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Sister Noon

Written by Karen Joy Fowler

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SISTER NOON

Karen Joy Fowler



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PRELUDE

IN 1894, MRS. PUTNAM took Lizzie Hayes to the Midwinter Exhibition in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where they both used a telephone for the very first time. They stood behind curtains at opposite ends of a great hall, with only their shoes showing from the outside. "Isn't this a wonder?" Mrs. Putnam asked. Her voice was high and tight, as if it had been stretched to reach. "And someday you'll be able to call the afterlife, just as easy. Now that we've taken this first step."

There was a droning in Lizzie's ear as if, indeed, a multitude of distant voices were also speaking to her. But that was merely the thought Mrs. Putnam had put in her mind. Lizzie might just as easily have heard the ocean or the ceaseless insectile buzz that underlies the material world.

It made little practical difference. The dead are terrible gossips. They don't remember, or they don't care to say, or, if they do talk, then they all talk at once. They can't be questioned. They won't change a word, no matter how preposterous. The truth might look like a story. A lie might outlast a fact. You must remember that, for everything that follows, we have only the word of someone long dead.

In 1852, while on his way from Valparaiso to San Francisco aboard the steamship *Oregon*, a clerk named Thomas Bell met a woman named Madame Christophe. Mr. Bell was an underling at Bolton, Barron, and Company, a firm specializing in cotton, mining, and double deals. Madame Christophe was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, very tall, with clouds of dark hair and rosy, satiny skin. Her most remarkable feature was her eyes, for they didn't match. One was blue and one was brown, and yet the difference was subtle and likely to be noticed only on a close and careful inspection and only when she was looking right at you. She did this often.

One night they stood together at the rail. The stars were as thick and yellow as grapes. There was a silver road of moonlight on the black surface of the ocean. Thomas Bell was asking questions. Where had she come from? Madame Christophe told him she was a widow from New Orleans. Where was she going? Who was she? Whom did she know in San Francisco?

She turned her eyes on him, which made him catch his breath. "Why do you look at me like that?" he asked.

"Why do you ask so many questions?" Her voice was full of slow vowels, soft stops. "Words were invented so that lies could be told. If you want to know someone, don't listen to what they say. Look at them. Look at me," she said. "Look closely." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "What does that tell you?"

Mr. Bell couldn't look closely. His vision was clouded by his ardor. But he saw her shiver. He rushed to his cabin for a wrap to lend her, a green and black tartan shawl.

They debarked in San Francisco. In the crush of people, she got into a carriage, and he lost sight of her.

She should have been easy to find. There were so few women in San Francisco. Fewer still were beautiful. He sent inquiries to all

the hotels. None had a Madame Christophe registered. He asked everyone he knew, he spoke of her everywhere, but could say only that she was a widow from New Orleans, that her eyes didn't match, and that she had his shawl. He was forced to depart for Mexico, where he would conduct negotiations concerning the New Almaden mine, without seeing her again.

In the 1850s, most of the people who made up San Francisco's society had once been or still were distinctly disreputable. In 1855, when Belle Cora, a popular madame, inadvertently caused the murder of a United States marshal simply by assuming she could sit in that part of the theater occupied by respectably married women, it was not always so easy to explain why one person was top-hole and another was not.

But Mrs. Nora Radford's case was simple. Her husband had died owing everyone money. Her conversation, she overheard young Mrs. Putnam say, was interesting enough, only there was too much of it. This observation was as hurtful as it was inaccurate. She had always been considered rather witty. Mrs. Putnam and everybody else knew that she was more surprised than anyone by her husband's debts.

She refused to blame him for any of it. In fact, she was impressed. How clever he must have been to have fooled them all.

And she was touched. How hard he must have worked to give her such a sense of security. Much harder than if he'd actually had money. Forty years of marriage and he'd never once let it slip. She moved into rooms and missed her husband hourly.

Her new home was in the country, overlooking a graveyard. This was not as dismal as it might sound. She had a curtained bed and a carved dressing table. The cemetery was filled with flowers. On a

warm day, the scent came in on the sunshine. The boardinghouse was called Geneva Cottage.

Her landlady was a tireless southern woman named Mrs. Ellen Smith. Mrs. Smith took in laundry and worked as housekeeper for Selim Woodworth, a wealthy San Francisco businessman. It was Mr. Woodworth who had suggested the arrangement to Mrs. Radford. Mr. Woodworth was a prominent philanthropist, a kind and thoughtful man whose marked attentions to her after her husband's death, in contrast to the disregard of others, vouched for his quality. "My Mrs. Smith," he said warmly. "She works hard and makes canny investments. I don't know why she continues on as my housekeeper. Perhaps her fortunes have been so vagarious, she can never be secure. But she is a wonderful woman, as devoted to helping the unfortunate as she is to making a living in the world. That's where her money goes." He tipped his hat, continued his way down the little muddy track that was Market Street. Mrs. Radford hoisted her heavy skirts, their hems weighted with bird shot as a precaution against the wind, and picked her way through the mud. She took his advice immediately.

