



# MONSTERS

THE PASSION AND LOSS THAT CREATED FRANKENSTEIN



A NOVEL BY  
**SHARON DOGAR**

'A talented storyteller' PHILIP PULLMAN



**MONSTERS**

A NOVEL BY  
**SHARON DOGAR**



ANDERSEN PRESS

Also by Sharon Dogar

*Annexed*

First published in 2019 by  
Andersen Press Limited  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road  
London SW1V 2SA  
[www.andersenpress.co.uk](http://www.andersenpress.co.uk)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Sharon Dogar to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Sharon Dogar, 2019

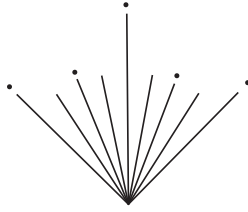
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 78344 802 9

Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 78344 803 6

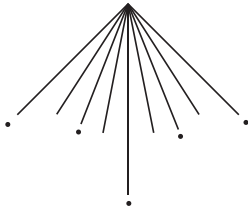
This book is printed on FSC accredited paper from responsible sources

Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



This book owes its existence to Charlie Sheppard,  
who commissioned me to write it. If you hadn't  
asked, the book wouldn't exist.

With special love to my father Miraj din Dogar,  
who, like Mary and her mother, as well as Byshe  
and Claire, knows all about exile.

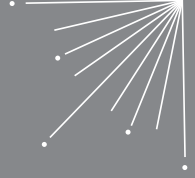
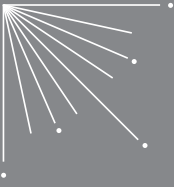


Each man kills the thing he loves . . .  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!

*Oscar Wilde*

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me?

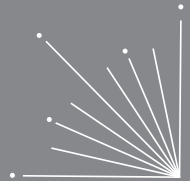
*John Milton, Paradise Lost*



# PART



# ONE



## **2ND JUNE 1812: 41 SKINNER STREET, LONDON**

Mary stands at the top of the stairs seething with the unfairness of it all. Her stepmother has sent her to her bedchamber – again. Mrs Godwin says it's for refusing to do as she's told, when really they both know it is because Mary refuses to call her Mamma. Mrs Godwin is not her mamma. Mary has managed to avoid calling her Mamma for the last ten years and is not about to break that vow to herself – and her real mamma – now.

Mary hovers at the top of the long flight of narrow stairs waiting for the sound of her papa's study door opening and then closing. Once he's inside she can creep down the stairs. She hears him cross the room and sit in his chair but still she waits. If he hears her open the kitchen door he will get up and ask where she is going – and once she tells him he will want to come. She couldn't bear that; she wants to visit Mamma alone.

Below her, Mary can hear her stepsister Jane and Mrs Godwin laughing together. The sound grates. Papa would not mind if Jane decided to call him Mr Godwin rather than Papa. He would not send her to her room. Or make such a silly fuss about it. That's the problem with her stepfamily, thinks Mary – they have no capacity for reason. And that is why they do not understand her decision never to call Mrs Godwin Mamma. It is not a mere fancy, but based upon the sound principles that her father has taught her. All feelings must be studied before being acted upon. Nothing must be done in haste or without prolonged thought. Mary has thought about what it means to have a stepmother and come to a reasoned decision. It is clearly

true that a girl cannot have more than one mamma. And she already has one.

Mary takes a deep breath, it would not be reasonable to do what she wishes, which is to rush down the stairs and confront Mrs Godwin and Jane. Their laughter feels deliberate. Look, it seems to say, how happy we are, without you. If there is a God then she does not understand why he allows people like Mrs Godwin to survive. She would like to run down the stairs and scream at the pair of them: it's MY HOUSE, MY FATHER. But she is fourteen now and far too old to behave in such a childish manner. She closes her eyes, visualising her mother's face in the portrait above Papa's desk. If only she can keep quiet and wait a little longer, then she might creep out of the door and be gone.

'Mary?'

'Oh!' She stifles a cry as she turns, but it's only Fanny, her older sister. Fanny is as quiet as a mouse. She can sit in the corner of a room for hours without anyone noticing, and then she moves and they jump at her presence – as though she has appeared out of nowhere – a ghost.

'What are you doing, Mary?'

'What are *you* doing?' Mary hisses back. 'Creeping up on me!'

Fanny sighs; it is obvious from the expression on Mary's face that she is planning something. She has that look in her eyes, a look of determination and fury that is peculiarly Mary – and that usually means trouble. 'I wasn't creeping up on you,' Fanny says mildly. 'I was simply coming down the stairs!'

Mary is immediately contrite. 'I'm sorry,' she whispers. 'I'm trying to get out without anyone noticing.'

'Why?' Fanny whispers back.

'Because I want to visit Mamma.'

'But—' begins Fanny.

'Alone,' Mary says quickly.



‘Why can’t you just ask Papa if you might go alone?’ says Fanny. ‘I’m sure he would let you.’

