

Student Number: 100728514

Dimitrios Kalpouzos

The House of Weathers
&
Anxieties of the Historical Novelist
Reconstructing the Past in Fiction

Supervisor: Benjamin Markovits

Submitted as part of the requirements for the award of the
PhD in Creative Writing and Practice-based Research
at Royal Holloway, University of London

I hereby declare that this thesis is in its entirety my own work and that I have acknowledged all quotations from the published or unpublished work of other people. I also declare that I have read the statements on plagiarism in Section 1 of the Regulations Governing Examination and Assessment Offences, and in accordance with these regulations I submit this thesis as my own work.

Signed:.....(Dimitrios Kalpouzos)

Date:.....

Abstract

The creative component of my thesis is comprised of a piece of original writing, a historical novel with the title *The House of Weathers* set between the years 1868 and 1876 in the United Kingdom. The narrative observes the lives of three protagonists from childhood to adulthood and records their personal experiences and character development in their respective environments on the outskirts of society: rural life in a small village in the West Midlands, the peripheral inner world of a travelling circus, and the marginalized conditions of existence in the web of child prostitution in the capital. Among the novel's primary aims is to reconstruct, based on research, a previously unfictionalized aspect of the era in which it is set and to evoke in the reader's imagination a sense of the time through the eyes of the particular set of characters.

Directly related to the fiction, the critical component of my thesis aspires to explore and describe the anxieties pertinent to the task of the historical novelist, namely the potential issues related to and inherent in the genre that may arise during the writing process. These are discussed in three distinct categories:

1. The discovery of sources.
2. Authentication of the source material.
3. Incorporation of the historical information into the fictional narrative.

Providing examples of the use of material by historical novelists and examining the relationship between historical data and fictional narrative, the critical component of my thesis also aims to constitute a brief manual purely within the field of historical creative writing, offering questions for consideration to the writer of historical fiction. Finally, I discuss my own engagement with the fiction and review my personal relationship with the historical element in regard to the creative component of my dissertation.

Table of Contents

Creative Component

The House of Weathers.....	5
Part One: 1868.....	6
Chapter One: Eli.....	7
Chapter Two: Frances.....	34
Chapter Three: Isa.....	44
Part Two: 1876.....	65
Chapter One: Eli.....	66
Chapter Two: Frances.....	108
Chapter Three: Isa.....	124
Chapter Four: Hallow	133
Epilogue	137

Critical Component

Anxieties of the Historical Novelist, Reconstructing the Past in Fiction.....	139
1 Introduction	140
1.1 The Nonexistence of Historical Fiction.....	140
1.1.1 History as a Character.....	142
1.1.2 The Importance of the Historical Fiction Construct.....	145
1.1.3 Thesis Objectives.....	148
1.2 Definition of the Historical Novel.....	150
2 Sources.....	156
2.1 Research.....	156
2.2 Sources.....	159
2.2.1 Language and Vocabulary.....	159
2.2.2. Food and Drink, Dress and Anatomy.....	160
2.2.3 Burial Habits.....	161
2.2.4 Health and Disease.....	161
2.2.5 Architecture.....	161
2.2.6 Agriculture and Natural Life.....	162
2.2.7 Law and Politics.....	162

2.2.8 Climate and Natural Conditions.....	163
2.2.9 Sexual Relationships and the Body.....	163
2.2.10 Transportation, Travelling and Trade.....	163
2.2.11 Money and Currency.....	164
2.2.12 Art and Entertainment, Science and Education.....	164
2.2.13 Further Sources.....	165
3 Authentication	167
4 Incorporation	172
5 My Engagement with the Fiction.....	178
Bibliography.....	190

The House of Weathers

Part One

1868

Chapter One: Eli

The boy was holding a dead bird in his hand. Its feathers were black, flecked with white spots at the tips — a starling. One of its wings was broken. The bird's eyes were open and if the boy looked closer he could see the tops of trees reflected in them.

The bird trap should have been at the roots of the tall elm that stood out among the oaks but when the boy arrived it was missing. He discovered it, upturned, a short distance away. Fox, probably. He knew by the scratches on the wooden boards, he recognized the claw marks. But the bird had died of terror, safe and untouched; the fox hadn't got to it.

Eli set down the bird and returned the trap to its original place. No one in his family owned a watch, not even his father, but he didn't need one to know he was late. A look at the sun told him as much. He was expected at Hallow; Charlie would be cross with him.

Light and shade alternated under the branches as he carried on his way through the forest, hastening his pace. His excitement rivalled his guilt and he was unsure which of the two was prevailing. Jon Weathers had risen early to travel to Birmingham to sell the last of the family's harvest which had remained from the summer. Eli usually accompanied his father on these trips; he was expected to contribute to the work and at the same time he wouldn't miss an opportunity to see the big city, even for a few hours. But on this occasion he had lied to Jon Weathers, pleading that he had to attend school when in fact lessons had been cancelled on the day. His father had easily given him permission, unaware of his real plans.

