
Opening Extract from...

The Anchoress

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Please note that this extract is taken from an uncorrected proof

THE ANCHORESS

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'Tis not that Dying hurts us so –
'Tis Living — hurts us more –
But Dying –is a different way –
A Kind behind the Door –

The Southern Custom — of the Bird –
That ere the Frosts are due –
Accepts a better Latitude –
We — are the Birds — that stay.

Emily Dickinson

I had always wanted to be a jongleur, to leap from the shoulders of another, to fly and tumble, to dare myself in thin air with nothing but my arms and legs to land me safely on the ground. An acrobat is not a bird, but it is the closest a person can come to being free in the air. The nearest to an angel's gift of flying.

But that was as a child, when my body was secure, like that of a boy, and I felt myself whole and able to try anything. That was before my arms and legs grew soft and awkward and my woman's body took away those strong, pliant surfaces of skin, before I knew I could bleed and not die or, worse still, carry a life inside me and die because of it.

In spite of my body, the dream remained. It was the idea that I loved; I understood enough of the world to know that I could never be a jongleur.

I remember Roland especially, though in my child's fancy I called him Swallow. He was part of a travelling troupe that visited our town one market day and began to perform in the middle of the crowd, the music and the colours of the costumes nudging us to stop and watch. A circle formed, with Swallow as its centre. His costume was grey striped with red, his face painted

with blue on his cheeks and forehead and red on his nose. He balanced the hilt of a sword in each hand, the blades standing tall above him, and danced, lifting his knees, pointing and scooping his feet in front and behind. When he stopped, his confrère gently placed an apple on the tip of each blade. Making sure they were still, the balance certain, Swallow stepped right then left, forwards and backwards, a slow and graceful single carole, smiling at us all. Finally he threw the swords up and caught them in one hand — though someone shouted, 'Blunt, you fraud' — and gathered the apples with the other. He bowed deeply and ran to join his companions who were building a tower, three on the bottom then two on their shoulders. With dancing feet, Roland climbed from leg to arm to leg to arm and onto the shoulders of the men on top. He stood still for a moment, arms in the air, stretching out to the heavens, face tilted up, then leapt and tumbled. I gasped to see him swoop like a swallow in the grey sky beyond. He landed surefooted and still on two slippered feet and the six men formed a line, bowed deeply, then turned around, pulled down their breeches and farted at us, one at a time. The crowd laughed and cheered but I was still leaping in the air with Swallow.

When I saw him later that day with his face cleaned of colour, I saw his nose was not at all like a swallow's beak, but sat to one side of his face as if it had been dough flattened by a rough hand. He told me he had fallen when learning to tumble; his own knee had broken his nose as he landed.

The day after I was enclosed I thought of Swallow. I'd thrown away everything in this world and leapt into the air, lighter than I'd ever been, flying to God, who would catch me in his arms. Here, like Swallow, I was a body without a body. Even inside

the thick walls of my cell I felt I could see the sky all around me, blue and clear, and I thought I had what I wanted.

I didn't know then that I had landed on hard ground and broken my bones with my own body.

1

The Church of St Juliana
Hartham, English Midlands
St Faith's Day (October 6) 1255

SARAH

I was near the door, where women should stay. The floor was hard, refusing me, though I lay face down, my arms outstretched, embracing it, wanting this life, this death. I knew there were people nearby, those from the village who had come to look or pray, but I saw none of them. Voices in the sanctuary that seemed so far away sang a dirge, a celebration of loss, prayers for me. I knew the words: I had read and reread them, memorised them, prayed on them, but now they were nothing but sound. The dank cold of stone crept into my bones; I did not feel the drops of water on my back, their chill blessing. I had become stone.

The bishop lifted me to my feet, my legs leaden, and guided me toward the altar. I took the candles they gave me; now a flame glowed in each hand and I could see nothing beyond them. From somewhere outside my ring of light, the bishop's words

implored me: 'Be fervent in love of God and your neighbour.' I knelt and prayed.

Then words, paper and more words: I signed to all I had asked for. The clinking of the thurible's chain and the bitter-sweet smell of incense drifted close, quietly wrapped around me like a shroud, like arms that loved me.