‘Are you?’ spits Mary. ‘You don’t think SHE would make him say no just to spite me, and that Papa would agree with her as he always does, and then SHE would make sure to arrange that he was busy as soon we are about to visit Mamma?’

‘You deliberately irritate her, Mary. Why can’t you agree to call her Mamma – if you could only do that then everything would be easier!’

‘But I can’t,’ Mary says, scratching the inner elbow of her arm. The skin is already raw and bleeding but she does not notice until Fanny gently holds her fingers back to stop her. ‘If I were to call her Mamma it would feel like I was betraying our own mother. Our real mother,’ she says staring pointedly, at Fanny.

‘Shall I go downstairs and distract HER for you?’ Fanny suggests, feeling guilty.

‘Thank you!’ Mary clutches Fanny’s arm, grateful for her offer of help because she knows how much her sister hates to do anything that might cause trouble.

She waits until she hears Fanny’s voice guiding Mrs Godwin further down the stairs and into the bookshop below the house. She hears the heavy door between the house and the shop swing shut; her stepmother will be in there for a while now. The juvenile bookshop is her pride and joy, despite the fact that it fails to make them any money. Mary starts off down the stairs. Her father coughs as she creeps past his door, but she carries on into the kitchen. She opens the back door, carefully sliding back the bolt and slipping through before closing it silently behind her, making sure the latch catches. Once she is through the yard and out she begins to run. She meant to walk quietly and confidently away from the house but she cannot help herself. The feel of the breeze in her face releasing all the pent-up fury.

The sight of a young woman running makes people stare. Young women should be calm and considered. Young women should be able to manage themselves, and young women should not allow their own desires to overcome convention. But Mary doesn't care. Whenever she is angry she forgets her shyness, enjoying the looks of surprise, the knowledge that she is different. She was not born to be like other girls; she was born to be like her mother. An outlaw. A radical. She runs until she can feel her heart pumping and her breath coming short and sharp. She runs until she crosses over the bridge into the churchyard, and it is only the thought that she does not want to arrive at her mamma's grave perspiring and breathless that slows her down as she makes her way up the short hill to where Mamma lies buried.

At the sight of the square gravestone standing beneath two tall willows she feels her heartbeat slow, and the usual calm that being near her mother brings begin to embrace her. She sits on the damp grass beside the stone. This is where her papa taught her to read, lifting her small fingers to follow the letters bitten deep into the stone. She lifts her hand now, tracing the letters of her mamma's name:

**MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT GODWIN**  
AUTHOR OF *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*

'Papa's sending me away, Mamma!' she cries out as she presses her hand over her mother's name. 'To Scotland!' She leans her head against the stone. Today it is cool and damp. In the summer it is warm and soothing. Mary knows the feel of it intimately. It is the touch of her mother. The only one she has ever known.

The stone accepts the weight of her thoughts as she rests against it. She does not want to go to Scotland, to leave Papa. What if the family she is to stay with do not like her? Silently the stone relieves her of her fears. 'After all,' she imagines Mamma saying, 'it might be an adventure. Something to write about.'

'Thank you,' she whispers, brushing the hair from her face. 'I'm sorry I won't be able to visit you for a while, Mamma!' The wind lifts the branches of the willow. 'But I'll think of you,' promises Mary, 'and I will have your books with me.'

The stone remains silent.

'Goodbye.' Mary touches the stone with her lips, sweeping the fingers of her hand one last time over the letters of her mother's name before she turns to go.

'Where's Mary?' Jane asks Fanny. 'I can't find her anywhere!'

Fanny does not move from her position by the nursery window, where she is watching anxiously for Mary's return, ready to wave her in when it is safe. She shrugs her shoulders at Jane and holds her tongue, but she is hopeless at lying, can already feel a dreadful blush beginning to creep across her cheeks.

'I won't tell,' says Jane, stepping closer. 'You know I won't. I just want to ask her something.'

'What?'

'Whether or not she's going to take the brown pelisse to Scotland.'

'Why?'

'I look so nice in it! And it's a shame not to be able to wear it.' Jane imagines herself stepping down from a carriage in the coat they each share; it has a high fur collar and a matching hat. It is very *soignée*. Jane's mamma speaks French and has taught Jane the language. She would like to look *soignée*.

'But it's far too smart just to wear!' says Fanny. 'And Scotland

can be cold even in summer. I think Mary should take it,' she says firmly.

'But she might not want it,' insists Jane. 'She doesn't care very much for clothes. She says women should focus more upon the quality of their minds – and less upon the cut of their cloth!' Jane mimics Mary's prim voice so exactly that it is hard for Fanny not to smile, but she manages to resist, despite Jane's infectious laughter. It is hard to believe, sometimes, that the two girls could almost be twins, there is only eight months between them but Mary is by far the more grown-up.

'Is your mamma really making Papa send Mary to Scotland?' Fanny asks.

Jane stops laughing at once. 'Mary blames my mother for everything,' she snaps. 'It's not Mamma's fault that your father fell in love with her.'

