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**An examination of how a composite novel can be used as a tool to explore social, moral
and emotional effects of trauma from suicide loss**

Andrea Michelle Lownes

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of MA by Research.**

University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

The aims of this creative project are to explore the effects of suicide trauma on survivors and to bring the taboo of men's mental health and suicide to the fore through the creation of an historical composite novel entitled *The Fallout*. The driving force behind this project is the suicide of my husband and partner of twenty years. His mental health was a moot point for many years and the stigma surrounding it meant that he felt unable to ask for or seek help. It was most definitely a contributing factor to his suicide. The creative piece, *The Fallout*, is comprised of four independent stories that are linked through one event: the suicide of a Baron in the north of England in the twelfth century. The four stories are: 'Ena', the kitchen servant that finds the body, set the morning after the suicide; 'Peter', the brother of the Baron's mistress, set early a month after the suicide; 'Isolde', the baron's wife, set nearly three years after the suicide; and 'Matthew', the Baron's heir, set fifteen years after the suicide. Each story has its own narrative arc and therefore can stand alone or they can be read together.

The choice of a composite style was to reflect the effects of trauma: the fact that you are isolated. You may be part of a family or community but at the same time your trauma creates barriers that are difficult to break down or through. Each story focuses on a different person, thus I have the opportunity to explore how trauma affects different people in different ways regardless of age, gender or class. In this way I am attempting to normalise the diversity of trauma and its, often, devastating effects. Setting *The Fallout* in the twelfth century enables me to examine contemporary issues of mental health, suicide and trauma but through a lens. Setting it hundreds of years in the past means that it is so far removed from contemporary society that I can offer the reader security and perhaps limit the adverse triggers to their own mental health.

The most important things for me when writing the creative piece was that I had a solid ethical underpinning and that there was a strong sense of realism. Realism needed to come from both the historical context and from the representation of trauma. The use of language used by the characters and details of their surroundings are appropriate to the late twelfth century without being overwhelming. Representation of trauma is also factual and realistic both in accordance with trauma critics and also with a suicide survivor focus group that I set up. Ethically I knew that I needed to offer readers hope, something outlined by the WHO and The Samaritans. This is something that is encouraged through previous research into the effects of suicide in the media, on screen and on stage. It is referred to as the Papageno effect, the suggestion is that if hope is given alongside coping strategies and that resilient characters are drawn then this could in turn reduce suicidal ideation and behaviours.

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The Fallout

Ena

Frowning against her rumbling stomach, Ena pressed her hands against it hoping to quell the sound. The day was dragging already. It was barely terce and those in the keep had only just finished breaking their fast; yet she had been awake since dawn toiling in the kitchens. They were hot and steamy now with the lingering smell of fresh bread and pottage which seemed to be mocking her growling stomach. Feeling frustrated she pushed the heels of her palms into her eyes and sighed. Ena was currently hiding, avoiding a vengeful Cook, after helping herself to more than her fair share of pottage along with half a loaf of white bread that had been destined for the Lord's table, Cook had promised her a flogging and she knew from experience that Cook did not make promises that she did not intend to keep. Shuffling further into the nook that she had created between barrels of produce and the rough stone wall; Ena pulled a stray lock of hair from beneath her cap. Twisting it round her fingers she frowned as she inspected the fiery hues, it wasn't curly, it wasn't straight, it was something else entirely. Like her.

She had worked in the kitchen under the ever-watchful eye of Cook since her mother and father had died two winters' past from a fever. It had swept through the castle and the surrounding villages wreaking havoc and leaving behind many widows and orphans. The Lord and the castle Steward had placed her in the kitchens, they had told her that she was at an 'awkward' age being nine summers, whatever that meant, but that she seemed strong enough for the kitchens. Her brother who was less than a year older than her had been placed with the blacksmith who had lost his wife and son. Oh, what she wouldn't give to swap places with him. She would not have minded the heat and dirt from the smithy, she handled it here well enough, but that was not her lot. Deep down she knew she should be grateful

because here in the castle she was able to spend time with Matthew, the Lord's son, and for that she was grateful. He was her friend. He understood her, he knew what it was like to feel so out of place. So lost and... unworthy.

"Where's Ena?" Cook's dulcet tones snapped her back into the present. Flinching at the angry tone of her voice Ena tried desperately to squeeze further into the wall. "Ena!" Holding her breath, trying not to give away her hiding place she listened to Cook stamping round the kitchen, searching for her. Cook's movements were barely muffled by the crackle of the cooking fires, or by the rustling and shuffling of the other kitchen staff. "There's no use hiding from me, girl. It won't bode well for you if you do." Closer and closer she came; the sounds of her feet and her voice growing louder and then... stopped. She had been found. She knew it.

"What?" Ena's tone sounded much braver than she felt as she crept out from behind the barrels and stood up. Cook's eyes were alight with anger, her puffy face was red, and beads of sweat were making their way rapidly down from beneath her cap. Pulling her shoulders back, Ena drew herself up and put her hands on her hips defiantly. With a speed and force that Ena did not expect, Cook flew at her and grabbed hold of her ear, yanking her down and across the kitchen to the central wooden table, muttering as she went.

"What? What! To me? Bloody ungrateful little sod. You'd do well to remember your place in this kitchen my girl. You're under my watch and no bugger else's." Keeping hold of Ena's ear she grabbed a wooden bread paddle from the table and brought it swiftly down across her backside. The rough homespun cloth did little to protect her from the force behind Cook's swinging arm. "You say 'what?' to me again and I'll drag you up in front of the Steward, yer won't be so bloody haughty then will yer?" Another stinging crack with the paddle was accompanied by a shriek from Ena as she twisted and turned trying to escape

Cook's hold. "Oh no yer don't, not till yer've learned yer lesson." And again, this time on the back of her legs. Shoving at Cook's rotund frame whilst pulling hard against the hold that she had on her ear, Ena broke free and ran around the table. Holding her hand up against her burning ear, she scowled and clenched her teeth against her own anger that was threatening to erupt out of her. Cook stared back at her, daring her to open her mouth with a raise of her eyebrows.

"Go on. Go on then, girl. Say what yer want, but you mark my words, go against me and I'll mek sure yer little visits with Master Matthew stop." At the mention of Matthew's name, Ena's eyes popped open and she ceased rubbing her sore ear. "I thought that'd shut yer up." Narrowing her eyes, Cook loomed across the well-scrubbed table poking the bread paddle at her. "You should count yerself lucky that Lord de Pomeroy saw fit to give yer a place here," she swept the paddle across the kitchen as she spoke, "he could've left you and yer brother to that bloody fever, or let yer starve in that hovel o' yours." Throwing the paddle on the table, Cook turned away from Ena and walked a few paces down the length of the table.

Another young girl who was stood at the table chopping some early spring greens cringed when she noticed that Cook was heading towards her. The girl immediately began chopping faster, ensuring that her eyes were well averted from the scene playing out just a few feet from her. "God's bones, why the likes of 'you' were spared when my girls were taken, I'll never know." Bitterness dripped from every word that left Cook's lips. Ena dropped her chin to her chest, the words no longer affected her the way that they once had. Cook had thrown them at her far too many times over the last two years. The only thing they served to do now was increase the resentment that Ena felt both towards the Cook and to God. Cook picked up an empty wicker basket from the table and walked back towards her. Putting it on the table, she shoved it over to Ena.

“You’re going nettle picking.” Ena rolled her eyes and screwed her face up until she caught the look of amusement on Cook’s face. “M’lady’s maid came down earlier to say that Matthew’s having one of his turns, they need some fresh nettles, they’re nearly out.” Cook relished the look of shock on Ena’s face, she turned from the table and headed over to the bubbling cauldron that was suspended over one of the large hearths set deep in the walls of the castle kitchens. Wrapping a hand in her thick apron, she grabbed a ladle, stuck it into the pot and stirred. Never taking her eyes from Cook’s form as it jiggled in time to her movements, Ena grabbed the basket and shuffled round the table.

“Why do I have to go? Why can’t someone else go?” Cook stopped stirring. Ena could see her pursing her lips and clenching her jaw. Others in the kitchen dropped their heads focusing intently on their given tasks, ignoring the growing tension. “One o’ the little uns should have to pick nettles.” The force that had been present in Ena’s voice moments before suddenly fled. Even from across the kitchen, Ena could see the muscles twitching ominously in Cook’s jaw. She knew that riling Cook further would put her into very real danger and yet she could not stop mumbling and muttering as she made her way towards the open kitchen door. “I shouldn’t have to do it.” A sudden rush of air ruffled the frizzy tendrils of hair that had escaped from under her cap, as the ladle flew from Cook’s hand past her head, splattering her face and clothes with hot liquid from the pottage that it had been submerged in only moments before. Dropping the basket, she pawed at the hot liquid and flew for the door before Cook could catch hold of her once again.

“Y’ll do it, cos I said y’ll do it,” Cook screeched from within, “an’ if y’don’t, I’ll box yer bloody ears!” Twirling round, Ena ducked quickly, as the basket hurtled over her head.

“Well, you just wait,” Ena yelled into the shadowy kitchen, “when I’m bigger, I’ll box yer bloody ears back!” She shouted triumphantly before scurrying forwards to retrieve the basket.

Lunging from the hot shadowy depths of the kitchens into the early spring morning had dazed Ena and she shook her head against the brightness of it. The sun itself was still relatively low in the sky but the absence of cloud held a promise of some warmth as the day progressed. Looping her arm through the twisted reed handle she noticed that the woven ends that attached it to the basket itself were fraying, it would not be much good for gathering anything other than herbs or plants but its usefulness remained. The basket had long since lost its natural scent of wood and the outdoors, now it smelled of onions and mutton fat, it was greasy and battered around the edges, much like she would be when Cook got hold of her later.

“Fetch this... fetch that... do this... do that...” Muttering low she mimicked Cook and scowled as she stamped away. Her fiery hair bounced around her scrunched up face in a frenzied state. Her eyebrows were drawn down and her eyes were mere slits; anger oozed out of every pore. “I won’t be little forever,” she paused and spun round to face the kitchen buildings once more, the heavy oaken door remained open, letting in some much-needed air into the kitchen’s smoky depths. Squinting at the dark yawning void she growled, “then y’ll get it, y’... y’... y’ ronyon.”

Nettle picking was one of her least favourite jobs, it did not seem to matter how careful she was she was always full of stings once she returned. White lumps of scalding pain that covered her arms and were smattered up her legs. She would go and get the nettles though, and she would find the best ones too. She knew how important they were for Matthew. The winter had not been as cold as they had expected but it had rained. How it had rained. Now, poor Matthew’s chest rattled constantly, and it seemed that nearly every day at some point he had been gasping for breath. He hated his illness and how those in the keep looked at him and treated him. They did not see him as the Lord’s heir, they saw him as weak and pathetic, they looked at him with pity in their eyes, but not Ena. Ena saw the

strength within him. He battled against his weak chest with his head held high, he would not let himself succumb to it. It made her proud to be his friend and she would do whatever she needed to do to help him. The juice of the pounded plant mixed with some honey would do wonders and who knew, maybe she would get to spend some time with him, if she could sneak away from the kitchens for a while. Cook did not like her spending time with Matthew, the Lord's son. She said it was not 'seemly', whatever that meant. They did not care. They would meet up as often as they could, and then go and secrete themselves in a warm dark corner somewhere making up tales of princes and princesses and of knights in magical realms. Sometimes they would creep into the Lord's solar and sit at the huge wooden table. Shoving aside the sprawling rolls of parchment and ledgers they would play dice or Nine Men's Morris; she loved that best of all. It was the only thing that brought them both joy in the midst of their misery. The best time to sneak away was usually after she had cleaned the cauldrons from the nooning meal. At this time, Cook would be with Lady de Pomeroy discussing the next day's menu or with the Steward going over the provisions that needed using, and the older kitchen servants were often out distributing the gravy sodden trenchers, left over from the castle's main meal, to the poor. At this time of day, she could slip away for an hour or so and the two of them would transport themselves away from drudgery of their own lives into the realms of fantasy. A place where they could laugh, could feel freedom and peace.

Letting the basket thump against her thigh she slowed down a little as she made her way down the muddy path towards the orchard. The rains had seemed relentless this last week leaving puddles everywhere. The rainwater had nowhere to go, in fact, there had been so much that the castle grounds were sodden and many of the pathways were now boggy. Her feet squelched, the cloying mud reluctantly letting go as she lifted her legs high in order to move on. In her haste to leave the kitchen, she had not grabbed her wooden patens to

protect the soles of her worn leather boots. There may have been no actual holes in her boots but the shoddy stitching almost invited water inside, chilling her toes. She tried to remain in the centre of the pathway, careful to avoid the tall grasses and plant life that were bent low on both sides, heavily laden with large drops of water. It was still early in the season for the plant life around the castle to be flowering but spending so much time outdoors with her mother as a young girl, she recognised many of the plants, knew their properties and qualities. Once she had wanted to be a healer like her mother; but it was so long ago now she was not even sure it had been her life. Thick green stalks of cow parsley held aloft closed green buds that drooped slightly under their own weight and that of the rain that still rested there. Soon delicate white flowers would bloom in clumps and the soft, fern-like leaves would frame them gently. In a month or so she would come back and pick some and help make tinctures that could be used for griping bellies. Resisting the urge to gently touch the bobbing green heads, she remained in the centre of the muddy pathway. Getting too wet now would only make this job more insufferable and she knew that being damp in the hot kitchens was tortuous. Thinking back to the kitchen, its cloying heat and steam made her eyebrows knit together again and she pressed her lips into a thin line. Determined, this time, that she would keep her anger in. She would save it up and let Cook have it full pelt when she returned. Perhaps she could throw her basket of nettles at Cook, let them sting her podgy face.

At the end of the lane, the orchard came into view. The trees stood proudly next to their neighbours. The gnarled branches and twigs spread out in the cool morning air, still bare from winter. As she came closer, she could see the knots that showed the growth from the previous season and already buds were forming along the lengths of each branch. She hoped that the summer would be good and that the harvest would be bountiful, she loved the crisp, tart nature of the fruit that grew here. The sun was still relatively weak and the

shadows in the orchard were deep. It unnerved her. She always felt on edge, that something might be there. What? She had no clue, there was just a feeling. She was forever being told that she let her imagination get the better of her, that she spent too much of her time daydreaming and thinking up fanciful tales. Perhaps the grown-ups were right.

Coming to a stop at the end of the lane she rubbed her hand along the lichen covered gate. The wood beneath her hand was sodden, the gate seemed to have lost its solidness, it looked as if she could squeeze the water out of it. Drawing her hand back she noticed flecks of lichen clinging to her skin, without much thought she wiped her hand on the back of her skirt and steered herself off to the right. To gather nettles, there was no real need to enter the orchard at all, the pastures towards the right got more sun and therefore, she knew, that the nettles that grew there were sweeter. Matthew could tell by now where the nettles came from. She would do anything to help her friend get well and see him smiling again, even if it meant heading to the pasture. The dense trunks of the apple trees shielded the pastures from the wind, another reason to head down to the right. The only problem with the nettles in the pasture, was the lack of dock leaves. For some reason, they were sparse even though there were plenty of nettles. Dropping the basket to the floor she bent over slightly and reached between her legs to grab the sodden hem of her skirts, pulling it towards her she threaded it through the belt at her waist. Her legs were now bare and goose bumps quickly popped up protesting against the cool breeze. Taking the handle of the basket in one hand and pulling tendrils of hair from in front of her eyes, she wound her way along the fence of the orchard. The grass was flattened in a thin trail, testament to the amount of times that she had trodden it in the last few weeks. Occasionally it jutted right, to avoid a low hanging branch and then made its way back again.

Coming to a large cluster of nettles that bobbed curiously at her under the weight of water droplets, she placed her basket on the floor and approached them. To protect her arms

and hands she wound them in the folds of her skirts and then hunkered down. There would be no gloves for the 'likes of her' Cook had told her time after time; it did not matter how much she begged and pleaded Cook would not sway from her decision. She seemed determined to see Ena suffer, some sort of fitting punishment for surviving the fever that had taken away her own daughters. If she could get her hands as close to the root as possible, she should be able to cut and collect it without getting stung. She took hold of her first nettle with her left hand and her eating knife with her right, but just as she bent in further to cut it away the sodden ground let go and the nettle came out root and all. Letting out a frustrated groan she knocked it against the fence, shaking free small clods of earth, before dropping it into her basket. Perhaps, she could tell Cook that she had pulled this one out whole on purpose so that it could be planted closer to the castle to make it easier for the healer or m'lady's maid to access. That way she might be able to avoid a further punishment for disobeying orders.

Wrapping her hands again she leant forwards and took hold of the next plant, this time she was more cautious of the lack of resistance that the soil would provide, just as she brought her knife down to it, a light flashed into her eye and she slipped, losing her footing she fell forwards, the knife landing in the midst of a dense clump of nettles. Trying to steady herself she jutted both hands out in front of her and as they hit the floor, she jumped back feeling tingles down both forearms. Sitting on her backside, with her knees up to her chin, she held out both arms and could already see the tell-tale bumps of the nettle stings springing up. Not wanting to scratch them, less they start to burn, she twisted to her knees and bent forwards laying her arms on the wet grass hoping it would soothe them. As she did this there was another flash of light that caught her eye. Furrowing her brow, she sat back on her heels and scanned her surroundings. She heard nothing. Nothing at all. Saw no one... and yet there it was again. A glint of light from within the orchard. Craning her neck, she tried to

peer over the fence to see what it was. She waited and then saw it again. Dropping her head to her chest she now peered through the fence but again saw nothing. Deciding that she did not have time to waste chasing her imagination she scrambled to her feet and returned to the nettles, already disheartened by the hot stinging effects on her arms she re-wrapped her arms and then stretched cautiously to retrieve her knife. Just as she bent down, returning to her task, another glint of light distracted her. She stood swiftly, turning her attention from the nettles and towards the orchard once more.