They led me through the front door, away from the gathered light of candles and people, and out into the night, black and chill. We walked through the graveyard, wet grass under my feet, the dead all around me. Singing came from the darkness, 'May angels lead you to paradise'; this was the hymn we'd sung for Ma when she died, and later for Emma, too. At the cell we stopped and the warm hands that held my arms let go. I shivered. The bishop's voice commanded, 'If she wants to go in, let her go in.'

The dark mouth stood open. I took a breath and stepped inside. Blackness yawned around me, damp on my face. But voices were nearby, sweet ones, singing, 'Be of good courage, thy desire from God is at hand.' They laid me down on the floor, scatterings of dirt and words falling on me, into my mouth and eyes. Death desired me and I accepted: 'Here I will stay forever; this is the home I have chosen.' I could feel my bones, white and still in the black soil; worms wove among my ribs like wool on a loom. Deep in this darkness I am dead. My body dissolves, crumbles, turns to earth. They turned and walked away, left me alone.

I startled, fright hot and sharp in my chest. Blows shuddered the door. I stood and pressed my hands against it, felt nails splintering wood, the sound sharp in my ears, then echoing inside my head.

These hammer blows that sealed my door were the nailing of my hands and feet to the cross with Christ, the tearing of his skin and sinew. The jolt of each blow pushed me away but I strained to feel it, the shiver of resistance humming in my body.

When she was dying, Emma had opened her hand for mine, held on to me, held on to life. Another nail, and another, the judder running through my arms and into my chest, through my jaw and into my teeth. The taste of blood sharp on my tongue. Christ made no noise, his face tight with pain; Emma didn't speak, just looked at me, her eyes fading. Blood dripped, then ran.

The hammering ceased but still my arms throbbed and silence rang in my ears. Then scuffling, tools clinking, the church door banging shut, the dull click of its latch, low and serious voices fading. I stepped away from the door, incense floating up from my robe to touch my cheek.

Two candles burned on my altar; they must be the ones I had carried in the church. I took two or three steps toward the bed and sat down delicately, as if not to disturb someone else's sleeping place; the straw rustled. I stood up again and peered into the gloom. Of a sudden my body came back to me: my heart was beating hard, my legs were shaking and my belly ached. I needed to piss, now. I looked around for the bucket, found it at the end of the bed, pulled up my robe and squatted. The ache in my belly lessened and I felt calmer. I reached out, touched the cold stone wall, rough and gritty on my hand. The clotted smell of dampness, the earthy smell of moss. This was to be my home — no, my grave — for the rest of my life.

I knelt at my altar and began Compline: 'The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end …' but my words ran

out. I'd prayed these words each night since I was a child; they were part of me, like breathing, and now they had deserted me. But this was my life, to pray. I began again, my breath fast and shallow, hoping that the thread would catch and the words be pulled along. Nothing; they would not return however much I concentrated. It was as if I'd never learned them. My first night alone and I had no prayer. I snatched at some lines: *Iesu Criste, Fili Dei uiui, miserere nobis … Domine, labia mea aperies …* I sang *Veni creator spiritus* over and over until my heart settled and slowed. My head drooped. I blew out the candles and crawled over to my bed, crossed myself and closed my eyes. It was done.

2

The clang of a bell, loud and close by. I started awake, opened my eyes but everything was black. Fright pounded in my head. The bed was hard, the blanket rough, and as I sat up, stone grazed across my hand. My cell. Letting out a long breath, I crossed myself and began my day as always: *Veni creator spiritus, mentes tuorum visita…* To my relief the familiar rhythm of the prayer settled into me, and I let myself move beyond its forms and words to the memory of candles and darkness, to the vows I had made the night before, giving all to God.

This life meant that I was to pray all day, as I woke, as I dressed, as I ate, as I read. I wanted to light my oil lamp, but I had no idea where my maid had left my flint and tinderbox, so I fumbled for my shoes, pulled on my robe and buckled my belt, reciting my *Pater noster*, then fumbled for my shoes, saying the *Credo*.

I stood in the darkness. The things of my old life made no sense now. I touched my lips; there they were, but when I moved my hand away, my mouth was gone. A flicker of light nearby. It must have come from my squint, my way of seeing into the church. I took a step or two toward it, felt along the

stone until I found a ledge and the niche cut into the wall above it. Someone was moving around in the sanctuary on the other side of my wall, lighting candles, beginning prayers. It was Martin, the priest's assistant; I could tell his eager voice from the day before when he had rushed in and out, carrying messages, straightening the altar cloth, lighting the thurible. Even though he was only an assistant, it was a relief to hear him and I knelt once more and whispered my prayers in time with his. I was alone, as I wanted, but it was a comfort to know that my cell hugged the church.