'Of course it isn't her fault!' agrees Fanny soothingly, although she and Mary most definitely have their doubts about that. When they are alone together Mary often cruelly imitates their stepmother: '*Oh! Is this the famous Mr Godwin I see before me!*' she says in a sickly sweet, cloying voice of feminine flattery, before pretending to faint upon the bed. Fanny is both horrified and amused by Mary's performance. 'She looks after us very well!' she often says in her stepmother's defence. But Mary will not be swayed.

'Why are you smiling?' asks Jane.

'No reason,' says Fanny quickly, 'but Jane, I can't understand why Papa would send Mary away. Without her here who will help him entertain his philosophers and poets?'

'I could sing for them,' says Jane. There is a short silence as both girls try to imagine it.

'I think Papa's friends prefer talking and thinking to singing and dancing,' says Fanny eventually.

‘Well, perhaps with Mary away they might learn to like it!’ suggests Jane.

‘Is that what your mamma says?’

‘No!’

‘Then why *is* Mary being sent away?’ Fanny persists.

‘Perhaps,’ snaps Jane finally, ‘it’s because she’s unbearable.’

‘Jane!’

‘Well, she is sometimes – even you must be able to see that.’

Fanny says nothing. She does not want to be disloyal, and yet she does not want to lie. She cannot bear to admit that at times the thought of a house free of Mary’s furious feuding with their stepmother fills her with relief.

‘Mamma says it will be good for Mary to get out of London,’ says Jane. She does not repeat what her mother has really said, which is that it might do Mary some good to listen less to the sound of her own voice and to have the experience of having her nose put out of joint occasionally. Jane is both thrilled and a little disturbed by her mamma’s dislike of Mary. At times she imagines what it might be like to be her stepsister, to have grown men pay such serious attention to her and to feel that whatever she had to say would be listened to and approved of, simply because she was the daughter of the great Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher Godwin. ‘*She has the mind of her mother!*’ Papa’s guests exclaim of Mary, whilst Jane and Fanny sit quietly in the background, listening.

‘Well, I can’t say what’s *really* happening because Mamma’s asked me not to!’ Jane tells Fanny.

‘Well then, I don’t want to know,’ agrees Fanny properly. ‘Not if it would betray a trust.’

‘Mamma says that Papa is in such debt,’ Jane continues without hesitation, ‘that he is sending Mary away to save her from the shame of it – should he be sent to prison!’

‘Oh!’

‘What is it, Fanny?’ Jane runs to her stepsister, for the colour has leached from Fanny’s face, and she is swaying where she stands.

‘Nothing,’ says Fanny, ‘it is nothing at all.’ But it is not nothing. It is *everything*; for the truth of the matter is that it hurts to know that once again she has been forgotten. As usual Papa has made provision for Mary, and Mrs Godwin has looked after Jane, but no one has thought about Fanny. She does not know why it is always so, but assumes it must be because she is not as clever as Mary. Or as bold.

For a moment Fanny is tempted to turn away from the window. She imagines Mary looking up and finding the space behind the panes empty. But she can’t do it. And Mary would probably just walk into the house boldly and take whatever punishment was meted out anyway – arguing that she has a perfect right to be disobedient if she is being treated unfairly. And then Papa, although he never stops Mrs Godwin punishing Mary, will smile at her proud disobedience. But if Papa is really sent to prison, what will happen to *her*? Where would she go? Will she be left here with her stepmother and Jane and Charles, her stepbrother? Perhaps they are keeping her here because they need her to help her stepmother look after little William? Yes, that makes sense, thinks Fanny, for it will save them the extra cost of a servant.

‘Mary’s waving at you!’ says Jane. ‘From across the square. Where *has* she been?’

‘To visit our mamma,’ says Fanny. ‘Will you listen at the door and tell me when the coast is clear?’

Jane runs to the door, happy to be a part of the sisters’ intrigue. She peers over the bannisters. ‘I can’t hear anything – I think Mamma’s still in the bookshop, and I can’t hear Papa!’

Fanny watches Mary as she stands waiting across the square,

her black silk cloak making her a dark shadow in the afternoon light.

Jane rushes back into the room. ‘Coast clear!’ she whispers. Fanny lifts her hand and waves.

### **7TH JUNE 1812: GRAVESEND TO BROUGHTY FERRY, SCOTLAND**

‘You’re sending me away,’ blurts Mary, unable to stop herself.

‘Mr Baxter is a good man,’ Papa says awkwardly, ‘and perhaps Isobel and Christine will make better companions for you than Charles and Jane – or Fanny?’ he adds quickly. He always forgets Fanny.

Mary stares up at the boat; she hopes she won’t be sick. She has a strange lost feeling inside, as though a part of her is already somewhere else across the sea.

‘Mamma believes the Scottish air might help to heal your skin,’ says Papa.

‘No! She simply wants to be rid of me!’ declares Mary.

Papa sighs. ‘Mary, we both think it is for the best.’