There was a small breeze that chilled her damp limbs, momentarily she forgot her hot, stinging arms. Stepping back, she wove her way along the fence, away from the nettles, until she found a clear gap. Gingerly, she moved forwards and then lent against the fence, craning her neck this way and that, determined to see where the light was coming from. The only movement she could detect in the orchard was the slight dip and sway of the bare branches in the breeze. Again, a glint in the distance but no matter how she twisted her neck and head she could not find the source. Letting out a disgruntled sigh, she climbed the fence, swinging her legs over the top she sat down, gripping the rough wood beneath her. In the summer, she loved the shade and peace that the orchard emanated but in winter and early spring there were too many shadows. The place was eerily quiet, except for the rustle of the branches and then, as the light glinted again, she heard a faint creak. Eyes wide, she sat frozen. Gripping the top of the fence until her knuckles were white, she held her breath, waiting. Waiting. There. A glint and a creak. Her breath left her body in a shuddering trail. Swallowing quickly, she slipped down from the fence, her feet sinking into the soft orchard floor. Bending left she tried again to locate the source of the light and noise. Nothing. Bending to her right she tried again... nothing.

The breeze shifted her mass of red hair and as she brought her hands up to sweep it from around her face, she caught the glint again and heard the creak. She wanted to turn and

leave but felt compelled to move forwards. She remembered the troubadours that she had heard up at the castle, they often sang of treasure found in deserted faraway places, perhaps it was treasure? Dragging her feet, she took small steps, trying to make no noise at all. The hairs along her arms prickled, not just from the stings of the nettles but something else. It almost felt like she was intruding, as though she should not be there. Taking small, shallow breaths, bending low, she crept forwards again. Coming to a tree in front of her she reached out her arms and then pressed up against it. She no longer saw the glint of light, but she heard the creak again as the breeze moved the branches above her. Taking a deep breath, she lent her head against the rough bark of the aged tree and let it out slowly. Drawing another long breath through her nose she closed her eyes, bracing herself. Everyone knew that with treasure came the possibility of danger. Mayhap there was no treasure at all, mayhap it was something else entirely, some creature that she had been warned about countless times. A creature that stole away disobedient children. When she opened them again, she took a step to her left and rounded the tree, trying to focus on where the creaking noise was coming from.

At eye level, at the next tree a pair of feet dangled, pointing down to the ground where the tree's roots were creeping away from its trunk. Large feet, wearing large boots. Men's boots. Good quality leather boots. Scuffed. Whose? The feet moved slightly, twisting round. Ena glimpsed an intricate metal fastening mid-calf, it was a stag's head, the de Pomeroy sigil. Her Lord's sigil. What was he doing? Was he stuck? His legs were closed, his ankles almost touching. That was not how he stood. He stood legs apart, strong and ready. Ready for anything... for everything. His arms were slack against his sides with his fingers curling into something that was not quite a fist, they seemed too big, too strange, as if he had been handling woad dye, like her mother's would look when she had been dyeing rough homespun material that she would make into a blue hood for her father. That colour...

not really blue at all. She knew that colour though, she had held the rough work worn hands of her mother and her father, and they had been that colour. Not blue. Not purple. Some sort of betwixt colour. Suddenly, she felt the wind in her lungs ripped from her throat.

She could not breathe. Could not move. Could not think. His feet. Pointing down, like an arrow. The dark brown leather was scuffed at the toe but then the breeze came and he moved and now she could see his sword belt on his hips, the light catching the jewelled pommel, sending a small shaft of light over her head and back out of the orchard. A signal. Still, she could not move. It was as though she had been planted alongside the other trees. She desperately wanted to look away, to turn and run but she couldn't. Her body began to tremble, starting at her knees and working up, her arms hung limply at her sides, but she could feel them tapping rhythmically against the tops of her thighs. Snapping her eyes shut she tried to focus on breathing, forcing herself to take in gulps of air and expel them, hearing her blood pumping in her ears not able to drown out the creaking noise that came as the breeze shifted the hanging body before her. All of the time seeing his booted feet, scuffed at the toes, pointing down. Needing to escape the image and the noise she opened her eyes again and looked up towards his head.

Running to him she grabbed hold of his legs and tried to push him up, tried to save him. She cried for help. Turned her head and screamed towards the orchard fence. His legs were solid, heavy. She was too short, too weak. She could not push him up to save him. Her feet slipped on the floor and he moved. His fingertips brushed the top of her head, catching her hair. Pushing against his legs now she jumped backwards, tripping and stumbling over the roots of the tree. Crashing to the floor she scrambled backwards, her skirt had slipped from her belt and was now tangling around her wet legs, getting stuck beneath her own worn boots. His were scuffed at the toe. Pointing down. Like an arrow. Pointing down to the solid ground below but nowhere near it. The creaking was louder, his body turned and

twisted and knocked against the trunk of the tree and then she saw his face. It was blue, no purple, mottled. His eyes were half open, unfocused, she could not see the colour, were they brown like his boots? His brown boots; scuffed at the toe. His mouth was open as though he was about to speak but it was frozen. Bent to one side he seemed intrigued, then the breeze came and shifted him again, the light glinting from the pommel.

In the distance she could hear panting, heavy breaths in and out. Tearing her eyes away from him she looked for the animal making the noise, there was nothing there. Only her and him. The panting was getting louder and louder and she realised it was her. Something took hold of her then, shocking her out of her reverie, again she began scrambling backwards wanting to look anywhere but at him, but he drew her back. Drew her in. Sweeping his body, she noticed again the boots, the brown boots, scuffed at the toe. Backing into something she screamed, or she thought she did but there was no noise. No. There was noise but it was not her shrill desperate cry it was the creak of the rope wrapped around the branch; it was the blood pounding in her ears. Her hands scrabbled around just behind her, she grabbed at the gnarled bark of the tree. Felt its solid form. It did not move. Edging up it she could feel the bark catching her hair pulling against her scalp, like his fingertips had when his body moved away from her.

Jumping up and away from the tree she turned and ran, stumbling the way she came. She tripped and fell forwards again, she put her hands out, trying to save herself but it was too late. She hit the ground with force and pain shot up her body from her knee which buckled beneath her. Her skirt was ripped and wet, there was blood on her knee, seeping onto the material around it. Blood, deep and red. There were droplets of it on the stone that she had fallen on. Dragging her eyes from her knee she twisted back up but now felt unsteady on her feet. Throwing herself forwards she limped against the pain needing to get to the fence. Grabbing the top, she managed to get her legs up onto the first slat and then she

flung herself over. Rolling again she came to her feet and now... now she was sobbing. Great wracking sobs that shook her body.

Up the lane smoke drifted from the roof of the kitchen. It seemed so far away. Looking over her shoulder, back into the gloom of the orchard she swore she heard the creak again. Could see him twisting and turning at the end of the rope, his eyes half open, head bent to his right. The image propelled her forwards, but her breathing was panic stricken. She was shaking and her feet were moving erratically. Every few steps forwards her legs floundered and she plunged into the brown puddles below. Brown. Like his boots. Scuffed at the toe and pointing down. Mud splattered up her skirts and her arms as she awkwardly regained her footing to move on towards the kitchen. Towards Cook. She needed help. She needed it now.

Trying to steady her breathing, trying to calm her body and mind she bent over and held onto her knees. Her left knee smarted and she winced against it. Breathing slower now. In... one... two... three. Out... one... two... three. In... one... two... three. Out... one... two... three. Like they always told Matthew when he could not catch his breath. Matthew! Her body contracted at the thought of Matthew's face when he was told. She had to move. Had to keep going. Stumbling on, dragging her feet, hearing them squelch in the mud, her sodden skirt clinging to her legs, weighing her down but she had to get away from the orchard, from him. Swinging and creaking in the breeze.

Throwing herself at the heavy kitchen door she fumbled with the latch. Who had closed it? It should be open. Her fingers felt swollen, too big to flip the latch down to open the door. His fingers were cold, solid, mottled purple like his face. Too big. Leaning her head against the door a mewling sound escaped her throat as it constricted again and again, her lungs trying to drag in air. Trying to refocus on the door she looked at her fingers, they were twitching and jerking and not doing what she wanted them to do but then she had it.

She pulled the door towards her, catching her toes, her toes in her boots, her brown boots that were scuffed on the toe but hers were not pointing down, hers were there. In the way.

Shuffling backwards she pulled the door open and fell into the kitchen heading straight for Cook.

The noise of her entrance startled Cook, who was elbows deep in a bowl with puffs of white flour escaping as she kneaded the dough within it. She stared open-mouthed at Ena, her eyes sweeping the bedraggled figure before her. She stopped her pummelling and brought her hands up, clapping them together to dislodge clumps of dough. She took in Ena's wet and ripped skirt, the splatters of mud on her arms and face, the tears, the mouth that was opening and closing with nothing coming out of it. Sliding the bowl to one side, Cook wrapped a floury hand around the handle of the wooden bread paddle before she spoke. "Where's them nettles then?"

"Piss on yer nettles." Ena's words whispered out on shaking breath. Cook stood agape.

Ena's terror was palpable, even to Cook. "Get the Steward. We need the Steward. We need help." Gripping Cook's plump forearm she turned her head to face the others in the kitchen.

"Help! Help! Get help. Get the Steward. We need the Steward. Raise the hue and cry."

Swinging back to Cook they shared a look of mutual fear, the type of fear that only death can

bring. The type of fear both knew so well. "I think he's dead. By the love of God...

m'lord's dead." Dragging her ward against her chest she threw her arms around Ena's

heaving shoulders before lifting her head.

"You 'eard 'er, get the bloody Steward!"

Peter

It was time for Peter to be up but he was loathe to do so. Mary's arm was draped across his chest, a comforting weight and her warmth made him want to shrug away the day. Blinking a couple of times, he let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom of the house. Noticing the dying red embers in the fire pit he knew he could not put off getting up much longer.

Turning towards Mary, he looked at the way her dark lashes fanned her high cheekbones.

She was a special woman and he was indeed lucky to have wed her. Never could you meet a warmer or more patient and understanding woman. She stirred in her sleep and rolled onto her back; his eyes were immediately drawn to the ever-increasing swell of her abdomen.

Gently he stroked the taut mound under her shift.

"You'll waken him." Her voice was groggy and her eyes remained closed.

"It's time we were all up anyway." As Peter spoke, she puckered her face in mock annoyance, opened her eyes and looked deep into his.

"I need to piss," struggling to a sitting position she shook her head, "I always need to bloody piss." Flinging the covers back he jumped up and then hauled her up too.

"Go on then, I'll get this fire going." Stretching out her back she gave Peter a smile and waddled to the door.

"Don't waken Tom yet, he was crying in the night again."

He glanced over at the foot of their bed where Tom was wrapped in his own blankets. He loved his nephew dearly and worried for the forlorn little boy. Even in sleep he had such a sorrowful little face. Mary opened the door and he heard her feet padding down the path towards the midden heap where she would relieve herself. Stifling a yawn he went and picked up some wood from the pile and then knelt before the fire pit. Scraping away some of the ashes he placed some smaller kindling sticks around the embers then bent low and blew gently until they caught. Sitting back on his haunches he let the fire come to life before

putting on the larger pieces of wood. He would need to go and check on Magda's fire soon, hopefully she would not have let it go out... again.

"Deep in thought are you? Let me guess, Magda?" Murmuring in agreement he lent his head back against Mary's legs and looked up into her smiling face. "She just needs time, Peter."

Ruffling his hair she then turned to the shelves above the rickety table, lifted the lid of a basket and took out a heel of bread. Breaking it in two she handed him a piece and then ripped off a chunk of her own and pushed it into her mouth before she went over to the water bucket to scoop out a couple of cups. The bread was dry and took a fair amount of chewing but the water helped soften it up. They sat on stools by the fire pit and put their feet on the hearth stone to warm them up while they finished breaking their fast.

"How much time? He's been dead weeks, if she carries on like this people will start suspecting something's amiss." Peter's voice was strained, looking after Magda in her grief was draining. They had all suffered grief, he had lost his first wife in childbed not three years ago; he hadn't behaved like Magda was doing now and they had married for love. She was not married to Richard, he was their Lord, she was his mistress. The suicide of Richard de Pomeroy had sent shock waves through the village, what had made him do it? He had money, power, status, plenty of food on the table and a family of his own. Old Peg, the tanner's wife said it must have been demons who had made him do it, or guilt over his wrong doings. It seemed almost unbelievable, no one could suspect him of wrongdoing, he was such a fair Lord. Never took more than what was owed in service or taxes, gave gifts at yule and Easter and always had time for everyone in his care. The truth of his misdemeanours with his sister laid heavy on Peter's mind. He would not sully his Lord's name or reputation, best to keep the knowledge to himself to protect everyone involved.

"You're away again Peter? Come on, talk to me love." Squeezing his knee she brought him out of his own thoughts and back to her. She was always so understanding.

“We can’t keep going like this, us looking after Tom when he should be with his mother. Her, in bed all day every day. She needs to be up and pulling her weight. There’s wool that needs spinning and crops that need planting, we can’t take on all her work forever, it won’t be long before your time.” He nodded at her belly before reaching over and giving it a pat. “It’s not a dog, gi’o’er patting it.” Humour shone from her eyes, easing some of the tension that was building up inside. “Go round now, get her sorted and tell her she needs to come and see Tom, maybe that’ll help her.”

Peter sighed deeply and gave her a weak smile.

“Right then. Let’s see what today’ll bring us.” Slapping his thighs he stood and grabbed his coif from a peg by the door, dragging it over his head he gave Mary another smile before heading out into the grey morning.

Magda woke with a start. Her breathing was heavy and she felt sweat running down her face and neck. It was that dream again. The one where Richard was dead. It was just a dream, she told herself. Just a dream. Relief flooded her but then, just like the cold light of day that crept forth each morning, so too did her realisation. Richard was in fact dead. He had abandoned her.

Rolling over she looked forlornly to ‘his’ side of the bed. She could swear that the indentations of his body remained, as though he had just left the cottage to go to the midden heap to relieve himself. If she closed her eyes she could imagine he was out there. When he had finished, he would creep back to the cottage; a slither of light piercing the darkness from the open door and would then be almost blocked by his form in the doorway before being swallowed entirely as he closed the door with a creak. Stumbling and tripping he would make his way back over to the bed, he would pause on his knees shuffling the straw round to

make it more comfortable before lying down next to her. Closing her eyes, squeezing them tight against her pain, she rolled onto her back once more.

The straw below offered little comfort, it was from the last harvest. It was after the harvest feast when Richard first came to her, she could feel his touch even now and hear him calling out her name when they made love. They had been the happiest six months of her life and now, like the straw, she felt limp and lifeless. It was not supposed to be like this. How had it happened? Why would he leave her like this? Alone. Completely and utterly alone. Every part of her body ached; her heart felt like a stone. There was such heaviness in her chest that it made her stoop over when she moved about. Grabbing the covers she tugged them, bunching them up and hugging them to her body before she rolled once more; this time away from 'his' side.

The heavy darkness of the cottage was broken by small shafts of light that were filtering in from round the ill-fitting door. She would have to get Peter to look at it. She had put off getting Peter to fix it because she had believed Richard's promises. He was going to move her out of here, this hovel with one pokey room. He said he was going to have something built for her, something worthy of her. A wave of hopelessness washed over her, pressing her into the hard-packed earthen floor. Magda's ears rang with the silence of her home.

Outside, beyond the door and the wattle and daub walls, the village was waking. Doors creaked open and animals clucked, bleated and grunted as they were ushered outside for the day. Yawns and guttural moans pierced the air as the inhabitants of Clayborne stretched to waken their bodies and minds. Life went on. Shutting out the noise of the wakening village, Magda dragged the blankets over her head. Closing her eyes she prayed for sleep to claim her once more. If she slept, she might dream of him. Something pleasant. She might feel the weight of his touch or smell the musky scent of him. Oh, the promises he

had made to her during their whirlwind love affair: a home, silks and soft linens. She had asked for gold, his wife wore silver and amber (her favourite apparently) but she wanted, nay, needed more than that. Their love was bigger than the love that he shared or had with his wife. Magda needed Richard to show her how much he loved her. He had given her a ring, a golden band with three small red stones set into it. They caught the light like the red stone in the pommel of his sword. Initially she had worn it on a leather cord around her neck, long enough so that the ring nestled between her breasts, now it was on a cord of hemp rope. Easing her grip on the blankets she felt for the cord and scooped up the dangling ring. At first it was cold to her touch, like his side of the bed but once it was nestled in the palm of her hand it warmed. The weight of it was comforting. She did not want to hide it away anymore, she wanted to wear it so that everyone could see how much he loved her. Maybe she would... her thoughts were broken as the cottage door creaked open. Not caring who it was or what they wanted she shuffled further down in the covers.

“Get up.” The deep rasping voice of her brother called over to her. She ignored it. “Come on, Mags, get up. The fire’s out.” From her cocoon she could hear Peter start to bustle around the home he had once lived in too, before he had wed. He had left the door propped open and light streamed in hurting her eyes as she peeped out. “You can’t lig in bed all day Mags, come on.” Drawing the covers back just a little, she watched the lithe form of her brother in the gloom from near the fire pit. He had pulled his coif down when he had come in and the brown material bunched on his shoulders. His brown hair, so much like hers and their father’s, was now thinning and she could see little glimpses of white scalp. She did not like that he was aging, he would be gone too soon and then no one would look after her. He was knelt down and she could tell he was going to sort the fire for her. She was glad, she hated that job. Grabbing the flint from under a large stone at the edge of the pit he took some kindling and ruffled it before striking the flint. Small blue sparks shot out once, twice and

then a tiny spiral of grey smoke twisted up from before him heading up towards the smoke hole in the thatch above.

“You can’t stay there all day y’know.”

“Why?” At her question Peter turned around and looked at her, shaking his head. He turned again and pulled some wood over the small fire. They were both quiet for a while; it lay heavy on her. No one understood her pain, the way it gnawed at her continually.

“He was the love of my life.” Magda’s words were soft. Sighing deeply Peter stood and brushed his hands down his hose, there was a patch on the knee.

“Just get up.” There was a harshness to his tone borne of frustration.