The church door banged as Martin left, but I stayed on my knees, listening to my breath going in and out. The familiar ache was still there in my chest: Emma gone and in the ground, my little sister's life dragged from her body. Her wails of pain, then her whimpers that terrified me even more, the desperate grip of her hand that weakened and finally let go. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Here, inside these walls, Christ would heal me of my grief, help me let go of my woman's body, its frailty and desire. I would learn to love him above all others, to share his suffering.

Patches of dull light glimmered through gaps in the thatch and a soft golden glow came from somewhere above me. I looked up. Over my altar, and just below the roofline, was a window covered with strips of horn that kept out the wind, but were thin enough to let through some light. I could see only dimly, but found my flint and lit the oil lamp on my desk.

Next to it was a book, simply bound and without a clasp, my Rule of Life. I picked it up and held it between my hands, felt the smooth leather of the cover. Inside were page after page, row after row of letters, here and there a simple red capital. Plain

words, no illuminations such as I had seen in Books of Hours, not even a flourish around a capital, or a curl of leaves. I had thought there would be something. Even the bishop said that mine was a calling few could undertake. If I was to read this book each day, look to it for guidance about how to live this hardest of lives, surely I deserved better.

I moved nearer the lamp to read the first page.

You, my dear sisters, have begged me for a Rule for many a day and so I have written down these words for you, that you may be encouraged in your love for Christ as you hang with him.

My dear sisters. I was one of these dear sisters. The bishop told me the Rule had been written by a godly man for some anchoresses who had lived not far from here. God had blessed the diocese with more women like them, he said, and there were now many copies of the Rule. The one used by the women in this cell had been given elsewhere, so a scribe had made one more, just for me. I wondered about the man who had written out all these words, one by one, and drawn the plain red capitals. Just for me. Perhaps the other copies had been plain as well. This was my life now; I should not expect more.

The parchment whispered as I turned the pages, word after word.

A quiet knock, then a little louder, and a muffled voice.

'Sister Sarah? 'Scuse me, Sister, for disturbing you. It's Louise, your maid.'

I looked toward the rattling shutters. Louise would be standing at the maids' window cut into the back wall of her room, the one adjoining my cell on its narrower side. I walked across to it, pulled back the bolt, and swung open the wooden

shutters. They banged as they hit the stone wall and I winced. The window was low, just above waist height, and we both had to bend to speak.

'Pardon again, Sister, but I'm Louise, as you'd remember from yesterday. It's me as will be caring for all your needs till the second maid comes.'

'Yes, Louise. I remember.' I sat down on the end of my bed and looked through the window. In the light of her room, I could just see Louise's face when she straightened, the shadows emphasising all the lines of her face. Her hands were folded across her belly in a stance that I would ever after connect with her voice, patient and longsuffering. 'Your room is enough for your needs, I hope?'

'Yes, Sister. There be enough room to cook and for two women to sleep, though if I may say, it be —'

'Yes, Louise. I trust you understand your duties.' I suddenly felt awkward; Louise was a maid, and I had dealt with servants, but most likely she knew more than me about this place, this cell, how I would survive. And now I was to teach and guide her path with God. 'Can you read, Louise?'

'No, course not, Sister. Where would I have learned to read? Me as was born here, in that house just over—'

'Then I will read to you from my Rule and from my books. And you must pray and be quiet when you're indoors, and modest when you go out.'

'Yes I will, Sister.' I heard her make a clucking sound with her tongue. 'And if I do say, Sister, that's always been my way; that's why Father Simon, he's the priest here and he said to Bishop Michael as I would be most suitable to be maid to the new anchoress. "A pious widow of good life", they were the

very words Father Simon said of me.'

'He said that to me as well. But you're under my care and instruction now.' I began to feel easier.

'Yes ma'am … Sister. I wonder, Sister, if you'll be wanting some food after your long fasting, and after walking here all that way.'

Her words made my belly growl; I thought of roast venison and baked quince. 'A little pottage and some water, I think.'

As Louise opened her door, early morning light hazed through the maids' window and softened the darkness in my cell. I left open the shutters, stood and looked around.

