
Opening Extract from...

An Almond for a Parrot

Written by Wray Delaney

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AN ALMOND FOR A PARROT

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ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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For my mother, Nina Lowry.

The third female circuit judge to be appointed in England, she sat for twenty years at the Old Bailey. For her service she was given the Freedom of the City of London with the right to drive a flock of sheep across London Bridge. She has yet to do so.

A remarkable woman, who I'm very proud to call Mum.

Fleet Marriages

One of the most disgraceful customs observed in the Fleet Prison in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the performance of the marriage ceremony by disreputable and dissolute clergymen. These functionaries, mostly prisoners for debt, insulted the dignity of their holy profession by marrying in the precincts of the Fleet Prison at a minute's notice, any persons who might present themselves for that purpose. No questions were asked, no stipulations made, except as to the amount of the fee for the service, or the quantity of liquor to be drunk on the occasion. It not unfrequently happened, indeed, that the clergyman, the clerk, the bridegroom and the bride were drunk at the very time the ceremony was performed.

Appendix VI, The Newgate Calendar

Chapter One

Newgate Prison, London

I lie on this hard bed counting the bricks in the ceiling of this miserable cell. I have been sick every morning for a week and thought I might have jail fever. If it had killed me it would at least have saved me the inconvenience of a trial and a public hanging. Already the best seats at Newgate Prison have been sold in anticipation of my being found guilty – and I have yet to be sent to trial. Murder, attempted murder – either way the great metropolis seems to know the verdict before the judge has placed the black square on his grey wig. This whore is gallows-bound.

'Is he dead?' I asked.

My jailer wouldn't say.

I pass my days remembering recipes and reciting them to the damp walls. They don't remind me of food; they are bookmarks from this short life of mine. They remain tasteless. I prefer them that way.

A doctor was called for. Who sent for or paid for him I don't know, and uncharacteristically I do not care. He was very matter of fact and said the reason for my malady was simple: I was with child. I haven't laughed for a long time but forgive me, the thought struck me as ridiculous. In all that has happened I have never once found myself in this predicament. I can hardly

believe it is true. The doctor looked relieved – he had at least found a reason for my life to be extended – pregnant women are not hanged. Even if I'm found guilty of murder, the gallows will wait until the child is born. What a comforting thought.

Hope came shortly afterwards. Dear Hope. She looked worried, thinner.

'How is Mercy?' I asked.

She avoided answering me and busied herself about my cell.

'What does this mean?' she asked, running her fingers over the words scratched on a small table, the only piece of furniture this stinking cell has to offer.

I had spent some time etching them into its worm-eaten surface. An Almond for a Parrot.

'It's a title for a memoir, the unanswered love song of a soon-to-be dead bird. Except I have no paper, no pen and without ink the thing won't write at all.'

'Just as well, Tully.'

'I want to tell the truth of my life.'

'Better to leave it,' she said.

'It's for Avery – not that he will ever read it.' I felt myself on the brink of tears but I refused to give in to them. 'I will write it for myself. Afterwards, it can be your bedtime entertainment, the novelty of my days in recipes and tittle-tattle.'

'Oh, my sweet ninny-not. You must be brave, Tully. This is a dreadful place and…'

'And it is not my first prison. My life has come full circle. You haven't answered my question.'

'Mercy is still very ill. Mofty is with her.'

'Will she live?'

'I don't know.'

'And is he *alive?'*

'Tully, he is dead. You are to be tried for murder.'

'My, oh my. At least my aim was true.'

I sank back on the bed, too tired to ask more. Even if Hope was in the mood for answering questions, I didn't think I would want to know the answers.

'You are a celebrity in London. Everyone wants to know what you do, what you wear. The papers are full of it.'

There seemed nothing to say to that. Hope sat quietly on the edge of the bed, holding my hand.

Finally, I found the courage to ask the question I'd wanted to ask since Hope arrived.

'Is there any news of Avery?'

'No, Tully, there's not.'

I shook my head. Regret. I am full of it. A stone to worry one's soul with.

'You have done nothing wrong, Tully.'

'Forgive me for laughing.'

'You will have the very best solicitor.'

'Who will pay for him?'

'Queenie.'

'No, no. I don't want her to. I have some jewels…'

I felt sick.

'Concentrate on staying well,' said Hope.

~

If this life was a dress rehearsal, I would now have a chance to play my part again but with a more favourable outcome. Alas, we players are unaware that the curtain goes up the minute we take our first gulps of air; the screams of rage our only hopeless comments on being born onto such a barren stage.