‘Do you?’ asks Mary coldly. ‘Or are you simply agreeing with her, the way you always do, with no thought for me?’ She swallows, hard. She must not cry; only girls like Jane use tears to express themselves. Her mamma would not cry. She would hold her head up and stride on to the boat, then write a book about it. Sometimes Mary wonders if she can ever really live up to her mother. She begins to scratch.

‘Stop it!’ snaps Papa.

Mary wraps her fingers over the sore skin, longing for the moment when she is alone on the boat and can scratch as freely

as she likes. The boat's horn sounds. 'Goodbye, Papa.' She would like to reach out and touch him, to be able to show that she is sad to be leaving. 'Do I eat my meals in my cabin?' she asks suddenly. 'Or should I go somewhere else?' She has never been alone on a boat overnight before.

'Excuse me!' her father calls at a passing woman.

The woman turns and stares at them. She is wearing an elaborate hat and travelling coat with a wide expensive fur collar. 'I am in a hurry,' the woman says. It is clear that she does not wish to be detained. Mary shrinks back a little as her papa continues regardless.

'My name is William Godwin,' he says loudly, as though the woman might recognise his name, but she does not. 'My daughter,' her father goes on, 'is fourteen, and travelling alone. Perhaps you might be so kind as to chaperone her?'

'Come, come!' the woman says, sweeping away up the busy gangplank. Mary turns and looks at Papa. 'Go on, quickly!' he says, shooing her forward. She does as she is told, running after the woman and turning briefly at the railings to spot her father's back already walking away. Oh, she thinks, we did not really say goodbye . . .

She would like to call out to him as some of the children next to her are doing; to shout his name and wave gaily, but the very thought of behaving with such abandon makes her blush. Papa would not want her to behave like that. She stands at the rails and waits; perhaps he might turn and wave at *her*. But he does not. She watches until he disappears, swallowed up by the crowd. When she turns back the woman has gone. Mary walks the deck, searching everywhere for her, but she is nowhere to be seen.

Slowly Mary makes her way to her small cabin. She sits on the narrow, hard bed. The boat journey is for two days and one night, and then she will be in Dundee, where she is to be picked up by her father's friend William Baxter, and driven by carriage



to Broughty Ferry. He has three daughters, two at home – Christine and Isobel – and another called Margaret, who is married and living nearby. *Christine and Isobel*. She says the names slowly to herself so that she does not forget them. *Christine*. *Isobel*. She hopes they will be more like herself and less like Jane, who would rather play at pretending to be married than discuss why marriage is a shackle that makes women nothing but a man's property. And yet, if she's being honest with herself, she knows she'll miss Jane's admiration – the way her stepsister sometimes parrots a phrase of Mary's, or repeats an argument, pretending that it is her own.

Mary unpacks her books and puts them by the bed, stroking each one before she puts it down. Books do not alter. They do not remarry like Papa or suddenly sprout, like her own body, changing shape and bleeding each month. The pages of books remain reassuringly the same, the words unchanging. She opens her mother's most famous work: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Perhaps she could just stay in the cabin and read for the whole of the journey. The thought makes her feel a little less anxious.

She is deep in the book when the motion of the boat changes as it enters the open sea, beginning to heave in rhythm with the waves. At first Mary merely feels a little dizzy, but then the real sickness begins. She rushes for the door, desperate for air.

Up on the deck she clings to the ship's rails hoping her chaperone might reappear.

'Hello!' says a man. He is her father's age and dressed in much the same manner. Mary smiles weakly, afraid of being thought impolite. 'Feel sick, do you?' he asks kindly. She nods, holding on tight to the rail, her stomach rising and falling with the waves. 'Try putting your head down,' he suggests. Grateful, she rests her head upon the cold rails, frightened she might be sick in front of this stranger. When she looks up he is gone.

Slowly she stumbles back to her cabin. She cannot move, but only lie and groan in between bouts of the heaving, gut-wrenching sickness, longing for the familiar feel of her own bed and the safety of home. She empties her stomach and for a while feels well enough to sit up. Perhaps she might go up on deck and try to get help. The thought is excruciating. She does not know who to ask and her profound shyness outside of home makes her awkward.

‘My own mamma took a boat to France to bear witness to the Revolution, so surely I can go up on deck and find help,’ she whispers firmly to herself. She stands up. Good; she can stand without feeling too faint. She reaches for her purse, perhaps she might be able to purchase some medicine to help.

Her fingers find empty space. Her purse is not there. For a moment all sickness is forgotten. Perhaps she put it down? No, it is not on the tiny bedside table. Or tangled up in the bed. It is nowhere in the cabin. She searches her clothes, hoping against hope that it will be caught up in the folds of her skirt. She has no more money. All of it was tied to her, and if she cannot find it then she has nothing.

It takes half an hour of frantic searching before she can bring herself to believe that it is truly gone. She sinks to the bed, a dreadful understanding coming to her: it must have been the man she thought so kind; he must have taken it when he suggested she put her head down. What a fool she is. What a little idiot. How can she ever hope to match her mother who travelled alone across a whole continent when she cannot even successfully catch a ferry to Dundee? Again the sickness overtakes her. It is almost a relief to give in to it, to be too ill to think.