You might think there would be nothing to tell about those four walls, two windows, a squint and darkness, but the stones carried so many stories. And they would carry my story, every moment of my time here. My only witness.

A few steps to my left, in the same wall as the maids' window behind me, was the parlour window with shutters like those to the maids' room, though still closed. Two narrow eyes: one open, one shut. Nearby, along the outer wall, the few books I carried from home had been set neatly on my desk: my Breviary, my Psalter and a collection of devotions, and now my Rule of Life as well. Tucked in close to the desk was a small chest where I could keep my clothing, and further along was the fireplace with its rough chimney. In the far wall, opposite the two shuttered interior windows, was the door through which I had entered, the only way in or out, nailed shut. I shivered. It could be opened only by my confessor or by Father Simon, and only if I was in need. To its right was a simple altar with a wooden crucifix hanging above it, and a mere step or two past that, but in the church wall, were my squint and ledge. Further

along that wall was my bed, a pallet covered with coarse weave blankets. I bent to touch them; my bed at home was covered with fine linen damask worked with gold and blue flowers that shone in the sunlight. My father had bought the cloth from Italy especially for me. I was here to forget my old life and I had longed for this rough cell, but all was so new, so different.

I walked the length of my cell from the wall with two windows to my altar, counting my steps — nine paces; then across the narrower side, from my fireplace to my squint — seven paces. This would be my world. I touched the squint, a thin window about the length of my two hands from finger to base and as wide as my wrist, cut on a sharp angle into the church wall so that the thickness of the stone prevented me from seeing all around the inside of the church. I knelt and looked through it to the long narrow view: the church's altar, two lighted candles on it and the crucifix above it on the wall. I remembered, from the day before, that there was an arch into the chancel with paintings of angels around its curve, and that I'd thought then how much smaller and plainer this church was than my old church in Leeton. But I realised now it made no difference; even if I moved closer to the slit or tilted my head, I would see nothing more than the crucifix and candles.

I crossed myself and rested my arms on the ledge below the squint, set deep enough into the wall to hold my prayer book. Lower again, a small square had been cut through the wall so I could receive the body of Christ at Mass. I rubbed my fingers across the stone ledge and thought of those who had knelt here before me.

'My grandfather William carved that squint, Sister.'

I gasped with fright.

'Oh, 'scuse me, Sister, but I brought your food and saw you looking.'

'Louise, what of the women enclosed in this cell before me? I know of Sister Agnes, of course; she was such a holy woman. And Sister Isabella was enclosed here more lately, I think. You were here, in the village with them. Were they—?'

'Oh, yes, Sister Agnes was a very holy woman. As you say, she was well known all hereabouts and stories are still told of all she did. I came to her for counsel when my little girl died, and then when my Rob died. She said as how we all suffer, just like our Lord did, and she said she'd pray for me. I could feel her holiness, I could.'

Holiness. I hoped the village would speak of my holiness.

'It was sad when she died,' Louise said, 'but we were glad for her going to heaven. What she always longed for, to be with our Lord. She's buried here in this cell; her bones lie there, just where you're kneeling now. You're blessed, Sister, if I may say, to have the bones of such a holy woman to comfort you.'

I stood up and stepped back. Buried deep down, I thought, now just part of the dirt and stones, nothing more. Still, the hairs on my head lifted, the skin on my knees prickled.

At the maids' window I took the water and pottage from Louise: a mush of cabbage and beets. The smell turned my stomach so I put the food on my desk, thinking I might nibble at it later. I drank some water. 'And the other woman? Isabella?'

'I don't know so much of Sister Isabella. She came from the convent at Challingford and she was only here about five years or so. She was a widow, young, and I never had cause to visit her like I did Sister Agnes. Strange to think, but I sat in the

parlour to talk to her, the other side of this wall, and now it's my duty to watch for those as want to visit you, especially those as would annoy you and interrupt your prayers. That's what Bishop Michael said, "It's your special duty, Louise." And don't you worry, I can see out my door here to be sure of those as come.'

I moved to the parlour window, only a few steps away from the maids' window and set a little higher, but low enough that I would be able to sit at my chair to speak with visitors. I opened the shutters that covered it, though it revealed only a black cloth curtain. I touched it, felt the ridges of the white cross sewn onto it, and remembered Bishop Michael's words on the day he examined my request to be enclosed: 'The black cloth signifies that you're worthless to the world, and it to you. The white cross stitched on top is a sign of your virgin purity.'