So here I am with ink, pen and a box of writing paper, courtesy of a well-wisher. Still I wait to know the date of my trial. What to do until then? Write, Tully, write.

With a hey ho the wind and the rain. *And words are my only escape*. For the rain it raineth every day.

Chapter Two

To Make a Hasty Pudding

Take a quart of milk and four bay leaves, set it on the fire to boil. Beat up the yolks of two eggs and stir in a little salt. Take two or three spoonfuls of milk and beat up your eggs and stir in your milk. Then with a wooden spoon in one hand and the flour in the other, stir until it is of a good thickness but not too thick. Let it boil and keep stirring then pour it in a dish and stick pieces of butter here and there. You may omit the egg if you do not like it but it is a great addition to the pudding and a little piece of butter stirred in the milk makes it short and fine. Take out the bay leaves before you put in the flour.

Written in Newgate Prison
September, 1756

I would like to make myself the heroine of this story and my character to be so noble that you could not help but be in love with me. Perhaps I should portray myself as an innocent victim led astray. But alas, sir, I would be lying, and as I am on the brink of seeing my maker, the truth might serve me better.

Feathers and dust. Let me try to tell you my truth as seen through these two green eyes, not just the one eye that is always blinkered in favour of its owner. Forgive me if I don't throw myself into the most saucy parts of my life first – like all seductions, it is the undoing of layers that makes the moment the greater by anticipation. Haste is always a lover's downfall. Whether that be the same with my story only the telling of it will show. I would like to make you laugh, to see that smile that curls across your lips. Laughter is by far the better remedy for all life's ills. Our days are measured too often in woes and too seldom in humour, which is a pity, for what is this world if not a farce, a comedy of follies performed without rehearsal, a stage waiting for a strumpet to tell her tale? So let me start, sir, before the clock runs out of hours.

~

Is it breeding that makes us what we are, or the muck we are born into, be that of a stable or a palace? Perhaps it is a smattering of both – and in my case, mingled with a sprinkle of magic. My father – if he really be my father – was one Captain Truegood, who gave up the Seven Seas to become a merchant in bricks. Finding that, like bread, bricks cannot be done without and like bread they are needed daily, soon he possessed more money than his feeble senses knew what to do with. His wealth enabled him to purchase an accomplished wife from a noble family, whose fortune had dwindled to little more than a title. My mother was seventeen when the contract was signed, and I can only imagine the disappointment of the marriage bed. Captain Truegood, no doubt drunk as was his way, made a hasty pudding of me. My mother's sentiments

upon such pitiless passion I will never know, for no sooner had she seen my face, than she decided very sensibly to depart this world. If there was misfortune in my life it was, I suppose, not to have had the sense to follow her, but once I made my arrival there was little I could do but grab life by the dairies and live it to my best advantage.

What philosophical thought my father had about his nine months of marriage and subsequent widowhood, he never said. But Captain Truegood was a man of few words and those that came to him came through the grape and the grain, only to be distilled into ill-thought-out mumblings and ill-thought-out doings.

My father had no interest in me other than to see me at first as a great nuisance and later as little more than a chambermaid. I will skip-hop over the inconvenience of my infancy for it is the general belief that nothing of value is to be remarked upon in the early stages of a female's life, unlike that of the male. Several writers have deemed the early years of a young man to be of such momentous importance that they have even recounted the circumstances pertaining to the time before the sperm meets the egg. All I will say is that my father begat me and my father promptly forgot me.

My first conscious memory is of the large wooden table in the kitchen. I spent most of my younger days hidden under it, keeping out of sight. That table was the centre of my world, the only solid thing in a house built on sand. I imagined its legs turning into roots that burrowed deep into the earth. No matter what else might befall me, the table would remain unmoved by fortune's wheel, a constant, like Cook.

Cook as good as brought me up; half-baked me, as she would say. Having no children of her own and little understanding

as to what infants might need, for guidance she relied on her cookbook as if she hoped to find the method for the growing of children, just as there were recipes for every other kind of slaughtered meat. I'm not certain that she fully understood the recipes for she told me she believed reading was nothing to do with letters. Recipes, she said, were weighed in words and words were weighed in time. As with so much that Cook said, this meant little or nothing to my green ears, but I would often fall asleep to the rhythm of Cook kneading bread, rolling pastry, cutting meat.