The sickness lasts until the *Osnaburgh* enters the harbour at Dundee. Mary hears a fierce knocking on the cabin door.

‘We’ve arrived, miss!’

Groaning, she gathers up her things. Will someone come and help her? Should she wait? What if the Baxters arrive and enter this small space, full of the stench of her sickness. The very thought of it drives her up and into the corridor, where she is standing, leaning against the wall surrounded by her cases, when Mr Baxter appears.

‘Mary?’ he asks.

She nods, holding out her hand. ‘I’m afraid—’ she begins.

‘Will you look at you!’ From behind Mr Baxter, a small woman appears. ‘Seasick!’ she declares. ‘Your father said so. William, take the wee lassie’s bags, and you,’ she says to Mary, ‘lean against me and we’ll struggle up together!’

Gratefully Mary does as she’s told. ‘I . . .’ she tries again to explain that her money is gone..

‘Not now, lovey,’ the woman whispers. ‘Rest first, explanations later.’

For a brief moment Mary closes her eyes and allows herself to lean against Mrs Baxter, enjoying the brush of her hand over her forehead. She is entranced. So this is what it might feel like to have a mother.

When Mary wakes the next morning she’s in a small bedroom with light and air pouring through the windows. Beyond the glass the view stretches all the way down to a deep blue loch. She closes her eyes, stunned by the quiet. Instead of street hawkers calling their wares, she can hear the sound of birds and the breeze in the leaves of a tree that hovers over the house.

‘Hello!’ says a voice at the bedroom door. ‘I’m Izy. Are you feeling better?’

Mary looks up into a pair of bright blue, curious eyes surrounded by a shock of thick gold hair.

‘Yes, thank you,’ says Mary. The two girls stare at each other; Izy Baxter overwhelmed by the fact that she is in the presence

of the real Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter. And Mary simply feeling shy. Izy waits for Mary to say something. She has been told of how intelligent she is, of how she is likely to supercede even her mother. But Mary is simply looking at her, saying nothing.

'Oh,' says Izy eventually, spying the pamphlet lying by Mary's side, 'you're reading Byron! He's a Scot, you know! We do actually have some of our own poets up here in the wilderness!' she adds, sitting down on the edge of Mary's bed.

'I read it as soon as it was published,' says Mary gratefully. 'Did you know, he sold fourteen thousand copies in one day!'

'My ma says grown women send letters to him – asking for a lock of his hair!'

'Fourteen thousand locks of hair,' says Mary. 'He'd have no hair left on his head if he agreed to send them all a lock each!'

'A bald Byron!' Izy laughs so much the bed shakes.

Mary stares at her. People usually admire Mary for her intellect not her humour. She has never really made anyone laugh like that before.

'Will you get dressed and come for a walk?' asks Izy.

Soon the girls walk out together every day, often disappearing at breakfast and failing to return until supper.

'Do you ever imagine travelling alone like your mother? Is it true that she walked through Paris and the streets flowed with blood!' Izy can never ask one question where two will do.

Mary nods. 'She truly stepped in a puddle of blood once,' she tells Izy proudly. The girls grimace with glee. 'She might have lost her head!' claims Mary.

'And then you would never have been born!'

Mary says nothing. She does not like to think of her birth, or of her mother dying so soon after.

'Let's run up the hill, turn three times and see who we'll

marry, will we?’ shouts Izy, noticing the pain in Mary’s eyes and thinking to distract her.

‘But why? It’s just superstitious nonsense!’ says Mary.

‘For fun!’ says Izy. ‘Do you never do anything just for fun, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin?’

‘No!’ says Mary.’

‘Oh!’ says Izy, stunned by the idea of eternal seriousness. ‘Would you like to try it?’

‘I might,’ agrees Mary.

Izy takes her arm. Mary feels silly. ‘One, two, three, go!’ Izy sets off up Law hill, pulling Mary along beside her. ‘C’mon, Mary, you have to run hard or the witch won’t tell ye!’

Mary presses her feet into the rough turf; the wind comes up over the crest of the hill almost knocking them over.

‘Turn!’ Izy shouts, pushing her hard. ‘Turn three times, widdershins!’

‘What’s that?’ shouts Mary.

‘Anti-clockwise!’

Mary spins around, her cloak flying in the wind and a breathless laughter rising up in her. The girls fall to the ground, up above, the clouds race across the sky. Not a trace of grey. Mary’s cheeks pulse with the effort and every time she looks at Izy their laughter begins again.

‘Ask, then,’ Izy says after a while. ‘Ask in your mind who it is that you’ll marry!’

Mary closes her eyes. Who will I marry? she thinks to herself, before crying out, ‘Oh, Izy, I can’t ask that!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because . . . because my mother didn’t believe in marriage!’