“Why? Why should I? What have I got left now?” Sitting up Magda dropped the ring and cord down the neckline of her shift and frowned at her brother.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing left’? What about Tom?” His tone remained harsh before he huffed away his ire and came over to sit on the bed. Anger rarely worked with Magda, she needed gentle coaxing.

“Exactly what I say. Without Richard, I have nothing. I am nothing. Tom’s only little, he’s no help.” Resigning himself to the fact that they were going to be having the same conversation yet again he reached over and took her hand in his squeezing gently. Almost every morning for the three weeks since Richard de Pomeroy’s death Peter had spent time convincing his sister that life was worth living, that it could be full and meaningful if only she would meet it each day. Looking at her now, the dark rings circling her eyes, the tracks where her tears had swept away the encrusted dirt on her face, she needed to get up and fight, he did not have the time for this, especially now that the fields needed more attention.

“What about Tom? He can’t stay with me and Mary forever. He needs you.” Snatching her hand from Peter’s she ignored his question and instead placed a hand over her stomach.

“Perhaps I am carrying Richard’s child.” Rolling his eyes heavenward, Peter stood and turned away from her.

“Not this again.” Striding over to the door he closed it before walking back over to her, they did not need any prying eyes of the villagers who could go telling tales to all and sundry.

Magda’s brown doe eyes stared up at him, her hair was matted from spending too long in bed and she looked gaunt, as if she had not eaten in days. He would need to get Mary to feed her up.

“Listen Magda, you’ve got to stop this. You can’t keep torturing yourself.”

“Stop what?” Her anger flared and she leapt from the bed standing toe to toe with him.

“This,” he opened his arms and gestured around her dirty home, “you’re slovenly, you’re not looking after yourself, you’re not looking after Tom and you’re not pulling your weight. It’s planting time, the fields need us, the gardens need us, we’ve animals to tend, you should be spinning wool for the tithes and taxes and it’s me and Mary picking up the bloody slack!”

His words hissed forth from between clenched teeth; a muscle twitched along his jaw.

“He was the love of my life.” Each word spoken by Magda was punctuated slow and spat back into Peter’s face.

“We’ve heard that before.” Magda gasped. Peter knew that now was the time for her to hear the truth of the matter. Before she could collapse back onto the bed he took hold of her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.

“Father wasn’t like this after our mother died and they’d been wed years. I wasn’t like this when Lottie died with the babe. You was just his mistress, nothing more. No better than any of the whores a Lord slakes his lust with.” Pain illuminated her eyes and her bottom lip quivered. “I know, I know. It’s hard to hear but it’s the truth of the matter.” Tears welled in her eyes and Peter regretted both his words and his actions. Loosening his hold on her, she slithered from his grip and buried herself once again below the blankets and fur on the bed.

“Magda? Mags?” His tone was gentle now but it had little effect.

“You know nothing,” the covers muffled her words and Peter once again had to sit down on the bed so that he could hear her, “we had plans for the future.” She whined.

“What plans could you possibly have had? He was our Lord, we his workers.” Poking her head up, she looked at Peter through watering eyes.

“I told him I wanted him to send ‘her’ away, his wife. I made him promise to move me in in her place, Tom would’ve stayed with you and Mary, he likes you and Mary,” tears spewed down her cheeks as she rambled at him, “we were going to have a big family and our sons were going to be great Lords with grand estates of their own. He didn’t love her you see,” gaining momentum and with a willing audience, she sat up and shuffled closer to Peter, “she didn’t pay him enough attention, there was always something else to do. Silly things, he said, always something for the estates or that Matthew. He was a disappointment too, how could he be heir to Clayborne? Our sons would’ve been strong, they would’ve been good heirs.” Dragging in big gulps of air she grabbed Peter’s hands in hers searching his eyes frantically before continuing. “She couldn’t make him happy, only I could.” He did not know what to say to her, how to react, he had never heard anything as delusional as this. “I would’ve been dressed in silks, head to toe in soft linens and silks. I would’ve been so beautiful. I told him what I wanted and he said I was beautiful just as I was.” Magda’s tears had stopped and a wobbly smile formed on her lips.

She began fiddling with something around her neck, her eyes widening as she did. Curiously Peter watched as she pulled a cord up from beneath her shift, pulling it over her head. In her outstretched hand was a length of what looked like a fragment of frayed rope which was tied to a gold ring set with red stones. He tilted his head to one side, confused slightly, and Magda grinned. She offered it to him and he took hold of the ring in his hand, testing its weight. He searched her face questioningly.

“It’s mine.” The pride in her voice was unmistakable. “Richard gave it to me. He said I was worth more than all the gold he had.

“Sard.” His quiet clipped statement confused her.

“What?” Magda tried to snatch the ring back from Peter but he held on to it, bringing it up to his face to examine it further in the gloomy light.

“You can’t keep this, Mags. You can’t wear it.”

“Why?” Her indignation made her seem more childlike than ever. “It’s mine. I asked for it and he gave it to me.” She grabbed for it again but Peter would not give it back. Her pushed her away from him and she sprawled back onto the bed.

“No Mags, you can’t. What if someone sees you with it?”

“Then they’ll know how much he loved me.”

“Shit. No. No. No.” Keeping tight hold of the ring in one hand he rubbed his stubbled jaw with the other, panic spreading across his features. Open mouthed, Magda sat back up and hugged her knees up to her chin. “If someone sees this, they’ll think you’ve stolen it.” He stood up and started pacing back and forth, clutching the ring in his hand. He walked over to the fire so he could inspect it further in the slightly better light. “You could swing for this Mags. Do you...” His words trailed off and he stood motionless, staring down at it in his hand. Knitting his brows together, he brought it up again, close to his face.

“What? What is it?” Scrambling off the bed she hurried over to him. The packed earthen floor was cool underfoot but she did not notice. Peter had taken hold of the cord and had begun rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger. Slowly, his eyes widened in horror and with mouth agape he turned to his sister.

“Tell me this isn’t what I think it is.” Pushing against him she tried to grab it from his hands. He held her back with one hand until she calmed a little and then threw it to her. “It is, isn’t

it?” Grabbing the sides of his head he pulled back his hands, dragging skin and hair with them, exaggerating his horror.

“It’s mine!” Looping the cord back around her neck, Magda pulled the front of her shift away from her body, dropped the ring down it and held it against her chest.

“I don’t mean the ring you stupid slut,” two strides and he was before her, “you stole the bastard noose didn’t you?” His face reddened with anger and she backed away the clumsy looking wooden sideboard before turning and heading back towards the bed. “Where’s the rest of it?” Peter’s fury spewed over and he began frantically searching her home. “Where is it?” Magda remained silent, dumbfounded at his reaction. She just stood by the bed watching him as he grabbed pots and baskets, emptying them and discarding them. Turning this way and that his eyes darted and scanned every dingy corner, then he stopped and looked at her. Frozen, she stared back. Slowly now, he moved towards her, she flinched when he came close but this was quickly replaced by panic as he pushed her away from the bed.

Grabbing the blankets he ripped them from the top of the mattress and flung them at her, she watched as they crumpled and puddled at her feet. Leaping over them she clutched at his tunic, desperately trying to drag him away. The scuffle was pointless on her part, he was bigger and stronger. Taking a fistful of her shift in his hand he gripped it tightly and held her away from the bed. With his free hand he grabbed the mattress, flipped it over and saw what he was looking for. On the dark floor below the mattress curled in a ring near the head of the bed was the rope that the cord had come from. Even in the gloom she could see the fire of pure anger that lit his eyes. Letting go of her shift he reached over and took up the rope.

Shrinking back slightly she stared blankly at Peter, ignoring what was in his hand altogether.

“Don’t gape at me like that, explain yourself. Why have you got this?” Silence. “They’ve gone bloody mad up at the castle looking for this, mad! They were on about it again yesterday when we were working on the fields. They’ve been going on about it for the last

few weeks.” He shook it at her and it twitched violently, like a grass adder when it was ousted from its shady hiding place. Silence. Behind them some wood crackled loudly on the fire making Magda jump but she did not speak. “The coroner should’ve had this when he came.” Peter tore his eyes from hers and looked at the rope hanging limply from his hand. It was not fashioned in a noose any longer and he was glad but knowing what it was made him shiver.

“We need to burn it.” His voice was quieter now and slower.

“No.” Snapping back to reality she stepped towards him holding out her own hands imploringly. “Please.” That painful whine, again. “Please, Peter. Don’t.”

“You can’t keep it.”

“But I want to.” Again her bottom lip quivered and tears welled in her eyes. Shaking his head he grabbed Magda and pulled her to him. Wrapping his arms around her he hugged her close to his chest.

“Oh Mags. You can’t keep it. It’s the deodand and belongs to the King now. You know how it works. Can’t you remember the other year when that horse trampled that young lad? It was what killed him and it had to go to the King. That’s how it works.” Sniffing and nodding against his chest she mumbled incoherently. Lifting her head up she looked sorrowfully at Peter.

“I just thought...”

“What? What did you think?” Peter’s words prevented Magda finishing. “How did you even get it?”

“I cut it down off the branch in the orchard. When I heard, I raced over but everyone had already gone back up to the castle. There was only me there, honest, no one saw. No one knows. I just... just... it was the last thing he touched.” Barely a whisper, her words tugged at his heart.

“It doesn’t matter now. What matters is keeping you safe. If you’re found with this you’ll be in more trouble than anyone can sort, it’d be a crime against the King. What if something happens to you? What about Tom?” Shrugging, she dropped her head to Peter’s chest and rested her forehead against the rough material of his tunic. “If the King doesn’t get the deodand then them up at the castle’ll be fined, they won’t miss it but if you’re found with it and the ring too, well that’ll be it for you. Not just you, me and Mary too. We’ll be ousted from the village and how the hell will we get another Lord?” A strangled sob escaped from her and Peter pulled her close once more, hugging her tight.

Slackening his grip, he took a step back from her and took hold of one of her hands. Gently, he tugged and when she moved he guided her over to the firepit. Letting go he turned and brought a stool for her to sit on. Getting one for himself he sat close to her side. The stools were old, made by him when he was a lad but they were sturdy and did not wobble. Taking another lump of wood he placed it on the fire and waited for the flames to take hold. Black smoke curled from it and headed up and out, the wood was damp. She had left it outside too long after he had brought it for her. He always told her to take it in straight away but she never listened. Magda only ever did what she wanted, only the things that were easy and made her feel good. She had no interest in domestic chores, she had little interest in any chores at all.

“Mags, this is important. If you keep this and anyone finds out...”

“I know.” Without letting him finish she spoke over him. She looked and sounded as though she had been defeated.

“Do you though? Do you understand? One wrong word to the wrong person and you’ve had it, we’ve had it. Listen, you’ll meet someone else.” Forcing lightness into his voice he nudged her.

“No, I won’t.” Flat and defeated. She seemed adamant but he would not agree with her this time. This time he had to get through to her, she had to listen to him. Without looking at her, he dropped the rope onto the flames, primed and ready to hold her back if necessary. She went rigid and her breathing stopped momentarily but remained seated. Together they watched the flames lap the rope, tasting and testing it. The light from the fire grew as the flames accepted and feasted on their fuel. Sniffing loudly, Magda dragged the back of her hand against her nose, wiping away her sorrow.

“Listen, Tom can stop with me and Mary for now. There’s plenty of jobs he can do to help out. We’ve got the garden to dig over ready for pea planting and he can come up the fields with me and do a bit of bird scaring whilst we get sowing.” Turning slightly, he looked down at his sister. Her eyes were red and puffy, she was slumped over slightly and her hands were limp in her lap. She seemed so young. They had all always protected her, ever since she was born. Protected her and shielded her and now she was struggling, not knowing how to handle the tragedies of life. Maybe they were partly to blame, him and their father. Peter remembered the day she was born, he was eight and as soon as he saw her he fell in love with her, everyone did. There had been two brothers born after him, there had been others too but he had never known them, they had never even breathed. He remembered these two brothers though: Merrick and Simon. They had both been chubby loud babies, always smiling and gurgling but both had died before they reached two. When Magda came, they had been joyous. He had prayed that night, knelt by the side of the cradle where she was swaddled tight. He had scrunched his eyes shut and prayed with more fervour than he had ever known before or since. He had begged God not to take away his sister like he had with his brothers. He had promised that he would protect her and look after her and he had. She had been loved and adored her whole life. When their mother had died they had cozened her, him and their father. They had not left all the domestic chores to her, they had shared them up, they had

not wanted to tire her out, make her ill. When he had married Lottie she had been jealous and had cried every night until their da had taken a switch to her legs. She had run round to them and Lottie had soothed her and comforted her. Mary was the same with her too. Magda could do no wrong. If she asked, they gave; nothing was too much trouble for lovely Mags, nothing. Even when she had gotten herself with child, they had all forgiven her, even though he was a married man. She had said she loved him and would never love again. Three days she had spent in the stocks, three days they had sat with her in the rain while the villagers came and mocked her brazen ways. Mayhap they should have punished her, made her see the error of her ways but they could not because she was Magda, beloved Mags.

“Listen Mags, why don’t you have a couple of days to sort yourself out, we’ll say you’re ill if anyone notices you missing.” His tender words soothed her, she nodded slowly while watching the flames dance over the charred remnants of the rope. “I’ll get Mary to fetch you some food round while you get some rest.” She nodded obediently. “I’m going to take this and keep it safe for you.” He reached over and took the cord from around her neck, wrapped it round the ring and pushed it deep into his pocket. “Perhaps we’ll bury it, we can always dig it up later and sell it on if we go to a bigger town.” Her head snapped up. “Not now though, it’d look bad, a bit suspicious. Later. When everyone’s moved on a bit.”

“I suppose.” Her voice was back to the whine of a child. “I suppose I’d be able to buy my own linens and silks then.” A soft smile curled her lips as she contemplated this.

“Aye,” he said as he stood up, “perhaps.” Ruffling her hair, he walked behind her and started towards the door. “Mags?” Turning, she looked at him.

“Mmmm?”

“No more of this...right?” Nodding in agreement she rose from her stool and headed over to the bed. Peter stayed by the door, watching as she straightened the mattress, scooped up the blankets and fur and straightened them over the limp mattress before climbing in. “I mean it

Mags. No more talk of Richard, I can't protect you against nobility and definitely not against the King. Best to leave it now. We'll find you someone else." Pouting at Peter now she frowned slightly but then straightened her face and nodded at him as she snuggled down, pulling the covers up under her chin. "Promise me Mags."

"Promise." Yawning loudly she closed her eyes. Peter took hold of the latch and opened the door, squinting his eyes against the grey April morning.

He sighed and looked back at her cocooned in the bed. She would have to move in with him and Mary, she could not really be trusted on her own. They would look after her and Tom, and no one need know anything about it. About Richard, about the ring or about the bloody deodand. Shaking his head he closed the door as quietly as he could before heading off, he needed to speak to Mary before going up to the fields. Back in the gloomy hovel, snuggled down on the flat, limp straw mattress, Magda sighed as she cleared her mind of the promise that Peter had asked of her and prayed to God that she would dream of Richard, 'her' Richard.

Pulling up his coif he shoved his hands in his pockets and headed back home. He kept his head down, barely registering those he walked past.

"Ow's your Mags doin'?" Looking up he met the steely gaze of old Peg. "Not bad now Peg." Peter slowed his pace, gave Peg a smile and tightened his grip round the ring in his pocket. "What you doin' down this end Peg?" "Come for some water from the beck, sweeter than t'well." She pointed at the bucket by her feet. She wiggled her toes in the dew laden grass. "It's heavy now though, be a good 'un and gi' us an 'and back up the lane."

"Will do." He grabbed hold of the bucket, careful not to slosh any of the water out and down his clothes.

“I’ve not been right mi’sen, cold that settled on mi chest, is that what’s been up wi your Mags?” He grunted in acknowledgement of her questioning neither confirming nor denying anything. “Aye, weeks I’ve been badly, since Lord Richard, God bless him, passed away.” She stopped talking, concentrating now on where she was walking as they headed up the back lane towards her home and the tanning pits. Even from a distance Peter could smell the potency of the tanning pits, the acrid stench of urine and faeces starting to burn his throat the closer they got. “I bet it was that downpour that I got caught in when I was in the orchard after his body had been taken back to the castle.” Peter’s breath caught in his throat, he coughed to try and disguise it. He felt increasingly uncomfortable in old Peg’s presence now, sweat was starting to form across his brow, luckily it was covered by his coif. “Your Mags probably caught a chill from it too.”

“I’m not sure Peg.” He needed to keep his answers short, keep his tone light, nothing got passed Peg Tanner.

“Hmmm, she was there a while y’know, wet through she was, like a drowned rat when I saw her. My eyes aren’t what they used t’ be mind, couldn’t quite tell what she wa’ up to, can’t o’ bin no good though, can it?”

“Where d’you want this bucket then Peg?” He had stopped breathing through his nose now, the smell of the tanning pits was overwhelming, though Peg was used to it.

“Just by the door’ll do.” He dumped the bucket next to the door post, under the thatched overhang. Before turning back round to face Peg, he breathed deeply trying to make his face relax.

“Right then Peg, I’ll be off. Mary’ll have mi hide and be selling it to your Dick if I don’t get cracking.” He gave her smile and wink and then headed off down the lane.

“Tell your Mags I was asking after her won’t you love?” She called to his retreating back.

“Will do.” Lifting a hand in acknowledgement Peter gave her a wave and then marched back down the lane towards home. He felt sick, his stomach roiling. That was all he needed; bloody Peg Tanner had seen Magda in the orchard. Had she seen her cutting down the rope? He had not dared ask. Best off pleading ignorance. Of all the people to have caught sight of Magda it would have to be Peg Tanner! That settled it, the bastard ring would have to go, he’d bury it under the midden heap. No. No. They might come looking for it. His mouth had gone bone dry and he desperately tried gulping to get a bit of moisture back into it. When he went up to the fields later, he would bury it in the copse on the other side. Nice and deep. No one would know and that way if Peg did know something and say something there would be no proof of anything.

He could feel Peg’s eyes burning into his back as he walked home, he dared not increase his pace, he needed to remain calm or at least appear so. Bloody Peg Tanner! Bloody Magda! That was it, she had used up her chances and trust. He would move her out and into his and Mary’s tonight and tomorrow he would see about getting her married off. Sod her. They were not going to suffer for bloody Magda and her brazen ways.

