they had done on the Thames.

Thornhill seemed to have been pulling on an oar all his lif
It made little difference whether the water on which he did
was called the Thames or Sydney Cove.

He worked for many masters but in particular for Mr Kin
who had built one of the stone storehouses that had floated i
Thornhill's vision that first day. Alexander King was a tidy fello
with tiny ears flat against his head and a dimple in his chin bi
enough to lose a boot in. He was a cheerful sort of man wh
took satisfaction in amusing people, and Thornhill alwa
obliged. His laughter was all the more sincere for knowing th
the joke was on Mr King.

Mr King had a finger in many pies, but the one of imm
diate interest to Thornhill concerned certain casks, containin
certain fluids precious in the colony, which Mr King had caus
to be brought on ships from Madras, from Calcutta, from t
Indies. Mr King would come down in the morning, stand on t
wharf in the sun and, with a list in his hand, punctiliously cou
the casks on their way to the Customs men: so many of Jamaic
rum, so many of French brandy, so much Ceylonese gin. Pa
up without a murmur, smiling as he did it, because he knew th
other casks, not appearing on his list, were being looked after
night. That was Thornhill's job: privily to convey those cas
from the ships to a bay around the point from the settleme
where they were safe from the grasping hand of the Master
Customs.

You will get your share, Thornhill, King told him, smiling h
calm smile, the smile of a flourishing man. *You will find it bet
than coin of the realm.* Thornhill had no concerns about n