But the excitement of where he was heading and what he was about to see was too great to be stifled by an eleven-year-old's sense of right and wrong. The circus had come to Hallow and that fact alone dominated his imagination. The circus's appearance was in itself an apparition. So out of the ordinary, it was indeed a truly rare spectacle in their small village. Eli had never even seen a travelling troupe before and perhaps he wouldn't have another chance like this for many years to come. That was the justification he posed to himself for his lie. And maybe with a little luck, his family wouldn't find out about it at all.

Charlie had proven himself to be Eli's closest friend a few days ago, when he had come to the Weathers house at dusk to let him in on the news. He also knew the reason why the circus would set camp at the otherwise ignorable destination that the village of Hallow was. Some of the troupe's carts had been damaged on the way and as a result the circus was leading a slower

trail, forced to stop and put on shows in obscure places between towns to make up for cancellations further ahead.

Obviously, this was a circumstance not to be missed if you were a child. It didn't compete with bat fowling, as they called their sport of trapping birds late at night, blinding them in the dark with a lantern's bright light and catching them in the 'long net', a tall stick with a piece of net attached to the fork at its end. Much like the birds that were their victims, the boys themselves had been suddenly taken by the circus's arrival. It was all Eli could think of for the past two days.

On the other hand, his detour through the forest had been vital despite the great occasion, as working in the fields alongside his parents the previous days hadn't allowed him to check on his traps. These were of his own invention and he felt proud of them. Moreover, they demanded his frequent attention. He couldn't neglect the decoys he used or the new birds he caught, so the task of refilling the food and water supplies in his traps had delayed him.

Now Eli wondered whether the money he was carrying on him would be enough to gain both Charlie and himself a ticket for the show. He had no clue what its price might be. There was another lie there, too, or at least a deception. Mostly, the few coins the boys made from bird catching went to their families. A farthing for a warbler or a flycatcher, two for a rosefinch, three for a robin. Perhaps a shilling for a wryneck, a redstart or a rare chough. But Eli had kept the last sum he had made selling to the bird-man a beautiful chaffinch a month ago and hadn't told his father about it. A whole three shillings. Unprecedented. He had intended of course to pass on the money to Jon Weathers but for great luck he hadn't. And now this sum might just allow him entrance to the show. His father would have never paid for him to go to the circus. He considered such spectacles a waste of time.

Crossing one of the last clearings almost near the forest's edge, Eli started to run. The trees were thinning and, maybe, if he was fast enough, he wouldn't miss the start of the show. Charlie and he had arranged to meet by Adrian Fabron's house, at the outskirts of Hallow, and to head together from the blacksmith's home to the field where the troupe had camped.

Slowing down for a moment to catch his breath, Eli observed he was almost out of the forest. Some ten or so more fields to cross and he would find himself on the highway, a bit further out from the first houses of the village. He hurried along until he reached a small hill, after which the trees ended. Before him, a field of ploughed brown ground opened up, to its right a tract of tall, wild bushes. Behind it, in the distance, he thought he could discern the highway, its dusty serpentine body dragging on between the fields. He took a step forward and he froze.

Something was moving next to the thicket of bushes ahead of him. Eli stood still. Whatever it was, the strange creature seemed to be writhing as though in agony. Then he realized it was not one thing. There were two people there, only they were so engaged one over the other that from where he was their figures appeared like one struggling body.

Eli hid behind a trunk at the same time as he recognized the girl. It was Frances. He didn't know what his older sister was doing there. Wasn't she supposed to be back home, helping out their mother? Maybe she had been sent on an errand. But whatever the reason, she wasn't back home, she was here and, with a staggering sense of terror, Eli knew something wrong was happening to her.

Frances lay with her back on the ground, pressed down by a man who was moving over her. His hands were around her wrists and she seemed to be saying something to him, although from where he stood Eli couldn't hear them. He started shaking. He knew what they were doing, the man and Frances; he had seen their dogs and other animals during this act. But it was wrong, Frances would never let a man do this to her. She was fifteen, not a grown up. The stranger must be forcing her to do this against her will, he realized, alarmed.

Eli's knees gave way and touched the ground. He should do something. He could see the man moving over his sister, her legs on either side of him. He thought about shouting. That would distract the stranger. Maybe he would chase after Eli, giving Frances time to escape. But Eli knew he wouldn't be faster than the man. He would get him. And then what? Trembling all over, he was unable to tear his eyes away from the man and Frances, their bodies moving against one another in the field below him.

When he couldn't bear the terror any longer, he turned around and ran away in the opposite direction.