Keeping firm hold of the ring in his pocket, he went searching for Mary, she would know of someone for Magda to marry, anyone would do now. Anyone.

Isolde

Lady Isolde de Pomeroy sat silhouetted against her solar window. She sat with her head bowed focusing on the gown that she was embroidering. One hand clutched the embroidery hoop firmly and the other rose and fell rhythmically as she passed the silk thread through the material. Amber flames lapped against the logs in the fireplace; the light emitted from them added to that of the candles liberally dotted about. Shadows of winter had been banished to the corners of the room, sporadically they crept forwards, only to retreat again when a draft caused the flames to flare. Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth impatiently, she lowered the material and lifted her head. Jabbing the needle into a small pin cushion, she twisted her head and then rolled her shoulders in an attempt to ease the knots of tension that had formed. Carefully she draped the gown on a side-table to her right and then turned towards the window.

The snow had fallen all morning and now the gardens were under a white blanket. There was little movement below her in the small courtyard or in the garden itself. A ginger tom cat was crouched against the wall of the stables, staring intently at a blackbird which was oblivious to the danger. It spread its wings, reaching itself up and then shook. Curling its wings back against its plump body, it cocked its head to one side and seemed to freeze. The moment paused and seemed to stretch out. Lady de Pomeroy looked back towards the cat. There was an almost unnoticeable shift as it pulled back, she could imagine the muscles under its fur contracting, readying itself for attack. Eyes darting back to the bird she willed it to notice the danger that it was in and flee, fly away, but it did not. It sat. Still. Head cocked to one side studiously. Holding her breath, her eyes shifted again to the cat. Its tail swept lazily left to right and then with a speed that made her jump, the cat pounced at the bird. There was a flurry of snow and feathers as the bird tried desperately to escape the predator's claws and jaws but it was hopeless. Tussling with the bird, the cat turned its back, its ginger

fur contrasting starkly against the snow. She turned away from the scene, back to her embroidery.

Blinking intently, she let her eyes become accustomed to the change in brightness. The room seemed gloomy in comparison to the brightness outside. Twisting her body in the chair, she clutched the aged arms and pushed herself up. Balling both hands into fists she pushed them into the small of her back and stretched. Again, she twisted her head right and left and rolled her shoulders willing the tension to dissipate. Dropping her head to her chest she looked down the length of her body and saw small scraps of embroidery silk clinging to the fabric of her surcote. The cream and green thread lay haphazardly against the soft red wool. With a sharp intake of breath her body jerked and she was transported back to a memory of long ago. Strong, calloused hands moving gently against the neckline of an ivory surcote. She could feel the warmth and weight of the fingers as they traced the deep red embroidered roses that nestled between soft green leaves. He had traced each one, slowly, standing so close to her that she could feel his breath on her cheek as he looked down. Breathing deeply, she could still smell traces of the wine that he had drunk at their wedding feast. Closing her eyes, she pictured the intense gaze of her husband. He had eyes that you could swim in, get lost in. Flecks of gold in brown-green pools, rich and tantalising. Darker in the winter months and then lighter in the summer, like his hair. They were enigmatic and she never tired of looking into them. A familiar heat built behind her eyelids, her throat suddenly felt too tight and then a hot tear escaped from beneath her lids and wound its way slowly down the freckled curve of her cheek. Reaching her jawline, it stopped and seemed to cling to the warmth of her face before dropping. Opening her eyes, her vision swam with unshed tears. Blinking rapidly, some escaped and travelled similar routes down her face. Dragging her hands against her eyes and face she swept away the tears and took some deep breaths to calm herself. Her heart was beating rapidly and the room felt too warm, cloyingly

so. Noticing how fast her breathing was becoming she tried to slow it down, tried to focus on it, keep herself in the present. In this room. This room that was becoming hotter and hotter. Beads of sweat formed along her hairline and upper lip. She could feel them swelling against her skin and then they too were wending their way down her skin, travelling down her body, making her feel cold and hot at the same time.

Lowering herself to the floor she crossed her legs, like children do when listening to stories. Fussing the material of her surcote so that it covered her legs she pushed her hands into the rushes that adorned the floor. Stretching her fingers out she grasped them tightly together, clutching at the herb strewn rushes. Crunching them in her palms she released the scent of the herbs and inhaled deeply. Lavender and rosemary, heady and sweet, chosen specifically for times like these when she was overcome with the past. Chosen for their calming and gentle properties. Breathing deeply, focusing on the lavender scent she turned her gaze to the fireplace. The fire was lower now, the flames smaller and seemed to be languidly moving against the charred remnants of wood. The movement of the flames were hypnotic, helping to bring her back from her panicked state. Her linen undertunic was clinging to her back. Opening her hands, she scattered the crushed herbs and rushes back onto the floor. Rubbing her hands together she brushed away the fragments that had stuck to her sweaty palms, then she sat up straighter, shrugging and pulling her surcote and tunic away from her cooling, damp skin. Her breathing had returned to normal but she felt compelled to drag air into her lungs until they hurt. Over and over she did this. It had become part of the ritual that she used to negate the effects of her panic. Twisting her body, she moved onto her knees and then stood up slowly, careful to pluck out her skirts from beneath her feet so she did not fall. Looking over her shoulder she picked the rushes from her skirts and discarded them. It would not do for anyone to walk in and see her looking anything less than a Lady. It would not do at all. After all, she was a Baroness. Or, rather,

she had been. Whatever she was or was not she was still a Lady and had been brought up to act as such. Otherwise, what was it all for? The rigorous lessons in etiquette, the training with other noble families, the long bartered for marriage that increased her own family's standing. Indeed, what had it all been for?

Noticing the lengthening shadows in the room, she headed to the door. Lifting the catch, she pulled the heavy door open and popped out her head.

"Mary?" She called once and then looking left and right, listening for movement. "Mary." This time louder. Her voice bounced back from the walls of the corridor. Movement from the far end heralded acknowledgement of her calls. From the shadows came the lithe figure of a servant.

"M'lady?" Curtseying before her mistress, she turned her eager face up.

"The fire needs tending, Mary, and a goblet of wine too."

"I'll fetch Ena, m'lady." Bobbing her head and curtseying again, she scurried away to do her mistress' bidding. Letting the door close of its own volition, she turned and made her way back to the chair by the window. She did not sit down immediately, instead, she turned her back on the window and faced the room. By far this was her favourite room in the house. They had lived here for well over two years, since they had been ousted from Clayborne Castle under the King's orders following her husband's suicide. Herself and the children had had their lives torn asunder and then had been unceremoniously packed off to her dower lands. The manor house itself was small in comparison to Clayborne, but it was well furnished. She had demanded glass be fitted in her solar and in the bedchambers and her brother by marriage had agreed, anything to be rid of her no doubt. Knowing it was an extravagance that many did not have, she relished the fact that all year round she could sit by the window safe from the winds and rain, enjoying the light that filtered through the small panes. Few rooms had glass back at Clayborne, oiled cloth hung at many of the windows,

muting the light that filtered through. She did not miss that. What she did miss, however, was the smell of nature that would sneak in round the sides of the cloth. There was a freshness, especially in the long winter months, which she was always appreciative of. With glass, there was no such trespassing of nature. No breeze that came and freshened the air of the room. With glass there was the smell of soot. Soot from the fire and from the walls above the sconces. She was lucky that she did not need to rely on tallow candles, instead beeswax candles lit the room. The honeyed sweetness of their scent lifted her spirits somewhat, but there was a heaviness about the air in the room. An oppressiveness. Was it the air? Or was it her? Was she the one that brought with her a shroud of oppressiveness? A heaviness borne from her very soul?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the creaking of the door and the shuffling of footsteps. Mary entered the room carrying a small tray with a goblet and a small jug of wine. Noticing the steady spiral of steam from both the jug and goblet she smiled heartily at Mary. Warmed spiced wine. A pungent aroma of love. Behind Mary, came the kitchen girl. Her head was lowered, and her shoulders stooped. There must have been no less than two score years between the two serving maids but by their gait and posture you would assume that they were both of a similar age. Ena's fiery tendrils had once bounced about her face and head, unwilling to be tamed by brush or comb; now they hung limply against her sallow skin. Her eyes were permanently shadowed and dark; heavy rings signalling her lack of sleep. "Good afternoon, Ena." Trying to adopt a jovial tone she spoke to the kitchen girl. Grunting in response, she barely acknowledged Lady de Pomeroy before turning towards the fire. Dropping heavily to her knees, Ena began scraping at the ashes and dying embers before her. Mary placed the tray of wine on the side table near the window and then turned towards her lady. She glanced over at Ena, dropped her shoulders and shook her head slightly.

“Lady Isolde has spoken to you girl.” Another grunt. The two older women stared at each other for a moment, sharing a knowing look. The light that Isolde had forced into her eyes a few moments before, fled and her stomach clenched. Isolde had thought that taking Ena with her when she was forced onto her dower lands would have benefitted everyone. Matthew would have his friend, Ena, by his side. The girl who would while away the time with him when he was ill. The girl who brought a smile to his lips, even when he could barely draw breath. The girl full of life and mischief, and if Cook was listened to...defiance. She would have escaped the place of her ordeal, the orchard where she had found the swinging body of her Master, Baron Richard de Pomeroy. She should have been able to leave behind the nightmares, but she had not. Instead, they had followed her. Drawn her in and slowly but surely, sucked the life from her young body. “Anything else, m’lady?” Mary asked.

“Not at the moment, Mary. Thank you.” Bobbing into a curtsy, Mary retraced her steps to the door. Tilting her head to the side, Isolde focused her attention on Ena who was gently squeezing a pair of bellows together, coaxing the fragile flames into life. She had always been a stocky child, full of health and vitality. Even after the fever that had claimed so many of the villagers and castle dwellers four years earlier, she had always been robust. At thirteen summers, she had lost the podginess of childhood, however, it had not been replaced by the gentle curves of a girl fast approaching womanhood. There was no nip at the waist, no gentle curve of the hip or swelling bosom. Ena was no longer a stocky child, she was now thin. Painfully thin. She could not even be described as slender, like her own daughter. She was a waif in all sense of the word. Sitting back on her heels, Ena balanced the bellows on her knees and pushed her hair back from in front of her face. Isolde noticed the raw skin around her nail beds, she had chewed them and picked at them until they had bled. Her heart ached for the girl.

“Ena, go to the kitchen when you have finished here and see if Cook has got any honey cakes left from the nooning meal. Get a few and go and share them with Matthew. His chest felt tight earlier, I rubbed him with goose fat and sat him by the fire in his room. I am sure he would love the company.” Again, a forced jovial tone. Even she could hear it. Slightly too loud, the pitch verging on high and an over pronunciation of her words. Isolde felt awkward all of a sudden and needed a little solitude. Ena nodded her head, gathered her bellows and bucket and with barely a rustle of movement, left the room, like a spectre.

Letting out a long steadying breath, Isolde closed her eyes and grasped her hands in front of her. Squeezing them together she then ran the pads of her thumbs over the opposite nails in a rhythmic pattern. Opening her eyes, she took a seat again by the window. The spiral of steam that had swirled from the jug and goblet had diminished somewhat. She held the goblet in her hand and inhaled deeply: the earthy sweet scents of cloves and cinnamon together with the wine relaxed her. Sipping her first mouthful she swirled the warm liquid around her mouth. Noticing the feel as it rippled across her tongue and swept the roof of her mouth. Swallowing the liquid, she held her breath as the heat from the wine suffused her stomach and moved up and out. Spreading up her chest and down her arms, the slightly heavy warm weight brought about through the consumption of wine or ale. Nothing as potent as the dwale that she had been given to drink those first few days after his death when she was inconsolable with grief. She did not need that level of sedation now, now she just sometimes needed to force her body to unclench, to relax and to feel. Leaning against the high back of her chair she let her thoughts drift, let her thoughts and emotions take over her as she cupped the goblet to her chest. Her stomach clenched once more as her mind swam over Ena’s crouched form in front of the fire. She knew that feeling only too well. Fear. The type of fear that comes and goes and each time it returns it grips a little tighter and stays for a little longer. The type of fear that makes you hold your breath, the way she was

compelled to do, all too often. It was a habit that she had formed since her Lord husband's death. It was an unconscious response to a situation that she had no control over. Her breathing she could control. In and out. In, hold, out, hold. Those fiery curls of Ena's, subdued by experience, now so much more like the fur of the tomcat that she had seen earlier. What had he done with his prey? Eaten it? Played with it? Waited for it to stop struggling, watched its chest heaving, its eyes wide with panic and then as it started to move once again, had it pounced and clamped its jaws around its neck? She felt like that bird. Like a victim. Yet she was not the victim of attack, she was a victim of circumstance. Circumstances. Staying with the roiling, clenching feeling in her stomach she began to tap her forefingers against the goblet nestled against her chest. Left. Right. Left. Right.

It had not been her choice to marry Richard de Pomeroy. He had been her senior by a score of years, yet he was a good match. He had just come into his Barony on the borders of England and Scotland and was required to settle and have a legitimate heir. He had spent much of his youth on campaign or under the King's service quelling skirmish after skirmish both in England and abroad. The first time she had met him had been at the church where they had married. He had not turned when she had walked towards him that day. Light had streamed in from the high windows in the church, dust motes had danced in the air, celebrating their union. His hair was still damp from his bath. A black curtain of waves that touched his collar. He was not much taller than she was, but he was so much broader. His body formed a perfect triangle. Broad shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist and hips. His arms were held in front of him, gripping his sword belt (initially she had believed it to be an aggressive action but later she realised it was something that he did when nervous) she noticed the ripple of muscle beneath his clothing; could sense the raw power of this man, this knight. She had been almost at his shoulder when he had finally turned, dropping her gaze instantly, wanting to hide her nerves, not wanting to seem brazen, she focused instead

on the pommel of his sword. On the jewels in the pommel. A large ruby surrounded by smaller, darker gems. The light caught on their facets and bounced outwards across the church. The priest had begun to speak, she could not remember now what he said, she could just remember a hand coming towards her face, calloused fingers with short clean fingernails. He had taken her chin between his thumb and forefinger and had gently tilted her head up. Looking deep into her eyes, her breath had caught at the intensity of his gaze. Her eyes travelled his face: his cheekbones and just below them were smooth, he had shaved that morning, but it must have been early for there was already a shadow of growth forming across his square jawline. His nose was crooked, it bent to his right and there was a bump on the bridge, he could never remember how many times he had broken it. He had regaled her with stories of battles and fights, he could remember who and where and the cost each of these had had upon his men, he could remember so many details but could never remember how many times his nose had been broken. His skin had a bronzed complexion which highlighted the lines that had formed around his eyes, she could tell he was a man who laughed often, and he did, his emotions had always been intense whether it be excitement or happiness; or sadness that too often had become despair and wretchedness, they were always intense and around his eyes, betwixt his brows and along his forehead were grooves, carved out by his heart. Oh, but he had been a beautiful man. That day he had stolen her heart, nay, not stolen... she had given him her heart. He had not offered it back before he chose to leave, almost three years ago. No, he had kept it and taken it with him. How can one survive without their heart? How can joy be found or, love felt, without a heart? Pausing her steady tapping, Isolde lifted the goblet and took a deep draught of wine, holding it in her mouth she tilted her head gently, first to one shoulder and then the other, letting its warmth swish from side to side against the inside of her cheeks before swallowing.

She was lucky to remain unwed; she knew that. After all, she was a woman, mere chattel. If it had not been for her brother by marriage's 'generous' contributions to the King's coffers twice a year she knew that she would have been foisted upon another. At least that is what Eustace de Pomeroy, the new Baron had told her. Perhaps it was that or perhaps it was that she was now tainted. A wife whose husband chose death, what did that say about her? Or their children. Matthew had been the luckiest of the children, a child with a weak chest, he had not been fostered out like his younger brothers or gone to experience life under the tutelage of some other noblewoman like his sister. He had stayed with her. He had only been rejected by his father. He had not been faced with further rejection and hostility by the noble foster families like her other children had. They had each faced the humiliating burden of their father's death and been sent home to her, one by one. Not home. Not Clayborne Castle. No. Home to Willowdale Manor, with a fraction of the servants and a fraction of the land. But they had glass in the windows, they did not have that at Clayborne! Grinding her teeth together she clutched the bowl of the goblet harder, she did not open her eyes though. she needed to let herself feel these things, needed to let her mind find its own path, work out these memories and emotions. For too long she had bottled them, distracted herself with issues and tasks. They had been eating her up inside, to the point where she could barely function, so crushed was her soul, so tired was her spirit that she had spent months, totally consumed by a darkness devoid of all life. Left. Right. Tap. Tap.

They had returned one by one. James had come first. He had only been out for fostering for a little over six months, he had just reached the point where he had made a few friends. Poor James, he had not understood that his father was gone, how totally and utterly definite that was. It had been a year and he had come to her in the night. He had slipped under the covers of her bed, lifted her arm and shuffled next to her body. He had lain like that for a time. Hardly moving. She could tell that he was not asleep though, there was not a

steady regular depth to his breathing. Isolde had waited, now wide awake, she had waited for it to come. And it did. As the cold shards of moonlight entered the room, casting long shadows in its wake, it had come. First, he had shuddered and then his breathing had become irregular and shallow. Soon she felt the dampness of his tears as he pushed his face into the side of her chest. She had pulled him closer and turned onto her side, cradling his juddering form as he wept. Deep, gasping sobs of realisation that his father would 'never' come home. He would never lift him above his head, put him on his shoulders for an excited 'shoulder-back ride'. He would never see him again. Fat, hot tears had rolled down her cheeks and mingled with her son's, and she had pulled him closer still. They had all been through this, this realisation. It was their moment of epiphany. Four children who had each crept into her room in the dead of night, seeking the safety of her arms. The warmth and comfort that only a mother can give. Coming to terms with their moments of epiphany. Not just once though. Over the last two years she had shared her bed regularly with at least one of her children. She had wiped away their tears, cooed into their ears and stroked the hair away from their damp faces, desperately trying to soothe their grief. She could not relieve them of it, more was the pity. She could not force it to cease. She was powerless to heal their broken hearts. All she could do was hug them tight and pull the covers around them more tightly. Cocooning them upon the soft feather-filled mattress. Sitting on the chair by the window, goblet in hand, Isolde could feel her throat tightening again. Pulling her tongue against the roof of her mouth she tried in vain to release those muscles.