The girls stare at each other, wide-eyed for a moment before collapsing into laughter. They have already declared themselves disciples of Mary Wollstonecraft – and Godwin, Mary’s father. They have read Godwin’s *Political Justice* and pored over

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. They have vowed to follow Wollstonecraft's principles, entering only into relationships with men who are brave enough to defy the world and offer them equality. They long to work hard and earn their own living, living lives full of intellectual endeavour.

'Oh, well then,' sighs Izy practically, 'let's ask who we might love to eternity instead!'

'I'm not going to ask that,' says Mary hesitantly. 'I'm going to ask for something different.'

'And what might that be?'

'I'm going to ask if I'll ever be a writer. I mean –' Mary stumbles a bit, shy now that the words are spoken – 'whether I will ever earn a living by it and be truly independent, like my mother,' she finishes.

'Aye,' says Izy, 'that makes sense.'

And with her friend's easy acceptance of the idea, Mary begins to feel that it might really happen.

'Did *you* ask who *you'll* love to eternity?' she asks Izy.

'I mustn't say, or it'll never happen!'

'Then I'll guess!' laughs Mary. Izy blushes. 'It's David, isn't it?'

'He's already married,' says Izy firmly. 'And to *my sister*. Or had you not noticed?'

'And yet you love him, Izy, don't you?' Mary says seriously. Izy looks away. They often speak of how wonderful her brother-in-law is, describing David's many virtues – especially his green eyes – but to admit that she loves him? Mary says nothing, waiting for her friend to acknowledge the truth.

'Aye,' says Izy eventually. 'I think I do.'

The very next day, Mary starts writing a story. It is set in Scotland. She does not read it to Izy – it's too close to what is really happening – but she gives it to her when she leaves.

‘I’ll be back soon!’ she says.

‘Promise you’ll come next year?’

‘Cross my heart!’ says Mary. ‘And keep everything exactly the same for me!’

### **JUNE 1813 TO MARCH 1814: BROUGHTY FERRY**

But when Mary returns to Broughty Ferry a year later, everything has changed. Izy’s sister Margaret is dead, and by the time spring comes, David has asked Izy to marry him.

‘I thought he might ask *you*, Mary,’ Izy says, as they sit beside the loch together.

‘Why?’

‘Oh, you know, you being the child of two such famous parents and all!’

‘But that’s silly!’ snaps Mary, irritated. ‘A man would have to love me for myself,’ she declares, ‘not for my parents!’ Izy says nothing. ‘Anyway, it’s you he loves! And I will never marry! I don’t believe in it, remember!’ The truth is that she is just a little bit miffed that David has shown no interest in her at all.

‘I think I might get married in tartan!’ replies Izy.

‘Oh!’ cries Mary, for she can imagine Izy in her kirtle and shawl, and David in a kilt.

‘Would you like to be my maid of honour?’

‘Oh, Izy!’

‘And Christy – the two of you, I mean.’

‘As long as I can wear tartan too! I don’t think my mother would mind *you* getting married,’ Mary says generously.

‘Let’s ask Papa to take us to the factory. I ha’e to stick to

the Baxter tartan, but you can choose any colour you like, perhaps a green to go with your hair?’

Mary has never been fussed over before, especially not in the way Mrs Baxter fusses over her, declaring she must go for a dress, not a kilt, and choosing a dark green with a deep blue stripe in it and the merest touch of red. ‘Don’t the pair of you look bonny!’ She hugs Izy.

Mary stands back, longing to be hugged but anxious not to get it wrong. Do mothers hug other people’s children? ‘Come here!’ Mrs Baxter cries – she is soft and yielding, her arms strong around Mary’s shoulders. Mary would like to sink into her but she holds herself stiff and unyielding, unsure of what to do.

‘There, get changed now and we’ll take it all home!’ Mrs Baxter says. Later when the girls are in bed, she says to her husband: ‘Stiff as a board the girl is – it’s as though she’s never been embraced!’

‘She probably hasn’t,’ Mr Baxter agrees. ‘Godwin’s a thinker, not a feeling man!’

‘Have you noticed how quiet Mary beomes every time she hears from home?’

‘Mmmm.’ Mr Baxter becomes tight-lipped, as he always does when he’s trying to keep a secret.

‘William,’ his wife says sternly, ‘what is it?’

‘Well, Godwin’s not the best of men when it comes to finances, and he has an awful lot of mouths to feed with a wife and two extra children, as well as the bairn of their own.’

‘Do you mean to say they’re sending letters worrying Mary? Well, I shall keep them back in future.’

‘You cannae do that!’

‘I certainly can!’

But the next morning there are two letters waiting for Mary next to her plate.