Mrs. Radford's initial impression of her landlady was that she was about thirty years old. In fact, this fell somewhat short of the mark. But also that she was beautiful, which was accurate. The first time Mrs. Radford saw her, she was sitting in a sunlit pool on the faded brocade of the parlor sofa. In Mrs. Radford's mind she always retained that golden glow.

"You'll find me here when the sun is shining," Mrs. Smith told her. "I never will get used to the cold."

"It seems to get colder every year," Mrs. Radford agreed. The words came out too serious, too sad. There was an embarrassing element of self-pity she hadn't intended.

Mrs. Smith smiled. "I hope we can make you feel at home here." She looked straight at Mrs. Radford. Her eyes didn't match. There was a shawl of green and black plaid on the sofa.

Mrs. Radford thought of her friend Mr. Bell. She couldn't remember the name of his vanished shipmate, but she was sure it wasn't Ellen Smith. Something foreign, something Latin. Mrs. Smith's beauty was darkly Mediterranean.

She stood and was surprisingly tall, a whole head above Mrs. Radford. "Take a cup of tea with me."

The kitchen was an elegant place of astral lamps and oil chandeliers. There were golden cupids in the wallpaper, and a young Negro man who swept the floor and washed the dishes while they talked. Mrs. Smith filled her cup half with cream, heaped it with sugar. She stirred it and stirred it.

"I can't quite place your accent," Mrs. Radford said.

"Oh, it's a mix, all right. I've lived a great many places." Mrs. Smith stared into her clouded tea. She lifted the cup and blew on it.

"I lived on the hill," Mrs. Radford said, coaxing her into confidences by offering her own. "Until my husband died. I'm quite come down in the world."

"You'll rise again. I started with nothing."

Mrs. Radford had often been embarrassed at how much beauty meant to her. At the age when Mrs. Radford might have been beautiful herself, she suffered badly from acne. It pitted her skin, and her lovely hair was little compensation. At the time, she'd thought her life was over. But then she'd made such a happy marriage and it had hardly seemed to matter. God had granted her a great love. And yet she had never stopped wishing she were beautiful, had apparently learned nothing from her own life. She would have been the first to admit this. It would have hurt her to have had ugly children, and this

was a painful thing to know about herself. As it turned out, she had no children at all. "You had beauty," she said.

Mrs. Smith raised her extraordinary eyes. "I suppose I did." The day was clouding. The sun went off and on again, like a blink. Mrs. Smith turned her head. "My mother was beautiful. It did her no particular good. I lost her early. She used to fret so over me—what would happen to me, who would take care of me. She told me to go out to the road and stand where I would be seen. That was the last thing she said to me."

It had been just a little back lane, without much traffic. The fence was falling into ruins; she stepped over it easily. She could see to the end of the road, shimmering in the distance like a dream. There was an apple tree over her head, blossoming into pink and filled with the sound of bees. She stood and waited all morning, crying from time to time about her mother, until she was sleepy from the sun and the buzzing and the crying, and no one came by.

Finally, in the early afternoon, when the sun had started to slant past her, she heard a horse in the distance. The sound grew louder. She raised her hand to shade her eyes. The horse was black. The man was as old as her grandfather, who was also her father, truth be told.

He almost went by her. He was half asleep on the slow-moving horse, but when she moved, a breath only, he stopped so suddenly that saliva dripped from the silver bit onto the road. He looked her over and removed his hat. "What's your name?" he asked. She said nothing. He reached out a hand. "Well, I'm not fussy," he told her. "How would you like to go to New Orleans?" And that was how she moved up in the world, by putting her foot in the stirrup.

"I was ten years old."

"Oh, my dear." Mrs. Radford was shocked and distressed.

Mrs. Smith put her hand on Mrs. Radford's arm. Mrs. Radford had

rarely been touched by anyone since her husband died. Sometimes her skin ached for it, all over her body. Where did an old woman with no children go to be touched? Mrs. Smith's hand was warm. "It wasn't the way you're thinking. He turned out very kind," she said.