Oh yes, she was lucky to remain unwed. Here with her children in comfort and safety. Tucked away nice and neatly from Clayborne, from her family by marriage. Away from prying eyes and malevolent tongues. She could raise her children how she wished. Now they had been abandoned by their father and rejected from the promises made between her 'Lord' husband and his allies. Men that had once been his brothers in arms. All from

noble stock. She grunted at the thought. Noble stock, indeed. So noble that the betrothal that had been made eight years earlier between her daughter Margaret and Baron Stephen Fitzpatrick's eldest son had been discarded. Baron Fitzpatrick, barely a month after his 'brother' had been lain to rest, had petitioned the King begging for it to be nullified. Poor Margaret, sweet Margaret had been mortified and had returned home from the Fitzpatrick's baronage red and puffy-eyed. It was not seemly, or so she was told by both Eustace and Father Abraham. It was not seemly for a family with such a noble lineage to be tainted or tarnished by a union between them and the de Pomeroy's. Seemly? Poor Margaret. Made a victim before her fourteenth name day. Such a sweet and charming girl. Now, and with the grace of the King, under the laws of nurture she could raise her children. Raise them in a way to make them stronger and more able to feel and unravel their emotions. She would talk to them, let them see her cry. Encourage their questions and discussion. She would not repress them. Any of them.

The Priest from Clayborne visited monthly. They would idle away the hours, she would avoid his religious undertones. Direct the conversation towards learning, towards dialectics, towards the words and teaching of those ancient learned men: of Cicero, of Plato and of Socrates. In warmer weather they had walked in the gardens, he had applauded her use of space, how the rectangular raised beds made the most of both the space and of the sunlight. He marvelled at the lavender plants, their pungent scent, the innumerable stalks hanging heavy with dense purple heads, acknowledging how she had chosen a spot so accurately that there was hardly any waste wood-like structure at the bottom of it. He had smiled pleasingly at the ox-eye daisies, commended the way she had taken plants (root and all) from down near the meadow and had managed to cultivate them in one of her beds. How clever she was, how patient and nurturing, like our Lord and Saviour. When Richard had died, she had initially sought comfort and solace in the arms of the church. Deciding in her

grief-blinded state that she would enter a convent and embrace the peace and solitude that the religious institution could offer her over a forced marriage. She had been in such immeasurable pain that she needed the numbing religious sanctity that only prolonged bouts of prayer could offer. Yet, it had not been enough. No, that was not right. It had not comforted her; it had not given her a sense of peace or any understanding of the events. The more she searched the scriptures, the less she found. Just over a sennight before they were to leave Clayborne, and perhaps six months after he had died, Isolde had found herself sitting in the castle chapel. She had no idea how long she had been there, the shadows had lengthened and deepened but she had not moved. She had remained, seated on the second pew, hunched over, leaning her elbows on her knees. She had watched the hypnotic flames of the exuberant beeswax candles seated on the altar. The flames swayed from side to side. A halo of golden light quivering above them, and even from a distance the honey-sweet scent of the wax teased her. Her stomach growled and protested, she had no idea when she had last eaten and she barely registered the noise, so entranced was she by the flickering flames.

The church doors had opened with force and Father Abraham's leather-clad feet had slapped down the aisle. He sat heavily next to her and grabbed her hands, both in his. Straightaway she noticed how utterly different they were to Richard's hands. Father Abraham's hands were soft and clammy, they were perhaps even softer than hers. His fingers were elegant and tapered off finely. There were no scars or callouses. They were not large and rough and warm. He could not enclose both of her hands with ease. They were hands of a Lady... a girl child. She had shivered and snatched her hands from between his and used them to straighten the indents from her skirts where her elbows had been. "My Lady, we have been so worried." His relief was palpable and she could see from the small beads of sweat on his forehead that he had been moving around the castle and grounds at more speed than which he was used to.

“Worried?” Her voice was gruff, her throat dry. She swallowed and tried to clear it.

Drawing her eyebrows together curiously. “Worried about what?”

“About you, my Lady. No one has seen you since before sext, you were not present at the nooning meal.” His face also crumpled into a frown. Studiously he searched her face, focusing on her eyes. Straightening her own face, she looked away from him and straightened her skirts once more. Below her surcote and her under tunic she could feel divots just above her knees where she had been leaning. Had she been there so long?

“I had no idea. I do beg your pardon, Father. I was just here,” stretching her arms out she swept the church, noticing again the golden halos of light sitting atop the altar candles, “searching.”

“Searching for what, my Lady?” There was a note of caution in his voice.

“Searching for understanding. For acceptance. For acknowledgement of some sort.” Silence between them. The cautionary tone was now etched across his face, his eyebrows were knitted together but they were raised too and his lips were pursed. “Do you know what I found, Father?” Isolde’s voice deepened, she looked at him, her eyes penetrated his. There was a darkness there that he did not like. “Do you know what I found?” He shook his head but did not speak. Leaning forwards, so close that their noses were but an inch apart, she whispered. “Nothing.” Pulling away from him, she turned to face the altar. Father Abraham had not shifted at all. He was frozen. “I have asked, I have beseeched the Lord my God. I have asked for understanding; I have asked for help. I have searched the scriptures and what have I found? Nothing.” Spurred into action, Father Abraham made another grab for her hands but she snatched them away.

“My child, you are grief-stricken. It is only natural to be angry, but you must cast away that anger. Cast away those doubts and lean on God’s love. Be strong,” he seemed to have found his feet and began running with devout words, “be courageous, He will not forsake you, he

will give you the strength you need to weather this storm.” Eyes snapping open in horror, she had stood and turned, pushing him hard against the back of the pew as she struggled to get by him. Her surcote tangled around her ankles and she snatched at it. The priest had recoiled somewhat, he looked up at her meekly.

“He will not forsake me? He will give me strength and courage? He will be with me?” Her voice rose with each question, both tone and the volume. Her eyes seemed to pop with every word that she over punctuated. “Like he did with Richard? Like he has for my children? For me? He is no God of mine. He is vicious and cruel.” Dropping against the back of the pew, Father Abraham grabbed at his chest, air seeping out of him. Curling her lips away from her teeth she bore down on him. “What God would allow such pain? What God would allow such suffering? What God would allow one of his ‘children’ to sabotage his own life. In fact, not just ‘his’ life, but his afterlife, in fact, all of our lives? He is no God of mine!” Her voice reached a crescendo and her arms shook with rage. Clamping her jaws together she ground her teeth together and stormed from the church. There were so many things from those early months that she had no recollection of. It was as though those things had not happened, even when others told her it did not spark her memory. However, this moment in the church with Father Abraham, she remembered every word, every breath, every heartbeat. It was her moment of epiphany, her realisation, not that Richard was gone and would not return. No. She had realised in that moment that religion was nothing but a fantasy. A fantasy dreamt up by men to control men and she would be part of it no longer.

“Go with it, feel it, feel the pain in your neck. Feel the churning of your stomach. Feel the hollowness of your chest where your heart should be. Feel it. Know it.” The whisper of her words moved featherlight between her parted lips. Tap. Tap. Left. Right.

Father Abraham was due to visit within the next week, she had received a missive from her brother by marriage, Eustace. He was sending Father Abraham to discuss the marriage of Margaret to a Sir Ralph Fitzwalter. An arrangement that Eustace had managed to garner with the King. She only hoped that Eustace would remain in the King's good graces for if he did not then she knew that the King would turn his attentions to her dower lands, the profits that could be made and the alliances formed and she would become chattel, auctioned off to the highest bidder. The one thing that may hinder such a plan would be the fact that her childbearing years would be soon at an end. Ralph Fitzwalter was from a lesser noble family, a second son but the family had 'felt for Margaret's plight'. Poor, sweet Margaret. The wedding would be held at St Augustine's Church with Father Abraham presiding and would take place on the 26th of May, Augustine's own Saint's day. The thought of the wedding jolted Isolde back into the room. Leaning forwards, she refilled the empty goblet and placed it squarely on the table. From the table beside her she picked up the soft blue surcote that she had been working on. Squinting her eyes, shifting closer to the window, she checked the stitching of the flowers she had been working on around the neckline. Murmuring appreciatively at the intricate rose buds and flowers she turned the gown around so that she could begin on the hem. Bending over to her embroidery basket, carefully so as not to wrinkle the material on her lap, she picked up a fine needle and clasped it between her teeth and then pulled out a length of cream silken thread. With her foot she pushed the basket to one side and then squinting her eyes again carefully drew the length of thread through the eye of the needle. Threading it on her first attempt she smiled delightedly, there was not even the slightest tremor in her hands. Not long after Richard's death she had developed tremors in her hands, a twitch in her right eye and blinding pains behind her eyes. She had become fearful that she would die from apoplexy. The healer, Old Nora, from the village had come to her, held her hands in her cold wizened claws and looked deep into her eyes. She had made

her an infusion of lavender and lemon balm and had laid a cold compress across her forehead and temples. She had sat next to her for a time and talked to her of grief in a voice that was barely more than a whisper, in a tone heavy with her own grief filled memories. It had been Old Nora that had soothed her, Old Nora who had brought her teas and balms and infusions to help with her fraught nerves, Old Nora that had potted her various herbs and plants to take with her to Willowdale Manor, Old Nora that had helped her start the search for the goodness within herself. On the eve before she had left Clayborne, Isolde had taken her a basket of cheese, bread, wine and ale. She had clasped her cold claw-like hands between her own soft warm ones, brought them to her lips and kissed them. Her gratitude so immense, she had been unable to form words of thanks. Old Nora's milky eyes had filled and the flames from her fire pit had flashed in the unshed tears. Her eyes had seemed to brim with a strength that Isolde hoped she too would one day find. Father Abraham had balked at her when she had told him how she had been using the ideas of Socrates to help aid her grieving heart. She had brought a selection of texts from Clayborne including some with the ideas and teachings of Socrates. She did not need preaching at, she had been preached at all of her life. What she needed now was to learn who she was, she needed to examine her own life, find for herself the things that were worth living for. Where Father Abraham told her to pray, she instead chose the path of introspection and over time she had found something within her that meant she was able to courageously fight on.

The texts were hers; Richard had bought them for her. Each year, he would present her with a leather-bound tome and would watch her eagerly as she turned the pages admiring the lavish illuminations. He always said it was his favourite day in the year, January 1st, the day of first gifts. It was his tradition, something he needed to do so that they would have good fortune throughout the coming year. For so long she had thought that Richard's gift giving signalled a man that indulged his wife and her 'fancies', but since his death, since her

time of introspection, she now realised that perhaps they were both overly indulgent of each other.

For many years she light heartedly mocked his penchant for traditions, often calling him 'Old Nora' for his superstitious ways. At times he had obsessed over them and his anger would flair up if she admonished either them or him. Towards the end of each of her pregnancies he would become fixated with the date that each child might enter the world. He frequently offered up prayers for his child not to be born on the thirteenth of the month. None of their children had been born on the thirteenth but she had often wondered if he would have loved them less if they had been. Iron horseshoes were mounted with iron nails above the lintels of doors, he revered this tradition so strongly that when he had granted petitions of his villeins to wed, he would ensure that they too were gifted with a horseshoe and nails, iron of course, to be mounted above the door of their own dwellings. His people often commented on the thoughtfulness and generosity of their Lord not realising that without adhering to his own strict set of traditions, he would not have been able to face each day. He would have become overwrought and would have made himself sick with it. In the warmer months, after sword and weapon practice was completed, he would often take Margaret out across the meadows and towards the village. They would pick angelica leaves and once at the village they would fashion them into necklaces for the children to wear in order to ward off evil spirits. Again, his villeins admired how thoughtful he was, to partake in some of their own lowly traditions.

The façade worked well, for it was only she that knew the depths of his fears. It was only she that would lie awake listening to the thoughts that would tumble from his mouth. Safe from the world, from the ears of those too quick to judge, cocooned by the darkness of the heavy curtains around their bed. She would lay her head on his chest and he would speak into her hair, muffling his thoughts. Oftentimes she had wondered if the thoughts were

muffled and jumbled inside his mind as well. Sometimes it was difficult to track his thoughts so fast did they run from his mouth. She would have done anything to alleviate his suffering, indeed she had. When he sneaked away and lain with that girl from the village, she had ignored it. Hoping it would be something that would bring him joy. Bring him out of the dark recesses of his own mind. How precious and precarious was life, she thought.

Isolde shook her head and sighed at the memories of a different life. She could summon the strength to continue and so she would, starting with the embroidering of small cream rose buds and flowers on the hem of sweet Margaret's wedding gown. Dipping her head, Isolde passed the needle through the fabric, pulling the long strand of cream silk thread with it. The flames in the hearth crackled behind her and catching a glimpse out of the window she saw that the clouds were heavy with snow, the afternoon was dragging on and she had work to do.

Matthew

Clayborne's great hall rang with laughter and singing. The commendation for the newly titled Baron of Clayborne had been a long affair. Each man had taken his turn kneeling in submission before Ralph de Pomeroy. They had knelt bareheaded and without weapon or tool, arms prostrate in prayer position and had each sworn their fealty after he had clasped their hands between each of his own battle-scarred ones. The oath was a simple one but had been used by generations of vassals and tenants binding them to the Clayborne heir and his lands. Each man had lain a hand on a treasured book of holy scriptures and had spoken clearly and passionately, letting his voice soar up into the high roof of the hall. Matthew had been one of the first to kneel before his cousin. They had both kept their faces serious and solemn for the occasion.

“Hear this, my Lord: I swear to you on the holy scriptures that I am your man. I will support you in all endeavours, be faithful and true.”

“I accept your oath of fealty to me and in return shall protect you and your kin, on my honour and these holy scriptures.” Ralph's solemnity had remained staunch and his acceptance strong for each and every man throughout the day. Once each man had paid homage and sworn fealty, the feast had begun, stretching long into the night.

People still milled about, many smaller groups had now formed and some were singing bawdy songs, some were telling riddles and others were playing games. The soft thud of dice or the clink of knucklebones was lost as the groups huddled together playing their games but the cheers, the ‘oohs’ and the ‘aahs’ soared above the general hubbub of the great hall. Matthew, sitting on the right of his cousin's chair, looked out at the vast space that should have been his by right of birth. The thick stone walls were draped with large tapestries depicting hunting scenes. They had once been rich and vibrant but their colours were now muted by age, dust and the thick black smoke that was emitted from wall sconces and the two large fires that were kept burning both night and day. There were high arched

windows built in the two long walls, covered with oiled cloth to keep the rain and wind out. The light they emitted was minimal but they did allow for some fresh air to enter the often stagnant place. The short wall behind the dais where they were seated was adorned with shields and weaponry. In the centre of the wall hung the de Pomeroy banner: a deep blue background sporting a rearing stag in its centre. Their coat of arms was many years old, supposedly brought across from Normandy with King William himself. It had been designed by some far-off ancestor to show loyalty, strength and fortitude. The great jewelled sword of his forefathers was mounted just below it: the broadsword that should sit on his hip, but it did not. Instead, it had been polished and mounted.

His father's death fifteen years previously had tainted the sword. The once rich, deep red of the jewelled pommel seemed ghostlike. Matthew could remember being small, watching his father as he had walked straight-backed across the courtyard, the red jewel catching the rays of the sun would wink at him from a distance. Always from a distance. Who would wear such a thing? Surely, God would not look upon the wearer with kindness, not when it had been worn by a man whose death had been self-murder.

Tearing his gaze from behind him, he looked at his cousin's face. His sharp features were often mistaken for slyness but this was far from the truth. He was a warm and enigmatic man, athletic, proud and adventurous. He was brave and courageous, everything that the Baron of Clayborne should be. Not like him with his weak chest. Although they were of a similar age, they had not been close as boys. He had spent far too much time sat in front of a fire with his chest lathered in goose fat whereas his cousin, Ralph, when he had visited with his mother and father had been boisterous and spent his time outside following the head of the castle guards begging to be trained by the famed warrior. Ralph had sat with him some mealtimes and had regaled him with his daring exploits and accomplishments. It was hard not to be jealous and envious of Ralph and his health when they were children, but

that was a lifetime ago. Now, Matthew loved and admired the man that his cousin had become. His friend and confidant. Time and age had brought them close together.

“Aah, my lovely wife.” Ralph’s voice broke into Matthew’s thoughts and he looked over to see the small, lithe form of Ralph’s wife, Barbara, heading towards them. Tendrils of auburn hair had escaped from beneath the sheer veil that she wore atop her intricately braided hair. Light from candles on the top table gave them a fiery vibrance. He had known hair like that once, beautiful wild hair that would not be tamed, like the girl who it belonged to. A wistful sigh escaped him which went unnoticed by both Ralph and Barbara. Grabbing her delicate hand, Ralph, pulled Barbara onto his lap. Her eyes shone with delight at the attention of her husband but there was a tiredness there too, their youngest son, Gregory, was ill and Barbara disliked leaving him in the hands of his wet nurse when he was unwell.

“I applaud you Barbara, the day has been magnificent.” Smiling shyly, Barbara turned to Matthew as he spoke.

“There is nothing that brings me more joy, Matthew, than celebrating with those that I love and treasure.” Reaching across the arm of Ralph’s chair she gently took hold of Matthew’s hand and squeezed. “Preparations are well underway for the next celebration, your marriage to Lady Elizabeth Fretwell.” Smiling broadly, she released Matthew’s hand and lent against her husband’s chest for a moment before rising.

“Ha! The eternal bachelor to wed! It will be a celebration indeed.” Ralph’s words were followed by a low rumbling laugh and clap of hands. “The troubadours will sing of the wedding feast for years to come knowing Barbara, how she loves a wedding.”