*Dear Mary,* Fanny writes,

*I write with good news. Papa has met with a new benefactor. His name is Sir Percy Bysse Shelley – and he is a young baronet who comes originally from Sussex. Sir Percy admires Father enormously, and especially his defence of the Twelve Radicals. Fortunately, Sir Percy has decided that he will raise money upon the promise of his inheritance, spreading it amongst those who share his principles yet do not have his own good fortune – he has promised to support Papa. I do not know if Papa has told you how seriously in debt we are. If Sir Percy had not arrived in our lives at this very moment, then we feared Papa might have to endure prison. With Sir Percy's coming it feels as though we are all lifted from the 'shades of the prison house'.*

*Papa likes to have him here often now that you are gone, for without you he has no one to debate with over supper! Suppers are no longer so serious with Sir Percy here. He winks at Jane and I secretly and then laughs aloud when we (rather clumsily) try to return the compliment. He has brought his young (and very beautiful) wife to supper once or twice. They went to Ireland together to support the labourers there in their fight for fair wages. He has written a poem, called Queen Mab, and he is teaching Jane Italian. I know Papa is looking forward to you meeting him on your return, which will be soon, I hope.*

*Your sister,  
Fanny*

Mary stares at the letter; she has a vague memory of a poet named Shelley, but she cannot picture him.

'Is something wrong,' asks Izy. 'Not bad news, I hope?'

'No, just that Papa has met yet another young poet!' says Mary, carefully closing the letter and putting it away before

she opens the next one, the clear writing of Papa upon the envelope.

*Dear Mary,*

*I have booked your return passage on the Osnaburgh for Thursday, and enclose some reading that you might enjoy as you take passage. The pamphlets are written by Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley, who dines with us often. You will be able to judge the measure of him from the literature enclosed – and will no doubt meet him soon after your return. He offers to support my work with a generous loan, but the arrangement will take quite some time and we miss your company alongside such an illustrious guest.*

*Your papa,  
William Godwin*

‘Oh!’ says Mary aloud. ‘Now I won’t be here for the wedding!’

‘But we must at least run up Law hill one last time,’ cries Izy, ‘before you leave?’

It’s a tradition between the girls that they make the trip at least once each visit. They race to the top of the hill, Izy winning easily, but slowing to reach the top alongside Mary.

‘Perhaps,’ says Mary when she finally has her breath back, ‘this hill really is a magical place. It has granted your wish to marry David, and perhaps it might one day grant my wish to be a writer?’

‘I think maybe it’s harder to write a book than to fall in love!’ laughs Izy.

‘The first story I ever wrote was about Margaret dying and you marrying David.’

‘True,’ says Izy, ‘but you already knew I was half in love with him!’

‘But what if there is a magic in the stories we write,’ Mary asks, ‘so that when we write a thing we might make it come true?’

‘Well, if you can do that then perhaps you could write a story where the church sanctions my marriage!’

Mary laughs, staring out over the loch stretching away to the horizon, the straw hills she has come to love, glowing in the spring sunshine: ‘The church will never do that,’ she says flatly.

Izy rolls on her back, and flings her arms out wide, facing the sky. ‘I dinnae really mind!’ she says.

‘Mary?’

‘Mmmm.’

‘When David asked me to marry him, he kissed me.’ Mary says nothing, sensing a revelation coming. ‘It’s no’ just a pressing of the lips.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

Mary wonders what else it could be. She and Izy used to imagine kissing David, even tried briefly pressing their lips to each other’s before drawing away, shocked by the sudden intimacy and softness of each other’s skin.

‘It’s more like touching tongues.’

‘Ugh!’ says Mary, throwing her chewed-up blade of grass away.

‘I know,’ sighs Izy. ‘I knew you’d say that. I’d have said it myself before it happened.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I like it,’ she laughs.

‘If you like him that much you can probably survive excommunication,’ says a stunned Mary.

Izy laughs aloud with joy at her comment. ‘I’ll tell him you said that!’ she says – but Mary can’t see the joke. She is being completely serious.

‘Must you go?’ asks Izy. ‘Can’t you stay, at least until the wedding?’

‘I can’t. Papa wants me back, to meet Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley.’ She rolls the name across her mouth.

‘Why does he need you when he already has Jane and Fanny?’

‘Jane and Fanny do not have my mind.’

‘Do you want to go back?’

‘No! I hate leaving here,’ cries Mary. ‘Every time I go I fear it will be the last time I set eyes on these hills or gaze out over the loch. Until you have been in London you cannot imagine the stench of it or the misery. Or how alone one can feel, even when one is surrounded by buildings and people!’

‘I hope you find someone for yourself, Mary,’ cries Izy, holding her tight. ‘Find a man as wonderful as David and come and live in Broughty Ferry with us.’

‘I cannot,’ says Mary calmly. ‘Papa will never have the money to marry me off, and I would refuse anyway. I do not want a husband. I have decided on a life of solitude, a life of writing!’

### **MARCH 1814: 41 SKINNER STREET, LONDON**

Jane clambers into bed with Fanny. ‘I think tomorrow I shall ask Sir Percy to decline the verb “to love”?’ she suggests, her eyes shining and her hair lying loose across the pillow. ‘Do you dare me?’