Mrs. Radford adjusted to country living as well as could be expected. The laundry was a busy place. The cemetery was not. She especially enjoyed her evenings. She would join Mrs. Smith. The parlor would be brightened by a lively fire. They would drink a soothing concoction Mrs. Smith called "balm tea." "Just a splash of rum," Mrs. Smith assured her, but it went straight to Mrs. Radford's head. In these convivial surroundings, she told Mrs. Smith how she had planned once to teach.

"I had a train ticket to Minneapolis. I had a job. I'd only known Alexander a week. But he came to the station and asked me to marry him. 'I want to see the world before I get married,' I told him. 'See it after,' he said. 'See it with me.'"

"And did you?"

His actual language had been much more passionate—things Mrs. Radford could hardly repeat, but would never forget. His voice remained with her more vividly than his face; over the years it had changed less. It pleased her to speak of him; she was grateful to Mrs. Smith for listening. "I saw my corner of it. It was a very happy corner."

In her turn, Mrs. Radford heard that Mrs. Smith's original benefactor, a Mr. Price, had taken her to a convent school in New Orleans. She spent a year there, learning to read and write. Then he sent her to Cincinnati. She lived with some friends of his named Williams. "I was to go to school for four more years and also to help Mrs. Williams with the children. She made quite a pet of me, at first.

“But then Mr. Price died. I know he’d already paid the Williamses for my schooling, but they pretended he hadn’t. They sent me to Nantucket as a bonded servant.”

The weathered wood and sand of Nantucket was a new landscape for her. Her mistress was the Quaker woman who owned the island’s general store. She came from a line of whalers—very wealthy. She invited Ellen to the Friends meeting house, where they sat in the darkness on hard wooden benches and waited for the Spirit. “It didn’t take with me, I’m afraid,” said Mrs. Smith, fingering the locket she wore at her throat. “I’m too fond of nice things. But she was also very kind. I called her Grandma and worked for her until she died, quite suddenly, and then again there were no provisions made for me. By now I was sixteen or so. I sold off some of her stock and got to Boston. Her real granddaughter lived there and I thought she might take me in, but she didn’t.” It was there that Ellen met James Smith, a wealthy and prominent businessman. They were married. He died. “It’s been my pattern,” Mrs. Smith conceded. “Life is loss.”

Mrs. Radford could see that Mrs. Smith had not loved her husband. It was nothing she said; it appeared on her face when she spoke of him.

Mrs. Radford had not decided what to do about Thomas Bell. He’d been back from Mexico for almost a year now. He was an old friend, so she owed him some loyalty, although he hadn’t, in fact, been to see her since his return. Served him right, really; if he’d come to call, to express his condolences, he might have seen the woman. Virtue provided its rewards.

And what of her loyalty to her new friend? Mr. Bell was not the sort of man who married. There were rumors that he had been seen going into a house of assignation on Washington Street.

Before her husband’s death, Mrs. Radford would only have

had to write the invitations and San Francisco's most eligible men would have gathered. Sometimes she let herself imagine the dinner. Alexander pouring wine. The gold-rimmed china. The sensation of the beautiful Mrs. Smith.

But Mr. Bell had been so desperate. Mrs. Radford was a great believer in love. She longed to do her little bit to help it along. Marriage was the happy ending to Mrs. Smith's hard and blameless life. The right man had only to see her, and it still might be Thomas Bell, who already had.

The most enjoyable parts of a social occasion are often the solitary pleasures of anticipation and recollection. But it is sadly true that one cannot relish these without having had an invitation to the party itself.

The MacElroys, who were special friends of Thomas Bell's, had announced the engagement of their middle daughter. There was to be a fabulous ball. Although Mrs. Radford had, with her husband, been a guest at the party celebrating the engagement of their first daughter and also at the marriage of their youngest daughter, there was no certainty that she would be included now.

It was only a party. Only a fabulous ball. She did not mind for herself, not so much, really, although she had always enjoyed a party. But it would be just the setting for Mrs. Smith. With this in mind, Mrs. Radford finally called on Thomas Bell. He was living in the bachelor club on Grove. He apologized for the cigar smoke, which did not bother her, but not for the fact that he had never come to see her, which did. His blond hair had receded over the years, giving him a high, wide forehead. He had always been a handsome man; now he'd attained a dignity he had lacked before. He looked

marriageable. "Did you ever find your lovely shipmate?" she asked him, quite directly, with no cunning preamble.

"Madame Christophe?" he said immediately. "No. I looked everywhere."

"In the servants' quarters?"

He responded with some heat. "She was a queen."

"And if she was not?" Mrs. Radford watched his face closely. She was looking for true love. She thought she saw it.

And also rising comprehension. "You know where she is." Mr. Bell reached excitedly for her arm. "Take me to her at once."