“It is an honour to have such a capable woman as yourself to preside over celebrations, Barbara.” Ralph turned to Matthew, the dull tones of his cousin troubling him. He saw Matthew’s smile on his face but there was none of it intoned in his words.

“I am away to bed my Lord.” Leaning in towards Ralph she laid a gentle kiss on his lips before rising and straightening her gown. “Goodnight Matthew.”

“Goodnight, my Lady Barbara.” She dipped into an elegant curtsy, smiled and headed across the hall to where her lady’s maids waited to escort her up to her chamber, or rather, to Gregory’s chamber.

“I fear Gregory suffers the same affliction as you cousin.” Ralph’s tone did not sound mournful or sorrowful. He spoke as if it was just a fact. “This damnable drizzle and cold air plays havoc with his chest. Luckily we have Aunt Isolde’s remedies to fall back on to help alleviate some of his symptoms. “You give us hope Matthew.” Ralph reached forwards and took hold of a large silver goblet, looking over the rim he frowned at the lack of wine and summoned a serving girl over. Matthew took his own goblet and took a draught of the deep red liquid. This wine was more than just palatable it was rich, no doubt very expensive. He smiled to himself as he let the liquid slide down his throat, warming him from the inside.

“This is good wine cousin.” Taking another draught he swilled it around his mouth, furrowing his brow as he tried to discern the flavours.

“Aah, it is Barbara’s recipe: one of her passions.” A serving girl arrived with a clay vessel, she dipped into a courtesy before filling both of the proffered goblets, dipped again and then left. “Top table only Matthew, too good for those down there.” He nodded towards the guests in the hall before taking another drink. “She complained too much about the wine my father served so I told her to do something about it: nothing worse than droning women.” He laughed uproariously at his comment and then leaned closer to Matthew. “She adds honey and rose water and stores it in clay vessels,” he tapped his nose in a secretive manner and winked at his cousin, “she says the casks and barrels make it too bitter, too brusque.” This time he shook his head and looked down at the contents of his goblet, studying its rich dark secrets. “All I know is that she has stopped complaining about the wine and that is good

enough for me.” Both men laughed and looked back across the hall. “Perhaps she will relay the secrets to your new bride come summer?”

“We shall see.” Matthew shrugged at the comment and then nudged a slightly perplexed Ralph as a juggler walked past the top table tossing coloured leather balls high in the air before catching them and instantaneously throwing them high again. Ralph and Matthew clapped and smiled as he moved on.

“The day has been good, Ralph. You have honoured me with this seat.” Matthew’s sincere tone brought forth a compassionate look in Ralph’s eyes.

“Cousin, the honour is mine. Now,” banging his fist on the table, he summoned his squire by whistling through his teeth, a small boy with a dark mop of unruly curls scurried along the dais and lent down so that Ralph could whisper into his ear, smiling at Matthew he hurried off, “a surprise for you.” He rose and indicated for Matthew to follow him.

Noticing the Baron standing, some of the huddles of guests quietened slightly, however, Ralph merely waved his hand at them indicating that they should continue their own revelries. Stepping off from the dais Ralph began to make his way over to the arched stairwell with Matthew following. Ralph’s broad shoulders and straight back were in sharp contrast to the narrow and rounded shoulders of Matthew. The stairwell was well lit with sconces on the inner wall. The stone was blackened around the only sources of light with soot and they spat and spluttered as the two men made their way up the steps worn smooth over time. There was a slight dip in each step indicating the thousands of footsteps that had traversed them.

On the next level was Ralph’s solar, the heavy oaken door was held open by his squire, he was sleepy eyed by now, ready for his bed but willing to do his duty to his Lord and Master. It had been many years since Matthew had entered this room and he held his breath as he did so. The fresh rushes on the floor crunched and he noticed the sweet smell of

woodruff drift up as he crushed the herb under his booted feet. There was a large fire blazing in the great hearth emitting a welcoming orange glow. Honey scented beeswax candles were dotted liberally around the room and were all ablaze. At the far side of the room was a large table scattered with parchments and ledgers, quills and ink pots. He had crept in here as a young boy and had sat at that table pretending he was Lord of the castle. On his better days, when his father was absent from his solar that is, he and flame-haired Ena would sneak in and play games in this room. They would throw open the shutters of the large window behind the desk, shove the parchments to one side and play games of knucklebones, dice and Nine Men's Morris on the expansive table worn smooth by age and use. Her squeals of delight when she had won had many times brought forth a muttering servant who would usher them from the room. How he missed her, his dearest friend. Where had she gone? One moment she had been with them at Willowdale Manor and then without warning she had simply vanished... run away and he had not seen her since. Dragging his gaze away he noticed by the hearth a table and two chairs inviting them over. These were new additions to the solar, deep mahogany wood, intricately carved, high backed chairs with arm rests. The seats of the chairs were adorned with cushions, dyed bright red. The same red that his mother had perfected using the madder root from the plants she grew and the alum that Ralph had imported from Constantinople and given to her last year.

"Come," Ralph moved over to the hearth and sat in one of the chairs, "your mother sent the material and Barbara made the cushions with it. Stuffed with horsehair and fleece." He moved about on the seat and then lent his head back whilst draping an arm over the side.

Matthew followed suit and sat opposite him.

"They are industrious women indeed, my mother and your wife."

"Aren't they all? Lady Elizabeth will be no exception, I am sure." Ignoring the comment entirely, Matthew looked intently at the contents of the table between them. There were two

goblets, less ornate than the ones that they had used at the banquet but still beautifully crafted and made from silver. He was unsure if they had once belonged to his father; his memories of his time at Clayborne were not always fully reliable. A clay vessel like the one the serving girl had brought their wine in a while ago also sat patiently. Ralph leaned forwards, picked up the clay vessel and poured some of the dark red wine into both goblets. A cloth covered something else, Matthew hoped it was not more food, the banquet had been overly indulgent and he had eaten more than his fair share.

“I thought the day may have drained you somewhat and so planned something a little more mellow for the two of us.” Leaning forwards Ralph whipped back the cloth, beneath it was a square of polished oak, two troughs had been carved out at two opposite sides. One trough held nine polished jet pieces with lead pegs at their base and the other trough held nine pieces of polished ivory also with lead pegs at the bottom of them. The board itself was carved with lines and dots for the game of Nine Men’s Morris. Both men smiled widely and nodded at each other. “Do you remember teaching me this game when we visited?”

“I do indeed, you were not the player I wished you to be, no patience for sitting still, you were more interested in what was going on in the training yard.” Wistfully Matthew spoke of times long ago.

“It is strange how age and time tempers a man. I am much more willing to take a seat and play now. Merrells is a game of strategy and skill. It is training for the mind.” Tapping his temple he winked over at Matthew.

“Merrells? Nine Men’s Morris.” Shaking his head Matthew shuffled his chair forwards so that he was closer to the table. The rushes hushed the scraping on the floor and bunched around the heavy-set legs. Ralph moved closer as well and then bent over and picked two pieces of straw from the floor, snapping one in half he closed his eyes and shook them in his hands before pulling the tips of both up through his closed fist offering his fist to Matthew.

Matthew studied the two pieces of straw before choosing one. Choosing the longer of the two he groaned before dropping it to the floor.

“I shall go first.” Taking a piece of the polished ivory, Ralph studied the board for a moment before placing it in the corner of the middle square and then settled back again. “It is a shame that your mother did not attend today, I have missed her.” Matthew placed his piece of jet in the opposite corner to Ralph’s ivory one.

“She was in two minds, has been for weeks but I think it was too painful. Too many memories for her.”

“Too much sadness no doubt.” Ralph played his piece absentmindedly and focused on Matthew’s face. He seemed so much older than his years and his brow had deep ridges carved across it. “I worried that you would not attend.”

“Me? Why?” Holding the piece of jet between his thumb and forefinger, he rubbed the smooth surface.

“Various reasons. For a start, this should have been yours, you could have petitioned the King for your right of inheritance. Why did you not?” Ralph’s voice was curious, there was no wariness to it, he was intrigued rather than worried for his own position. Placing his piece, Matthew looked over at Ralph and cocked his head slightly to one side.

“Honestly?” Ralph nodded invitingly. “It is not that I do not want it, it is that I do not ‘need’ it. By that, I mean,” pausing, he rubbed his temples and then took up his goblet and drank, “the Barony is more than title and wealth. It is... it is... people, families, women and children, it is taxes and tithes and church and King, it is money, greed, intrigue, business. I do not need that pressure, that stress. After we moved from Clayborne I had thought that I should grow strong, learn to fight and then reclaim my birth right, it made me sick. My mother fretted with worry for my health, all but had me strapped to a chair lathered in the dreaded goose fat for most all of that first winter, sweating my cods off in front of the fire. It

was a lonely time.” Silence descended broken only by the crackling of flames as they gorged themselves on logs nestled in the hearth. Sighing heavily, Matthew lent back in his chair and nodded at the board, signalling for Ralph to take his turn, he did so immediately, paying no mind to the placement of any of the other pieces. Laughing, Matthew took one of his own pieces and placed it next to Ralph’s, making his first mill and thus able to steal one of Ralph’s pieces. Ralph rolled his eyes at his own mistake but then smiled as he took up his goblet again. “It was when Margaret wed that I realised my pursuit was doomed. No, not doomed, that is not what I meant. Folly! That’s it, folly.”

“How so?”

“Mother had spent weeks embroidering Margaret’s gown, never complaining. It was not a chore for her, she just sat in her solar stitching the days away, smiling when Margaret would join her in the task. When Margaret wore that gown there was pure happiness on her face, pride on mother’s face and joy on Ralph Fitzwalter’s when he saw his bride. It was then that I realised that my dream of being the Baron of Clayborne was borne of folly, it was foolish to want it. I did not need it. What I needed was that joy, that happiness that I saw in front of me.”

“You think there is no joy or happiness for me?”

“No, no, no.” Matthew held up his hands as he spoke. “That is not what I meant. I am not explaining this well. Let me try again. Their joy and happiness came from something simple. From the flowers and leaves and buds that one woman had sewn onto the surcote of another woman. There was much joy and happiness that day and many compliments for mother and for Margaret. See? Mother has skills, skills and talents that make others happy but more than that, they make ‘her’ happy. Other people are not dependent on her. If she had been unable to decorate Margaret’s wedding gown then the gown would have been plain, it would still be a nice gown and Margaret would have looked just as beautiful and the wedding

would still have taken place. No war would have been started, no deaths or illness would have been suffered, no lingering implications felt by all who lived on mother's lands or on the Fitzwalter lands, it would just have been a plain dress. Is that clearer?" Furrowing his brows, Ralph pursed his lips and then shrugged his shoulders, still a little confused.

"I hate this game." Ralph pointed to the board on the table, his pieces were placed randomly, haphazardly; without much thought and he saw that the placing of just one of Matthew's pieces would form two more mills and he would lose two more pieces, he pushed the game board towards Matthew and flopped back in his chair with a peevish look on his face. "Give me battlefield strategy any day over games. That is something I know, I do not have to think about that, I breathe it, it is part of me."

Dropping his piece of jet back into the trough at his side of the board Matthew too leant back in his chair.

"What were your other worries for me not attending?"

"The last time we met I asked a great favour of you."

"Aaah," Smiling Matthew shook his head, "your bastard. Nay, that would not stop me attending."

"It has played on my mind I must admit." Leaning closer to Matthew, he lowered his voice.

"She fares well?"

"Aye. She is a doing well. It did not take much to pass her off as my own, she is a de Pomeroy through and through. Margaret has sent various correspondence with updates. She loves her 'cousins' dearly and they dote on her. It was for the best, that she went with Margaret, she needs a mother." Before Matthew could continue, Ralph interrupted.

"Yes, yes, yes. I know. Vindictive I believe you called it? Cruel I think was another term but I could not let Edith go."

“I never said vindictive Ralph. I said you were selfish and stupid, keeping the whore around while sending off your bastard. All under Barbara’s nose.” Matthew sat up and frowned at his cousin who was looking relatively sheepish.

“Ssssh. Keep your voice down, man.” The pair sat in reflective silence for a while.

“Do you miss your father Ralph?”

“Not as much as I should, he became a sour man. He spent many an hour with the priests in his later years and whatever they discussed made him pensive and miserable.” Reaching forwards, the pain of playing the game forgotten, Ralph took up both goblets passing one to Matthew and then settled back. Swirling the liquid around the goblet, Matthew watched it ebb and flow almost to the rim before he drank.

“I barely remember mine. His voice went first: suddenly one day I realised I could not remember the sound of his voice. I knew it had been deep but as much as I tried, I could not summon it. Then his face. I could remember that his hair was dark, that he was broad and tall, I can even picture now in my mind’s eye his gait as he walked across the courtyard but his face? Nothing.” Staring into the flames, Matthew’s eyes twinkled. A pensive, far off look overcame his entire face. Not just his eyes. His whole face seemed to shift, his jaw relaxed and his lips parted ever so slightly. Ralph watched him, feeling a rush of emotion, one that he had felt at intervals in the past but had quashed. “I do remember the tension that he carried with him, how, when he entered a room the temperature seemed to drop slightly. Muscles that had been relaxed in those around him seemed to tense slightly. My mother would jump up to fuss him, move a chair closer to the fire, remove his boots and rub his feet. She would always have his favourite foods cooking or near at hand and would ply him continuously as if he was ill.” The timbre of Matthew’s voice dropped as he recalled more of his father in this moment than he had allowed himself for many years. “He would disappear at times, some whore or other in one of the villages. Mother knew, I did not know this at the

time, she told me much later. She thought it might lighten his soul, so she would accept it as long as he did not flaunt it before her face. It did not help though, it made him worse. I am unsure who she was but she was quite demanding of him from what I have been told. I think he was weak willed you know; he was not asked about the role in which he had been placed by God. He became Baron because he was the eldest, he did not want it. It was all too much. Too many demands from every direction. King, tenants, vassals, family. Too many demands that weighed too heavily on him. Do you know why I have not yet wed?" Matthew did not look round at Ralph, instead he opened his eyes a little wider as he watched the flames dance before him. Unsure whether or not to answer, Ralph remained silent. "I feel that it would be unfair, almost as if it would be unchristian of me to do so. Sometimes I feel as if someone is trying to drape a very heavy dark cloak around me. It pushes the air from my body and clouds my mind. I have no strength to withstand it or shrug it away. It burdens my very soul, this darkness, sapping away joy and contentment. It is as though I am drowning in emptiness. At first I thought it was grief and sadness from losing father but now I think this is how he must have felt."

"It sounds like grief to me." Ralph's voice cracked slightly as he spoke in response to Matthew's words.

"No, not grief. I know grief. That is sadness and sorrow. The heat of tears in your eyes and the lump that forms in your throat making it ache so that you cannot speak. That is grief. I felt it when my James died of the pox yet a few years after my father. This... this is something different." Turning his head around, he looked at Ralph, noticing the way he blinked rapidly and swallowed. "This is a vast, dark, emptiness. Devoid of any feeling at all. There is nothing there. No sadness or anger or disappointment. Just... nothing. Have you ever looked down a dried up well or a mine shaft?" Ralph nodded when Matthew paused. "There is nothing there but black. No bottom. No end. Just black." Clearing his throat

Ralph tried to speak, his mouth moved but no words came out. He gulped down some wine and tried again.

“Perhaps a wife is what you need. Give you some cheer, something to warm you up on a cold wet night. Lady Elizabeth is a beauty.” He tried a wobbly smile which Matthew barely returned.

“No. That is precisely why a wife is not for me. She would suffer as I suffered and what of children? Should they be made to watch the suffering? Become part of it? Like the eye colour that is shared between parents and offspring. What if they too are forced to share in this dark oppressive... nothingness?”

“Surely Matthew, you cannot be serious? Matthew, you are to wed in a few short months.”

“No. I will not wed Elizabeth Fretwell. I have spent months considering this.” Rubbing rough hands over his face, Ralph sat back aghast.

“God’s bones. Tell me this is not so. Matthew, you must marry, the King will be furious, she is his ward.” Matthew shrugged.

“Tell me, what will he do? Strip my Barony from me?” A blush rose on Ralph’s cheeks partly from the mention of the Barony but also of the dismissive tone Matthew’s words held. He looked around the room again, before speaking.

“Matthew. You cannot speak like that about the King. You ‘must’ marry Elizabeth. We all have to marry, it is our duty to produce heirs, to continue our bloodlines.”

“Why? Why must we? What does marriage truly bring? Happiness? Contentment? Peace? Not that I can see. How many bastards do you think you have running around? How many have you spawned since being wed to Barbara? How many half-brothers or sisters do any of us have? The legitimate children live well and prosper but what of the others? What becomes of them?”

“I...I...” Waving a hand dismissively as Ralph tried to speak, Matthew turned his head and looked at the pale, frightened face of his cousin.

“Ralph, you are family. I love you. Whatever secrets you have shared with me will remain. You have nothing to fear. There will be no outbursts, no exacting vengeance. I have said, this,” he signalled around the room, “this, is yours. I do not want it. I do not need it. I want peace and I want happiness and I would not get that if I was Baron.”

“But, to deny yourself a woman... it just...it seems...” Laughing at this, Matthew leant back on his chair, seeming somewhat more relaxed than he had a few moments before.

“You do not need marriage to enjoy a woman Ralph, you know this all too well. There’s plenty of willing bed-warmers about me, women to spend my time with one way or another. I just feel better knowing that whatever this curse is, that it shall die with me.”

“What?” Ralph’s eyes widened in shock and he sprang forwards. Matthew chortled and waved his hand in front of Ralph’s face.

“God’s bones man, I do not mean that. The damage wrought on us all by my father’s death is not something that I would ever wish to instil on those around me. Mother was determined that we should learn about ourselves following his death. She would sit with us for hours reading those damnable books of hers, making us talk about the world, about our hearts and heads and expectations. It was all very uncomfortable at the time but I do believe it is what has made me strong enough to know that marriage and children are not for me. I think it helped all of us to some degree. We have all grown to be generally happy. Margaret and her Ralph, along with their brood, are very content. No fancy castle, no hordes of servants but comfortable enough and with very loud and boisterous children. Hugh is more than happy as Head of Trampton Castle Guards, romping his way through as many lady’s maids and servants as possible, drinking and gaming prolonging his boyhood for as long he can. We are happy, we are content and for this I should thank mother more often than what I do.”