‘Go on!’ whispers Fanny, her eyes alight. She would never admit it, but it is a relief, sometimes, to be free of Mary’s presence. Jane is fun. And so is Sir Percy – especially when he pulls faces at them across the table. ‘You’ll tell me what he says, won’t you?’

‘Of course! Do you like him yourself, Fanny?’

‘Perhaps,’ whispers Fanny shyly. ‘But he’s married, and Harriet is so beautiful and clever!’

‘He told me that she hid seditious pamphlets in her skirts,’ laughs Jane, ‘and carried them through the Irish customs!’

‘I’d blush at once, and be discovered,’ says Fanny hopelessly.

‘Sir Percy doesn’t behave as though he’s married, does he?’

‘But he is,’ says Fanny, ‘and we’ve met her, and so we shouldn’t really be too forward with him.’

‘Mmmm,’ says Jane, getting back into her own bed.

Sir Percy waits for Jane in the dining room, flicking through the books he has brought with him to teach her. He does not look up when she arrives, or stand as most men would, but remains immersed in his reading.

Jane does not mind, for it gives her the opportunity to stare at his face, the perfect symmetry of it allowing her eyes to slip from one feature to the next, like being caught up in a never-ending circle. His eyes are shaped like delicate, slightly rounded almonds. His hair is a soft curly gold and his skin so smooth that she clasps her hands together, stopping the longing in her fingers to reach out and touch it. Her eyes skim over his face searching for flaws, but there are none, his skin knitted into an ivory silk far fairer than any woman’s she knows. Perhaps only Mary’s pale skin might come close to matching it. When she’s not scratching. Jane is not looking forward to Mary’s return. It is lovely to have Sir Percy to herself.

Quietly she slips up to stand behind him. ‘*Amo, amas . . .*’ she begins.

‘Oh!’ he starts, and stands immediately; his jacket, she notes, is slightly too short, his frail wrists protruding from its sleeves. ‘Forgive me,’ he says, bowing slightly. ‘I didn’t see you!’ When Sir Percy remembers them, his manners are exquisite.

‘Or hear me!’ laughs Jane. ‘I was attempting to decline the verb “to love”.’

‘I am not sure the feeling is amenable to declension,’ he returns, before rattling off the endings and asking her, very seriously, to repeat them.

Bored at once, Jane seeks to distract him. ‘Tell me again why poets must also be agitators?’ she asks, neatly deflecting him. ‘I’m not sure I fully understood your meaning at dinner.’

‘Wordsworth,’ he replies, ‘says “a poet is man speaking to men”. He lived amongst the poor and destitute so that he might understand them better in his fight for their right to live on the land that is being stolen from them. Lord Byron may be rich beyond measure, yet he defends the right of weavers to break the looms that put them out of work and into poverty. Blake writes of the blood that runs down palace walls, unacknowledged by those who feast and become fat within them. What good is any poet who ignores such things?’

‘Mmm,’ agrees Jane, nodding seriously and wondering what Mary might say. ‘Did he win?’

‘Who?’

‘Lord Byron. Did he win the weavers the right to – um – destroy things?’

‘No,’ says Sir Percy earnestly. ‘The government believed it preferable to sentence to death the men whose livelihood they have stolen and so driven into poverty. They did not listen when Byron said that only utter desperation could have driven the men to such hazardous action – they preferred to believe those desperate men desired destruction – and yet Byron’s words will last, and history will judge; and that is what poets should be doing . . .’

He is away and Jane can sit back and watch the words fall from his beautiful lips, the passion light up his dark blue eyes. She puts a serious expression upon her face.

‘But Mr Godwin says we must encourage change slowly, through offering education, and so teaching reason to the poor.’

‘That may be right in principle, but how, I wonder, does sitting by the fire spouting ideas ever really change anything?’

Jane glances at the door; she doesn’t want Papa to hear him. She wouldn’t have Sir Percy in trouble for the world, but his righteous indignation makes her want to laugh out loud, especially as she has heard him agreeing so wholeheartedly with Mr Godwin over dinner. She bites her lip and widens her eyes to keep them serious. ‘So what should we do?’ she asks, leaning forward. She’ll do anything to keep him talking. He is easily the most wonderful being she has ever met.

‘Yes, we should teach the poor,’ he says, ‘but we must also encourage them to fight against their bondage. In *every* way they can,’ he cries. ‘They must do it through learning, but also through poetry and action – and if it’s required, even sedition!’ He is almost shouting. Jane reaches out and grasps his elbow in an attempt to calm him; to stop him before anyone in the household hears. He looks down at her hand in confusion as though, for a moment, he really has no idea at all why it might be there. She raises her finger to her lips but he smiles confidently at her caution. ‘We are in the home of William Godwin, author of *Political Justice*, a home where they understand revolution,’ he says. ‘Mrs Wollstonecraft herself reported on the French Revolution, and Mr Godwin tells me his daughter Mary is a true radical!’

‘You can ask her yourself when she returns,’ snaps Jane, for it seems as though Sir Percy is already as entranced by the idea of Mary as every other poet and philosopher who enters the house.