He had stepped close, his voice low; I felt the hem of his robes brush against my shoes. 'Remember, child, your virginity is your fragile treasure, your jewel, the blossom of your body offered to the Lord. In your cell it is sealed, kept whole.' His words made my face redden. 'Enclosure is the only means by which your virginity may be assured.'

I felt again the heat in my face and thought instead of the curtain between my fingers. Despite its thickness, the folds were smooth. Close weave, I thought, well combed and new; Sir Geoffrey had bought good cloth for my window, if not for my bed. Had he ordered it from my father? Pa was furious about my enclosure, and even more that Sir Geoffrey was my patron, providing my living in this place, but I knew scant of what had passed between the two men: cloth, money, talk of loans and marriage, the bodies of women. The old anger at my father rose

hot in my throat.

I pulled back the cloth, the only real opening between the world and me, though I knew the windows were not there for me to look through. Bishop Michael had told me severely that only women might look in on me, and only if needed, when I counselled them. 'There is to be no looking out and no letting men look in.' He stood tall and tipped his head back, in that manner he had. 'Lust prowls, it prowls,' he said roundly.

Anxiety curled in my belly at the thought of counselling women. Perhaps I knew more of prayer and reading than they did, but how would I, with my seventeen chaste years, speak to village women of their troubles, of husbands and babies and bodies? God had called me here to leave all that behind.

I held up my lamp to see into the gloom of the parlour and noticed a small opening cut into its door, enough to let in some light.

'That parlour ain't all it should be, Sister, and I be sorry for that.' Louise couldn't see me, but she must have guessed what I was doing. 'That door drags most of the time, and the little opening there lets in light, but when the wind gusts it blows through like a knife. I thought a village man might come and fix it, as it's Bishop Michael's custom to sit in comfort and some warmth. When he visits I can bring in a grander chair from the church, but that's all. And a man like that, he expects better.'

'Then the bishop's visits to me will be few and short,' I said, and let the curtain drop. I felt a creep across my skin when I thought of him sitting in my parlour, the words he would say. The flame from my lamp flickered and I looked around my cell. This would be all I knew now. I leaned on my desk, then pulled at my chair and sat down as my knees gave way. Louise must

have heard the gasp I tried to stifle.

'Sister, are you all right? Sister, can I —?'

'Thank you, Louise, it's just weariness and an empty stomach. I'll be … I'll spend some time in prayer now.'

I closed and bolted the shutters and walked the nine steps to my altar, back to my desk, then there and back again, reciting my psalms. The words and the steps settled me and I breathed more calmly. I was alone, enclosed; the world would not reach me here.

I opened my Rule and read, but my eyes slipped from word to word, page to page, wanting what was to come before I had contemplated what was in front of me: these words written for me, words that understood my need. Then a passage made me pause because it was so serious, and also because I had heard it spoken:

> *I would advise no anchoress to take a vow except regarding three things: obedience, chastity and stability of place; that she must never leave that place unless absolutely necessary; for example, if she were under threat of violence or fear for her life, or in obedience to her bishop or his superior. For whoever undertakes something, and vows to God to do it, binds herself to it and commits a deadly sin if she breaks it of her own free will.*

The day Bishop Michael examined my calling, his questions were many, and close. He needed to be sure of my faith, but also that I had a patron who would support my daily needs. Finally, satisfied with my answers, he had agreed, but with a warning.

'It is a laudable decision, Sarah, but you must know that

whoever vows to God to be enclosed within four walls binds herself for the remainder of her earthly life. In that cell you become Christ's beloved, and it would be grievous sin against our Lord, and grievous sin against the Church, if you were to break that vow.' He spoke slowly, stressing each word. 'If you doubt that you can remain in your cell, Sarah, it were better that you did not enter at all.' He looked into my face. 'We must be grateful the people have agreed to welcome another anchoress to their village.'

I was certain I would remain; of course I would. But the warning frightened me. And here it was again. This was what I had longed for, to be alone in my cell, to love Christ and to share his suffering. I would pray for the people of the village, and in time, I hoped, counsel and comfort them. There was nothing the world could tempt me with anymore.

Something deep in my belly fluttered and lifted. Four stone walls to hold my body. I left my desk and pressed my hands against the stone beneath my parlour window. It was hard and solid.