"No. But if she were invited to the MacElroys' ball, I would deliver the invitation. Then you could take your turn with every other eligible man in San Francisco." She meant this quite literally, but she allowed a familiar, teasing tone to come into her voice to hide it.

"Dear Mrs. Radford," he said.

"She is a working woman," Mrs. Radford warned him. "With a different name."

"She is a queen," Mr. Bell repeated. "Whatever she does, whatever she calls herself. Blood will tell."

Mrs. Radford was in black. Mrs. Smith wore a gown of pink silk. It was fitted at the bodice, but blossomed at the hips with puffings and petals. The hem was larger still, and laced with ribbons. The MacElroys' drawing room had been cleared for dancing, and she entered it like a rose floating on water. Couples were just assembling for the grand march. Every head turned. Mr. Bell made a spectacle of himself in his effort to get to her first. He was slightly shorter than she was.

"Mrs. Radford," he said politely. "How lovely to see you here."

And Madame Christophe. I mustn't imagine that you remember me, simply because I remember you."

"Though I do," she said. She glanced at Mrs. Radford and then looked back to Mr. Bell. "And my name is not Madame Christophe. I owe you an explanation." There was a pause. Mr. Bell rushed to fill it.

"All you owe me is a dance," he assured her. He was eager, nervous. He drew her away from Mrs. Radford, who went to sit with the older women and the married ones. The music began. She watched Mr. Bell bend in to Mrs. Smith to speak. She watched the pink skirt swinging over the polished floor, the occasional glimpse of the soft toes of Mrs. Smith's shoes. She attended to the music and the lovely, old sense of being involved in things.

Some of the men seemed to know Mrs. Smith already. Young Mr. Ralston engaged her for the redowa, and everyone knew he never danced. Mr. Sharon took the lancers, his head barely reaching her shoulder. Mr. Hayes chose her for the waltz, leaving his wife without a partner. And Mr. Bell danced with no one else, spent the time while she danced with others pacing and watching for the moment she came free.

In her own small way, Mrs. Radford also triumphed. People approached who hadn't spoken to her since her husband's death. Innocuous pleasantries, but she could no longer take such attentions for granted. Eventually every conversation arrived at Mrs. Smith.

"That lovely woman you came with?" said Mrs. Putnam. "I've not seen her before."

"She's an old friend," Mrs. Radford answered contentedly. "A widow from New Orleans." She said nothing else, although it was clearly insufficient. Let Mrs. Putnam remember how she had accused Mrs. Radford of talking too much!

At the end of the evening, Mr. Bell went to find their cloaks. "I so enjoyed that party," Mrs. Smith told Mrs. Radford.

“You’ll have many nights like this now. Many invitations. You were such a success.”

Mrs. Smith had a gray velvet cloak. Mr. Bell returned with it, settled it slowly over her shoulders. He was reluctant to release her. “About my name,” she said. They were walking outside, Mrs. Smith in the middle, the women’s skirts crushed one against the next, like blossoms in a bouquet. On the steps, they joined a crowd waiting for carriages. To the right were the Mills family and that peevish, gossipy attorney, Henry Halleck. “I had a need to change my name to get out of New Orleans. I was born into slavery in Georgia,” Mrs. Smith said. Everyone could hear her. “I became a white woman to escape. Ellen Smith isn’t my real name, either.”

And then Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Radford were alone in their carriage. The ride to the country was a long one. Mrs. Radford’s feelings were too tender to bear examination. It seemed as though Mrs. Smith had deliberately humiliated her. “Is it true?” Mrs. Radford asked.

“Everything I’ve told you is true.”

“Why pick that moment to say it?”

“It was time. I’ve been a white woman for so many years. And I didn’t want what that was bringing me. It wasn’t aimed at you. Or your ideas about love and beauty.”

The horse hooves clapped. The carriage rocked. “You don’t want to be the same person your whole life, do you?” Mrs. Smith asked. The carriage wheel hit a stone. It threw Mrs. Radford against Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith caught her by the arm. She was wearing gloves, so they didn’t actually touch.

This was the last party Mrs. Radford would attend in San Francisco. One month later she left on a boat filled with missionaries going to Hawaii. One year later she was one of only seven white women in Edo, Japan. From there she sailed to Russia; from there

she made her way to Peking. She died somewhere near Chungking at the age of seventy-four.

In 1883, many years after her death, Selim Woodworth received a message from her. It was a bedraggled note, crumpled, carried in a pocket, trod upon, lost, left out in the rain. Even the stamps were indecipherable. "The mountains here!" was the only legible bit, and it wasn't even clear where, exactly, Mrs. Radford had been when she wrote those words. It didn't matter. Selim Woodworth had been dead himself for more than thirteen years.