“You were always the intelligent one, Matthew. You should come and be my steward, we would be formidable you know.” Waving his hand again Matthew shook his head and then screwed up his face.

“No, no, no. That is what I have been saying. I do not need it or want it. I am a man made for a much simpler life than the one I was initially born into. The Barony will excel under you Ralph and I will always be your staunchest supporter, know that you always have my ear if you so wish it.” The men fell quiet once more.

“What will you do Matthew? The wedding? The King?” Ralph’s brow was puckered with uncertainty.

“I have written missives to the King and to Elizabeth, I shall send them shortly. I have begged their forgiveness. I have given up my right as heir, asking for Hugh to become heir apparent to whatever lands and fortunes we will be able to lay claim to upon my mother’s death. I will become disinherited.” Ralph’s jaw dropped; Matthew noticed how the wine had stained his tongue. Barbara’s potent, sweet drink; reserved for just the top table. Wine that only the very noblest of visitors were permitted to drink. Would he miss the wealth? The soft feather beds? The fleece stuffed cushions? Would he miss any of it? No. He would not.

“I am going to find Ena.” A burning log slipped amongst others in the hearth and a flurry of sparks and ash swirled around the smouldering wood whilst both men sat, silently contemplating the future that they faced.

Critical Commentary

Introduction

In October 2017 my husband had a total psychotic break from reality and the following March he took his own life by hanging. We had spent twenty years together and had two children. The event itself was traumatic, however, it was not something that came as a surprise as his mental health had been a moot point for many years. Even in those early, hazy days following his suicide I knew that I needed to do something that would bring the taboo of men's mental health and suicide to the fore. I wanted to write a creative piece that would explore male mental health, specifically suicide, and its effects.

It was not long after his suicide that I truly realised how many people had been affected by it. I began researching the effects that suicide can have on those left behind, known as suicide survivors. As part of 2018's suicide prevention month, September, Melinda Moore wrote an article for *The New Social Worker*. Within this article she discusses that for every death by suicide, one hundred and thirty-five people will be directly exposed and approximately 30% of those will be seriously psychologically affected by it. I knew then that my creative portfolio needed to be a genre or style that would give me the opportunity to explore how suicide loss affects different people, rather than focusing on a single protagonist. Choosing a composite novel meant that I could explore how one event can indeed affect different people within a community, not just immediate family.

The twenty-first century has seen both the critical and popular success of composite novels and short story cycles, especially those depicting traumatic experiences such as Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and A.L. Kennedy's *What Becomes*. Smith's text, centres round a hotel, shares the stories of Sara a young employee who dies in a tragic accident and is told from her ghost's perspective alongside other characters such as Else, a homeless woman who lives and begs outside. Kennedy's text differs slightly to this as the characters and stories are not interlinked by time or place, they are linked by the general theme of traumatic events. Kennedy's is more akin to James Joyce's *Dubliners* in this sense. Valerie O'Riordan suggests that the composite novel is popular because they speak to a global audience affected by an 'underlying sense of collective trauma and uncertainty' (Gill and Kläger, 2018, p.195). For example Kennedy's *What Becomes* highlights issues of domestic abuse in 'Saturday Teatime' and then in 'What Becomes' we have the forensic scientist who is embroiled in

other people's trauma on a daily basis as well as reliving his own traumatic injury. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been beset by violence, war and terrorism: traumatic events that have indeed shaken civilisation to its very core. In a technological era where social media platforms, and the media in general, dominate the world, there is now a greater sense of human connectivity than ever before. Trauma is embedded within all of our lives, whether it is through personal experience, through the media or in literature, it is something that cannot be escaped and as Andrea Klein suggests it 'does not degrade simply because we prefer not to see it' (2018).

It was not until my husband's suicide that I even noticed how prevalent suicide itself had become. It is present in films, on television, in books and in comics. These deaths by suicide, such as Brooks' hanging in *The Shawshank Redemption* or Selyse Baratheon's hanging in the television adaptation of *Game of Thrones*, all triggered abhorrent anxiety attacks for me in those initial weeks and months following his death. The subject of suicide is still seen by many as taboo and has long been a contentious issue for psychologists and theologians alike (Kelly and Dale, 2011). It was not decriminalised in the United Kingdom until the 1960s and there have been numerous guidelines established for its reporting in the media including the National Union of Journalists in Scotland in 2007 and the WHO in 2001 (updated in 2017). The fear held by many is the Werther effect, where after a suicide is reported there are then a spate of copycat suicides that follow. In 2010 an Austrian work group led by Niederkrotenthaler explored the Papogeno effect, opposite to the Werther effect. The group suggested that if a report focuses on crisis management and alternatives to suicide then it could lead to a decrease in suicide rates as opposed to an increase. I feel that hiding away from suicide is not the answer, we need knowledge and understanding but this needs to be done ethically and responsibly.

After my husband's death I turned to literature for comfort, purchasing Tamara Leigh's historical romance *The Unveiling*. The book opens with a detailed description of a death by hanging. Even though the description was graphic it did not invoke the same physical and psychological response that those on screen did. Using this as a starting point I read an article by Justin O'Donnell about historical fiction and the end of the article resonated with me. He said that historical fiction is not actually about the past at all, 'it's about human nature' the genre is just a 'lens to see ourselves in

a different age' (O'Donnell, 2016). Perhaps this is why I was not adversely affected by Leigh's text: the era was so far removed from my own that it felt almost surreal but in a way that made it easier for me to process and comprehend. It became a moment of epiphany for me in relation to the time in which I wanted to set my creative text, I needed it be an historical piece. This exegesis will explore why I have chosen the composite novel form to represent the trauma of suicide and why I believe that setting the stories in the twelfth century makes the presentation of trauma more palatable for readers who have experienced their own trauma.

The Composite Novel as a way to Represent Suicide and Trauma

In *Psychology Today*, Dr Deborah Serani discusses the challenges that suicide survivors face when grieving. She states that the grief process itself can be traumatic and complex because it is a 'loss like no other' (Serani, 2013). Silke Bachman's research on the epidemiology of suicide looks at the American Psychiatric Association's "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders", where the stress suffered by suicide survivors is ranked as 'catastrophically high'. It is believed to be equivalent to the trauma suffered by Nazi concentration camp survivors (Bachmann, 2018). There is an element of 'corrosive thinking' that accompanies it where survivors are faced with distinctive issues including: traumatic aftermath; recurring thoughts; stigma, shame and isolation; mixed emotions; and a need for reason (Serani, 2013). These issues can be overwhelming and can contribute to the development of illnesses such as depression, anxiety and PTSD in the survivors. In her 2004 book, Anne Whitehead asks how trauma can be narrativised if the experience itself is so overwhelming. This is something explored at length by leading trauma theorist Cathy Caruth. Caruth believes that there is a performance aspect to trauma, what we would recognise as flashbacks.

Caruth sees flashbacks as not merely a record of the past event, but as something that registers the 'full force of an experience that is not fully owned'. If they are 'not fully owned' there is then the suggestion that the flashbacks cannot be controlled (Caruth, 1995, p.151). If they cannot be controlled then they cannot be realistically narrated, leading to Caruth's conclusion that fiction cannot effectively represent trauma. Whitehead builds on Caruth's idea, describing trauma fiction as a 'paradox', for if the traumatic event is overwhelming and resistant to language that can realistically

and adequately describe it, then it cannot be narrativised. Whitehead refers to the effects of trauma as ‘inherent latency’ which she says becomes apparent in the fragmentary quality of trauma testimonials (Whitehead, 2004, p.7). Whitehead’s idea of the fragmentary nature of trauma testimonials links to my choice for the composite novel. It has long been agreed by critics that the stories in a composite novel should be both independent of one another but also interdependent.

Susan Garland Mann suggests that the stories together create something that could not be achieved in a singular narrative piece (Mann, 1989). Reading them together can create a much more complex understanding of trauma compared to reading individually. The notion of developing complexity is not a new one in terms of the composite or short story cycle. Ingram, in 1971, talked about the successive experience that a reader gleans as they work through each component of a collection or composite (D’Hoker, 2013). This seems to mirror the Gestalt theory of Psychology, whereby the whole is seen as being worth more than the sum of its parts, for every story can bring with it a deeper understanding of the underlying theme or concept. The notion of a linking theme is something that has been identified by various critics as a generic expectation of the composite novel. The fragmentary nature of trauma and traumatic memories is emphasised by the unifying theme.

Michael Rothberg (2000) coined the term ‘traumatic realism’ (cited in Whitehead, 2004, p.84), when considering how the writer of trauma fiction must employ a range of devices to make the reader ‘believe the unbelievable’. This is something that supports Caruth’s idea that for trauma fiction to retain its impact and not be reduced down to clichés there must be a multifaceted approach to the writing (Whitehead, 2004, p.84). Mann talks about generic signals that underscore the creation of composite novels: the use of the title and contents and the principle of development that helps create a central coherence whilst at the same time emphasising the differences (Mann, 1989). One of my aims was to show how suicide can affect a number of people, not just the immediate family. While referencing Tim O’Brien’s composite *The Things They Carried*, Farrell O’Gorman suggests that the structure of a composite is contrary in that it is ‘painfully inclusive’ (O’Gorman, 1998, p.300), exactly what I wanted to portray in my portfolio. The title and contents of the composite novels are the initial things that form both unity and disparity. With Joyce’s *Dubliners* it is easy to assume that the stories will be about different people from Dublin by having the name of the city as the title of the

book as well as including stories with titles such as ‘The Sisters’, ‘Araby’ and ‘Evaline’. Kennedy’s *What Becomes*, however, is not explicit. The title of the book sounds like an incomplete question and the stories within seem randomly titled for example ‘Wasps’, ‘Saturday Teatime’ and Confectioner’s Gold’, invoking a sense of uncertainty, something which seems very apt for a text that explores trauma. My own title *The Fallout* implies consequences and results. Fallout is a term that has been used in relation to explosions, especially nuclear ones, it implies that the effects are far reaching and toxic on the suicide survivors’ lives and their mental health. Although each of my stories is independent and concentrates on one specific character, I wanted there to be a unifying feature in the contents page. Each story is named after its titular protagonist. By just having the forenames as the titles to each there is a suggestion that grief felt by a suicide survivor is, as O’Gorman said, ‘painfully inclusive’. It can affect anyone. It also gives it a sense of intimacy, offering an implied understanding between reader and writer.

One of the aims of my portfolio was to create something as true as possible. Each of the characters in the stories holds elements of my own symptoms and reactions of PTSD, anxiety and depression. As part of my PTSD I suffered from flashbacks that became all consuming, embodying auditory and tactile/haptic hallucinations. According to Caruth, I would be unable to bring these memories, thoughts or feelings into my conscious brain and thus would not be able to incorporate them into my writing (Gill and Kläger, 2018), at least, not effectively. However, not all trauma theorists share the same ideas as Caruth. Many, such as Dari Laub who specialises in Holocaust testimonials, believes that this performative aspect can be used and controlled to some extent and can help healing. The auditory and tactile/haptic hallucinations that I suffered led to anxiety attacks. My breathing would become erratic and I would sweat profusely, exactly the same as Isolde does when she is in her solar. Readers should be able to identify with these things but also see how they are dealt with by the character. For example, when Ena finds the body, the image of his booted feet overwhelms her and is repeated. This obsessive thought pattern was something that initially took over when I first saw my husband’s body, the way his feet turned and pointed down. It invaded my waking thoughts and my dreams. In ‘Peter’, Magda has locked herself away in her home: her hair is matted and she has dark circles around her eyes from lack of sleep. During my depressive episodes I need

isolation. I need to be cocooned in a warm place, I am exhausted and yet sleep eludes me. These are things shared by many sufferers of mental illness and those who have experienced significant trauma.

Trauma fiction shares similarities with many forms of fiction in that it engages with and reflects contemporary issues. This links with Gill and Kläger's idea in the introduction to *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* that the composite novel offers a 'world-making model', one that can both reflect the world in which we live and can become a model for the world (Gill and Kläger, 2018, p.7). Each story can stand alone or be read together. It perfectly reflects the life of a suicide survivor. You are part of a family, a community, but are also separate and isolated. This is what makes it reflective of the world in which we live. It also makes it a model for the world because it normalises the grief process and the feelings of isolation that comes with it. By creating separate stories and focusing on individual characters I have been able to reflect this isolation in the structure of the composite and have also been able to explore the concept for each character within their own story. My portfolio is comprised of four stories: 'Ena', the kitchen girl who finds the body, set the morning after the suicide; 'Peter', the brother of the Baron's mistress, set nearly a month after the event; 'Isolde', the wife of the Baron, set nearly three years after the event, and 'Matthew', the Baron's heir, set fifteen years after the event. I have explored the concept of isolation in each story but the isolation is portrayed differently for each character. Isolde is sent to live on her dower lands and thus becomes isolated from the life that she knew as well as from her husband. Ena appears in Isolde's story and is described as 'shuffling' and as a 'spectre': her experience of finding the body has isolated her, her nightmares cutting her off from the rest of the world. The isolation of these two characters is somewhat different to Magda in 'Peter' and Matthew. Magda's isolation is self-imposed, she has shut herself away in her house from the rest of the village and her family. At the end of Matthew's story we learn that he is choosing a form of isolation by refusing to marry and by disinheriting himself. His isolation almost seems to be self-sacrificing; he wants the cycle of depression to end with him.

This notion of self-sacrificing isolation links somewhat to the need for reason that suicide survivors face. The separate but connected stories of my portfolio give me a way to explore key

aspects of the trauma of suicide. Having each story from a different perspective I am able to imply different things but at the same time refrain from offering clear answers. For me, this is important both for realism and for the underpinning ethics. For many, there is no indication that their loved one will commit suicide and there is no note left behind. It becomes a self-punishing cycle of questioning. Considering suicides played out in literature and onscreen there always seems to be a reason behind each one. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Brooks has spent the majority of his life in prison. He is institutionalised and cannot adapt to the world. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Billy Bibbitt's suicide is a response to Nurse Ratched's attempt to make him once again subservient to her. Many suicides appear to be self-sacrificing. Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, offers himself forwards for execution in the place of Edmund Pevensie; three characters commit suicide through self-sacrifice in the *Avengers* films. In my own collection there is no clear reason why the Baron commits suicide. From 'Isolde' and from 'Matthew' we are able to draw conclusions but the reasons are implied rather than explicit. The Baron appears to be a character plagued by anxiety, depression and compulsive thoughts. This gives a greater sense of realism to the character. It also makes it more ethically sound. Behaviourist expert Mark Schäfer discusses the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, about the suicide of a high school student who records video messages about those that she feels are responsible for her choice of suicide. He believes that filmmakers should depict the complexity of situations, rather than simplifying them and comments that if the series had been based on a true story then the character would 'surely have been mentally ill' (Hunger, 2017). As previously mentioned, my husband's mental health was a moot point and had been for years. He refused any help at all because of the stigma he associated with it.

With suicide there is an incompleteness. There is no definitive answer or explanation, just as there is no definitive logical process to grief. Although the stories of composite novels are structured with a beginning, middle and end, they are also punctuated with gaps and silences. They are fragments and stand alone amongst many. The composite novel is an ideal form for the exploration of the incomplete nature of suicide. When discussing John Galt's *The Steamboat*, Ian Duncan suggests that the reader is urged to 'imaginatively fill in the gaps' (Gill and Kläger, 2018, p.84). The central protagonist in *The Steamboat* is Duffle, the other travellers tell him tales but he seldom hears the

endings because of their need to continue along their journeys. None of my stories are incomplete, but they all invite reader participation. For example, Peter needs to support and protect his family and yet his sister's actions seem to be undermining this. At the end of his story we are left questioning exactly what Peg knows, what she will do and how much danger Peter and his family will be in. With Ena, we want to know where she is, if she has been able to process her past trauma, if Matthew will find her and what the relationship will be between the two of them. This links to the work of Niederkrotenthaler on the Papogeno and Werther effect, mentioned in my introduction. Working alongside Tilly et al (2010) they showed censored and uncensored scenes of suicide and found an increase in depression and a decrease in mood regardless of whether the viewers had seen the censored or uncensored ones. They theorised, much like Duncan, that the viewers simply 'complimented the missing details...using their own imaginations' (Schaffer, 2018, p.6).

In her book, Mann discusses the importance of narratives within the composite or short story cycle, the book as a whole must achieve greater coherence than simply through time and place. For her, each story as a 'narrative that must contain some kind of development' (Mann, 1989, p.17). This is different to what we might assume to be the structure of beginning, middle and end. This is more specific, she suggests the development might be 'completed physical action'; it might 'involve a discovery, this could be the protagonist, another character or the reader themselves; or it might be the 'reversal of the story's original situation or the character's original psychological state' (Mann, 1989, p.17). She believes that in most stories there are in fact multiple developments. This relates to the idea that Whitehead suggests about trauma fiction as a whole: that it relies partly on intertextuality. It is this that helps give it a sense of realism for it is synonymous with the way that memory works, and as I have already mentioned, suicide survivors are often plagued with unsolicited memories and recurring thoughts. In 'Peter' there is the development of physical action. He finds the deodand and burns it, he takes the ring from Magda and makes the decision that she will move into his house so that he can look after her. There is also the development of what Peg knows about Magda's presence in the orchard. In 'Isolde' we are party to her flashback and anxiety attack. Once the attack has abated, Isolde regains her seat by the window, holds a goblet to her chest and rhythmically taps her fingers against it whilst forcing herself to feel her emotions. This is a classic aspect of EMDR therapy

which is used in the treatment of PTSD and would be an example of a completed physical action. The reader discovers more about her husband's mental state and we discover that she knew about the mistress. In 'Ena' she discovers the body, the reader also discovers the root of the conflict between her and Cook. Possibly the surprise development is how she heads straight for Cook when returning to the kitchen. Even though there is enmity between them Cook is in fact something/someone that is constant in her life, and therefore offers her some form of safety and solace. Also in 'Ena' we see a reversal of the original situation and character. The story starts and ends with Ena in the kitchen and yet we end with a girl panic-stricken as opposed to impudent. In 'Matthew' it is Ralph who learns the most. He learns that Matthew will keep his secrets, that Matthew has no intention of marrying and that he will disinherit himself so that he can search for Ena. Ena's presence in three of the four stories acts as a centripetal force pulling the collection together, however, at the same time we see her character diminish over time. She is fiery and argumentative in 'Ena', she is an almost silent 'spectre' in 'Isolde' and in 'Matthew' she has disappeared entirely, her character development thus becomes a centrifugal force disrupting the positive developments that we see for other characters.

This tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces is what makes the composite novel the ideal choice to represent the trauma of suicide in fiction. Each story is pulled together by the underlying event, the need for reason, the chaotic and corrosive thinking of the characters. However, at the same time they are separated and seem to move further away from each other. Every event affects everyone differently and the isolation that comes with the label of 'suicide survivor' makes the divisions all the more prevalent.

Historical Fiction as a way to Represent Suicide and Trauma

After making the decision to use an historical composite form for my creative piece and to focus on the effects of suicide I then needed to decide how far back I wanted to set my text. Stephanie Merritt's article about historical fiction questions what we want from the genre, suggesting that we have an 'escapist appetite for stories safely cocooned in the past' (Merritt, 2014). Using an historical setting could offer the reader security, in the sense that the past is so different from their own time that the events and themes could also seem far enough removed that they would not trigger as many

adverse responses, physically or emotionally. The question that rises here is that if it is set too far back would I lose the contemporary relevance that I want to represent? In his thesis, Sturtevant states that the ‘Middle Ages are lost’ (Sturtevant, 2010, p.10) so surviving material has to be interpreted by the modern writer and is therefore a reinvention of the time. This is exactly what I want to depict, that suicide survivors are lost, they are out of their time, and need ways of re-working and re-imagining their present so that they too will have a future. There is a sense of freedom in being ‘lost’, you are not constrained in any way. To set my creative pieces in the Victorian era, for example, I would not have the same freedom because of the number of historical sources that are so readily available. In Jordison’s 2014 article, he cites Mantel’s thoughts about the negative attitudes that historical authors receive. She sees the past not as some ‘feathered sanctuary’ but the opposite, she believes that the danger to the reader is not the ‘coyness of the past – it is its obscenity’ (Jordison, 2014). The assumption is that the Middle Ages are a time of barbarism, that they are ‘primitive and unsatisfying’ (Saunders and Fernyhough, 2010, p.880), yet this is not the case. When Müller-Wood explored the idea of bio-cognitive constraints in the short story cycle and composite novel, she pointed out that the reader and the writer share the same ‘cognitive apparatus’ that enables us, as ‘Homo Sapiens’, to navigate and interact with the world (Gill and Kläger, 2018, p.33). These interactive and navigational skills have developed in humans across time. Many of the issues that we face now are issues that were faced a thousand years ago: death, love, conflict, war, trauma. They stretch beyond time and setting, they are integral to human nature. Forsyth (2014) has suggested that while we are reading historical fiction we are breaking from our own lives and when we close the book we are returning to our own times ‘with fresh eyes, understanding all that we have gained and lost’ (Forsyth, 2014). The Middle Ages is a relatively unknown time, looking at how similar traumatic events unfold and affect people a thousand years ago can shed light and understanding on the similarities that we face now.

It was not until the twelfth century that the works of Aristotle were re-discovered and not until the thirteenth century that many Arabic texts were translated into Latin. This period was actually ‘sophisticated’ in how it saw the workings of the mind and body (Saunders and Fernyhough, 2016, p.880). Perhaps we have lost that understanding of mental health issues and through historical fiction

we could re-invent and re-imagine it. This is one of the reasons that I chose to set my creative pieces in the late twelfth century. I wanted to include the ideas of the Greek philosophers, not only for realism but also as a subliminal message for the reader of searching for help and support outside of traditional methods or parameters. Both the WHO and The Samaritans/SOA have suggested that it is important to include areas of support within texts (WHO, 2017, 2019 and SOA, 2020).

One of the leading researchers of suicide in the middle ages is Andrew Murray. His extensive research has examined numerous legal documents in England and across Europe including the English Eyre Rolls. His findings suggest many similarities with suicide rates now. For example, approximately three quarters of all cases were men, the most common form was by hanging and there were spikes in cases during mid-winter and early spring (Murray, 2000). Considering the conclusions drawn by Murray and putting them alongside those drawn by the Office of National Statistics from 2017 and 2019 (Samaritans, 2020), we see that men, especially in their middling years, are approximately three times more likely to commit suicide than women both in the Middle Ages and in the twenty-first century. If the patterns and proportions of suicide rates have barely changed in over a thousand years, then surely we need to ask questions about the past to inform the present.

Another issue to contend with when writing was ensuring that not only is the trauma depicted realistically but that the setting is too. Although there has been vast criticism of the historical fiction genre in the past for being both 'popular' and 'escapist' (Wallace, 20005, p.3) the Middle Ages has seen a resurgence in the latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries with modern audiences. There has been a rapid increase in the popularity of both book and TV series' such as G.R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* and Bernard Cornwell's *The Saxon Stories* (*The Last Kingdom* on TV). Their penchant for historical accuracy without being superfluous made them a pleasure to read and a pleasure to watch. Perhaps this is why Martin's, Cornwell's and Mantel's texts are so popular, they are not stilted with superfluous language or bogged down with a hyperinflated lexical field. They are written with the aim of a broad and all-encompassing audience in mind. Thinking of historical fiction may spark memories of reading historical tomes by eighteenth and nineteenth century authors such as Sir Walter Scott or G.A. Henty. Because they were written in a time apart from our own, they feel almost archaic themselves. While reading G.A. Henty's *Wulf the Saxon*

written in 1894 I was very aware of the writing style. The depiction of the characters, how they move and speak was very reminiscent of the Victorian era in which it was written as opposed to when it was set, the eleventh century. It felt almost a chore to read it. If an intellectual finds reading a fictional text a chore then surely the audience base will be limited.

When reviewing Nicola Griffith's *Hild*, Cara Parks states that the book 'leans too heavily on historical reality, expecting it to breathe fire into the characters'. For Parks it is important that historical fiction does not linger on recreating the past but focuses more on 'excavating...humanity from beneath centuries' (Parks, 2013). It seems that she is suggesting that readers read with the intention of exploring the humanity of the characters rather than learning about the distant past. Surely it can be both? There are detailed descriptions of the rooms in which my characters are placed and of their dress but there is some form of explanation that goes with them. I want to reach a wide audience, I want my stories to be inclusive, not exclusive by being reliant on too much historical information that my reader feels more isolated than ever. For example, Ena forgets her 'wooden patens' when she leaves the kitchen but I comment that without them her feet will get wet so that the reader understands their use. The glass in Isolde's window is an extravagance which is mentioned and explained by her thought 'anything to be rid of her no doubt', glass was not used in many dwellings during this time so by including the idea of extravagance and being 'rid' of her I can exemplify her isolation and her feelings of worthlessness. In 'Peter', the discovery of the deodand that Magda has taken angers Peter who then reminds Magda of what it is and what should have happened to it. I explain it to the reader through Peter's explanation to Magda. When the characters speak to each other, I have written their dialogue how I think they would have spoken in regard to their social standing. When Magda shows Peter the ring his comment 'sard' is the twelfth century equivalent of 'fuck'. I have not explained this but because of the description of his tone and action the reader can assume that it is an example of profanity.

To ensure that the setting is not only historically accurate but also accurate to the feelings of trauma I have isolated my characters within their settings. Isolde is in her solar, there is a heavy wooden door and the windows are glazed. Nothing can get in and nothing can get out. She is completely isolated from the outside world. In the great hall at Clayborne Castle, Matthew and Ralph

are set apart from the merry making guests, they then retire to Ralph's solar which is quiet and cuts them off from the rest of the castle, emphasising their own internal struggles. Peter spends some time with Magda, isolated in her house; when he leaves he meets Peg Tanner and carries water to her home. The lane leads him away from the village, from safety and towards the stench of the tanning pits which I have used to reflect the dire straits that Peter and Magda could easily find themselves in, depending on what Peg knows and reveals.

With historical fiction you have the opportunity to explore not only setting but you have the chance to bring to life the unrecorded lives of the 'marginalised' people within society. A chance to explore subjects that are often seen as taboo (Wallace, 2005) and there is a sense of safety because of the protective cocoon of the past. This is true of 'Ena'. Ena's story has her as the central protagonist, and yet in relation to the Baron she is a minor character. She is an orphaned kitchen servant, very low on the social hierarchy of the Baron's castle and lands. However, it is through Ena that we see how devastating suicide trauma can be, especially on children. When she finds the body she is about nine and then in Isolde's story she is thirteen. Isolde sees her as a 'waif' and does not know how to help her. She feels 'awkward', speaking to Ena in a 'forced jovial tone', reminiscent of how people speak to those who suffer from mental illnesses especially those that are a result of significant trauma. The way Isolde reacts and acts towards Ena is not abnormal. Although PTSD and the effects of trauma have been studied fairly comprehensively throughout the twentieth century, the idea of complex trauma is something that is only now being explored in the twenty-first century. Ena has endured multiple traumatic experiences: the death of her parents, being separated from her brother, being forced to live in the care of Cook who seems to despise her. She finds the Baron's body and then is forced to move from Clayborne to Willowdale Manor. Psychologist, Courtois, developed a diagnosis of complex trauma as being associated with 'multiple traumatic stressors...along with severe disturbances in primary caregiver relationships' (cited in Ringel and Brandell, 2011). Given that Ena has experienced so much trauma and from such a young age, it is little wonder, that she is so adversely affected by the Baron's suicide. Being so low on the social hierarchy, Ena is all but dehumanised, something easier to show when the text is set in the twelfth century as opposed to the twenty-first, she is a servant and there are no protective regulations, there are no health professionals

or teachers, or outside agencies. This links to the popularity of historical fiction and what author Tim Weed refers to as the 'deeper human truths of existence' (King, 2017). I have been able to explore the effects of suicide trauma by giving a voice to the unrecorded populace.

Heather Webb, author of *Rodin's Lover* (2015), says that historical fiction is always relevant and that it 'teaches us to be empathetic towards others' (King, 2017). If we can learn empathy, then perhaps we can understand mental health issues more which will result in a decrease of the stigma attached to it. Trauma is embedded in our lives and in every culture and society throughout the whole of history, not only is it part of our lives but the fact that we are a society driven by technology and the media means that we cannot escape it. Perhaps this is one reason why we turn to the Middle Ages, because we see them as a simpler and more straightforward time (Parks, 2013). W.G. Sebald's 1992 book *The Emigrants*, explores themes of memory and trauma relating predominantly to both World Wars. Some of the stories are set after the First World War and some set after the Second World War. Two of the characters in the four tales commit suicide, long after they experienced their own trauma. Whitehead cites Sebald's comment on the idea of shared traumatic experiences; 'it's the chronological continuity that makes you feel it's something to do with you' (Whitehead, 2004, p.117). This links with historical fiction where we use the past to make 'clarity out of chaos' and to explore the 'human continuum' (O'Grady, 2019). It is not the fact that my novel is set in the twelfth century that is important but the fact that the twelfth century becomes a place of safety where we can learn empathy through what the characters say and do.

In my introduction I said that I wanted to bring men's mental health to the fore, this is what I have tried to do with the knowledge we learn about the Baron through Isolde and also with Matthew's revelations to Ralph. Matthew describes his depression to Ralph who initially dismisses it as grief, we can see Ralph's uncertainty and how uncomfortable he is through the way his 'voice cracked' when he spoke. However, he continues to listen and learns something of the overwhelming darkness felt by Matthew. This is a description of my own depressive episodes but giving them to Matthew was important because I am giving a voice to a marginalised societal figure. He says that he has 'no strength to withstand it or shrug it away' and yet we see strength in him when he declares his intention of disinheriting himself and searching for Ena. There is a complexity to Matthew that there is in all of

us, he has episodes of weakness and strength. The reader can identify with his character and also with Ralph who tries to bring 'cheer' to a situation he is uncomfortable in. We can learn empathy through this exchange; something that trauma theorist LaCapra believes will help both victims of trauma and society, aiding recuperation.

This is what makes my historical setting so apt for portraying the trauma of suicide. It becomes a cushion distancing the reader from their own personal trauma. Like with the tapping of Isolde's fingers on her goblet, the twelfth century acts as a centrifugal force, distracting the reader from their own lives. By doing this another world opens up for the reader, one in which they can explore the complexity of their own grief.

Conclusions

The most important things for me when writing my creative piece were ethical underpinning and realism. There were times while I was drafting that the two became contradictory. One of the first texts that I read while researching was Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*. One of the things I have discussed is the question of whether trauma can be narrativised because the traumatic events cannot be 'owned' and cannot be controlled and therefore will not be effective when written. Whitehead questions Caruth's ideas relating to this. In her book she cites Primo Levi (author of *The Drowned and the Dead*) who insists that 'human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument' (Whitehead, 2004, p.30). This is the idea that I have taken into my own writing, that memory may not always be totally reliable but it is useful. I may not have got every detail but my portrayal of Isolde's anxiety attack is effective, as is Ena's finding of the body, Peter's frustration with Magda and Matthew's description of his depression. I know that they are effective because I created a focus group which contained women who have suffered the same trauma from suicide that I have, many of whom have been diagnosed with the same mental illnesses that I have. Their feedback has been both supportive and complimentary; because of my desire to have my portfolio ethically underpinned I needed the reactions and reflections of those who share my journey.

The idea for the focus group came from my research around ethics, especially studies conducted by Niederkrotenthaler (mentioned in my introduction) and Tilly et al, 2010 (mentioned in my section on the composite novel) and also by the comments of Duncan about *The Steamboat*. The idea of viewers and readers using their imaginations to ‘fill in the gaps’. Using these ideas, alongside recommendations of the WHO and the SOA relating to the depiction of suicide, I needed to ensure that Ena’s character was sensitively created. The effects of trauma on Ena are severe, mentioned previously we see her diminish and disappear as we read. Although Ena does not commit suicide the fact that she disappears could imply to some that she may. Both the WHO and The Samaritans/SOA suggest that writers offer ‘hope’, find ways to cope with stressors and look for help (WHO, 2019). Ena does not seek help but Matthew recognises this and makes the decision to go and find her and help her. Caruth warned against reducing down trauma when writing, into a set of clichés. Is the fact that Matthew will give up everything to go and help her a cliché? Maybe it is. In her article Merritt says about historical fiction that ‘the novelist has no duty but to the story’ (Merritt, 2014). For me, this is not true, I have a duty to present trauma by suicide convincingly but I have an ethical duty to my readers to offer a sense of hope. Ena’s story is not a ‘happily ever after’ in the traditional sense but the reader is invited to participate and decide what will happen next. It may not be entirely reflective of trauma but it is ethical, and this far outweighs the lack of realism in this aspect.

Continuing with the idea of realism and the portrayal of grief I thought it important that there was no element of finality in any of the stories. I did not want any of the characters truly overcoming their burden of grief. Isolde’s story finishes with her sitting back at the window embroidering. The window is glazed, light may enter but no air can. I made this choice to reflect upon Isolde’s place in relation to her grief journey. She is almost three years out from the event itself and yet she is still in the semi-gloom, the light of acknowledgement and freedom from the trauma has not overcome the darkness of her grief. Thus, the reader can identify with Isolde, they can see that their own grief is not unusual; it is in fact a long and arduous process with small steps towards recovery.

The use of the historical setting is ideal when exploring trauma. There is a safety aspect to it; it is set so far in the past that the world is a different place. It becomes, as O’Donnell said, ‘a lens to

see ourselves' through, for us to explore contemporary issues of men's mental health and suicide in a way that does not overwhelm the psyche of the reader. The stories are not solely about the twelfth century, they are about human nature. Diana Wallace states that historical writers use this genre to 'comment in a coded way on the issues of the day' (Wallace, 2005, p.4). It offers us the chance to escape into another world far removed from our own but at the same time the issues we are escaping are the ones being explored. This could be why reading can be a cathartic process, you are conscious of reading the story but perhaps unaware that you are unconsciously processing your own trauma.

The guidelines of the SOA and The Samaritans regarding suicide depiction in fiction suggest that it is important and helpful to readers if the complexity of situations is conveyed rather than simplified or reduced down to a single incident (Samaritans, 2020). As mentioned in my introduction, suicide depiction and reporting is a contentious issue. The WHO have published guidelines for the media and for filmmakers and those working on both stage and screen (2001, 2017, 2019). They refer to suicide as being a 'global public health problem' (WHO, 2019) they suggest, similarly to The Samaritans and SOA, that narratives should try and incorporate 'resilience' and that there should be elements of hope. Isolde is a character of hope and resilience as is the character of Old Nora within Isolde's story. Isolde seeks help and Nora comes and sits with her, talks to her and gives advice. The implication here is that she does so from her own experience, help can be found in unlikely places. This gives her story an ethical underpinning. Isolde herself uses herbs and EMDR techniques to work through her anxiety. She looks back to the distant past, to works of Greek philosophers and applies them to herself. Isolde has learnt effective coping mechanisms to deal with stressors. The sense of hope and resilience in 'Matthew' is not solely to do with his character. He has made the decision to find Ena; he knows her trauma and pain and wants to find her so that they can help each other. In his book *Introducing Literary Criticism: A Graphic Guide*, Holland considers the history of literary criticism itself, discussing the use of Aristotle's theory of catharsis in Ancient Greece, describing it as both a 'therapeutic' and a 'purgative process' (Holland, 2016, p. 154). This notion of catharsis and therapeutics is part of the therapy that sufferers of significant trauma undergo. It helps aid the tortured mind and soul; helping to alleviate the 'corrosive thinking' that all too often accompanies the

trauma faced by suicide survivors (Serani, 2013). It has been a cathartic process for me as a writer and the feedback from my focus group suggests that they too have found solace in the pages and that my creative portfolio could aid in their own recuperation.

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