Did I long for my mother? Yes. Of a need for love, all children who haven't known one put the absent parent into a cabinet of angels – or fairies, as in my case. The only place I felt close to my mother was the blue chamber. I knew her spirit had long escaped the house in Milk Street but the walls of her room held tight to her memory. I would talk to her about my many frustrations and ask why it was that my father had so little regard for me. She she was wise enough never to answer, but I would always find solace knowing her to be listening like a benign angel.

I much preferred the company of servants to that of my father's chuckle-headed friends whose delights mainly seemed to be pinned on wine, peppered by the gaming tables. The world beyond our house was to me but a small theatre seen through shuttered windows. The comings and goings of the players were all such a narrow view of the great metropolis allowed. They were accompanied by the changing scenery of the seasons, signalled more by the fashions than anything nature had to offer.

I never liked the house. The furniture was heavy and given to chattering, or so I believed when little. The worst offender

was the grandfather clock. It stood on the first floor landing, an immovable exclamation mark, its face as large as the moon without any of the illumination. Its chimes called to the dead more than to the living. The grandfather clock's quarrel was with a young boy by the name of Samuel. In tick-tock talk, it would say:

'What-have
'you-to
'show-for
'your-self
'young-Sam?'

I told Cook there was a boy trapped inside the clock. The thought of it gave me nightmares. Cook, who had to share a bed with me, soon lost patience at being woken by a terrified child, and without my father's permission took the key to the clock from his study.

'There,' she said, as she opened the clock. 'You see? It's empty. A pendulum and two weights, the sum total of time.'

I could say nothing. For there crouched a small boy of about my age, his hands over his face. I never spoke about the clock again and neither did Cook.

As the outside world was forbidden to me, I organised the interior of our house into the streets and alleyways of the city I didn't know, of which I had only heard Cook speak. The main staircase was Gin Alley; at the top of the first flight was the step I called the Coffin-Maker, for it groaned every time I stepped on it. The seventh step from the ground I called Dead Drunk for it wobbled like my father in his cups.

The problem of how to avoid them tied me up in knots until it occurred to me that the simplest remedy would be to learn how to fly. To that end I took to practising, at first by

jumping off a chair. I was deeply disappointed to find I was unaccountably earthbound. I thought I needed more height to achieve my goal, and so it was that one morning I stood on the top landing and threw myself off. As I hurtled downwards, I realised I was about to land flat on my face on the stone floor and I willed myself to stop.

I stopped.

I hung in the air on an invisible step, and it was then I heard Cook scream. I landed with a bump. Cook hit me with her wooden spoon.

'What are you about?'

'I'm learning to fly,' I said.

'Well don't. You can't. So there.'

Strange to say that after that I never could do it again. Perhaps I had never done it at all. I wonder what would have happened if Cook had told me that my other notions were impossible, but she didn't and I came to believe that everyone must see the world as I did.

Once a week, Mrs Inglis would call on Cook. Mrs Inglis was a large lady with a face so folded with jowly flesh that it resembled an unmade bed. She always seated herself in the chair near the stove where she would pull up her petticoats and rest her feet on a stool. Her legs were blotched and itchy. Sighing, she would say what a trial it was to be old and who would have thought it would have come to this pretty pass. Cook would sit opposite and they would chinwag away the woes of the world into a bottle of gin.

Mrs Inglis always brought with her a sickly child of about thirteen. She would stand beside Mrs Inglis's chair but not once did Mrs Inglis talk to her.

'Back in the days…' as Mrs Inglis loved to say. 'Back in the

days, I ran a good school, I did. I had good girls, such good girls. I never let anything untoward befall them – could have done, earned a little extra on the side. It would've been legal, but I never. Was it my fault, what happened?'

'No, Mrs Inglis,' Cook would say. 'Let's think on something merrier.'

Then they would start on the gossip.

If I thought it odd that the girl should be so ignored I said nothing as long as she stayed by the chair and didn't come near me.

One day, while Mrs Inglis blabbered fifty to the dozen about nothing, or nothing I understood, the girl joined me under the table.

'How old are you?' she asked.

I was five at the time.

'Are you hiding from the gentlemen?'

'What gentlemen?' I said.

'The gentlemen who take you on their laps and ask to see what shouldn't be shown. Pretty Poppet they call me.'

I didn't like the way Pretty Poppet spoke and asked Cook why Pretty Poppet came all the time.

'Because some griefs you never rise above,' she said.

Mrs Inglis continued to visit and while time passed Pretty Poppet didn't age. I decided it would be pointless to say anything more to Cook, for surely both she and Mrs Inglis could see her just as well as me.

So it was that out of the rubble of neglect I slowly grew with a head full of recipes and ghosts.