*

The houses of Hallow were vague white shapes against the darkening sky. They looked like teeth inside a gaping mouth as he approached.

Confounded, Eli had been wandering in the forest, not sure for how long. Finally his steps had led him out of it and toward the village. He couldn't return home. He had ran away from the scene he had witnessed as if commanded by a force other than himself, and as a result he was now even more scared than before. He had been there while the man was forcing himself on his sister, and he hadn't done anything. What could he possibly do now? It was too late.

As he neared, Eli realized the village felt different. The streets were empty and he passed through them like a ghost, without encountering anyone. The houses seemed empty too, which was most strange. No sounds or voices could be heard, as if the people had evaporated from within. He looked around, uncomprehending what was going on. Then his eyes began to discern something in the distance, further away on the other side of the village, rising over the roofs of houses. It hadn't been there before... It was big, pointing to the sky... A flag, barely distinguishable, waved on top of it. He had forgotten about the circus.

Sound seemed to return as he left Hallow from the southern side and got closer to the field where the circus had been set up. There it was, the tent that had swallowed the village. A big top, painted in great red, blue and white stripes. The show was running. The more he approached, the clearer he could hear voices from inside the big top. They rose in mirth and later they exclaimed in awe. There was brief silence and then a common gasp echoed, air inhaled suddenly in dozens of mouths at once. Music came out of the big top as well, but from what instruments he couldn't tell. It was uncanny at times, and other times it aimed to be fun, lighter. Eli walked closer.

All around the tent, carts and carriages were scattered in a round formation, every now and then figures appearing and disappearing in them. A couple of men stood at the entrance, smoking. He didn't have the courage to walk up to them. Instead, Eli drew a circle around the field the circus had camped in and approached from the back, sliding his way through the narrow space between two yellow carriages. He didn't want to be there and yet the big top was magnetic. Perhaps it was the presence of so many people inside it that made it feel so safe to him. It pulled him closer, despite that he had no right to be entertained or stay in the company of others. He felt different, dirty after his terror that had driven him to inaction.

Eli saw a place where the big top's cover parted in two and he directed his steps there. Kneeling, he lifted the heavy canvas and peered inside.

It was a group of acrobats that he saw flying over the crowd who had their backs turned on him. Their short-sleeved costumes allowed their bodies to show as they twisted and turned in the air. They were men, strong and trained. They hung off ropes, caught each other's hands mid jump and performed complicated manoeuvres under the big top, as if their bodies were ink and they were struggling to inscribe words in the air with their shapes. The crowd, entranced, cheered them and caught its breath every time one of them dived to the ground only to be saved by another acrobat the very last moment. Even in the haze of his mind, Eli couldn't help but admire their strength, precision, the confidence with which they dictated their movements through nothingness.

Then the music changed out of the blue and his eyes rose to meet the most beautiful and simultaneously intimidating woman he had ever seen. She was a trapeze artist but if there was a rope on which she was walking on her way to the hovering instrument he just couldn't see it. Her way of moving, too, indicated there wasn't. She was treading on thin air, forty feet above ground, under the two great silver wings she had instead of arms. She tiptoed on nothing, opening her wings marvellously like a giant butterfly, she turned upside down, her powerful figure cutting the air, she flew in exquisite pirouettes from one side of the big top to the other. The heads and murmurs of the crowd followed her every movement and gesture as though the spectators were attached to her body by invisible lines. In the end she hovered in the middle of the tent, the other acrobats freezing in their places all around. She shed her butterfly skin, revealing a striking red costume that clung tight on her body, and began turning her figure around the trapeze. Her command of movement was mesmerizing, as if the horizontal bar was but a simple extension of herself.

The third time she twisted around the hovering instrument, sharp pain exploded in Eli's legs and he was pulled back by the hair, out of the tent. Blows continued to fall in rapid succession on his knees, hands, back and stomach. Through watery eyes and suddenly out of breath, he saw his tormentor's face was that of a tiger.

'What have we got ourselves here then, eh? A trespasser?'

The boy standing over Eli was a few years older than him. He smiled threateningly through the orange and black stripes painted on his face and resumed punishing parts of Eli's body with the cane he was carrying.

'Ow!'

'Thought you'd watch without a ticket, eh? Thought you're clever?' he said and kept directing lashes at the younger boy's flesh.

Eli scuffled and fell. He jumped on his feet and started running. The boy with the tiger's mask followed him closely with ease, beating his hands, legs and his back as he ran away. The beating went on for some time, casually from the older boy's side. Eli managed to outrun him in the end at the edge of the field beyond the carriages. The boy stood there and watched him as he rushed away from the circus.

He stopped only when the big top was barely visible any more. He was on the road south of Hallow, which was deserted at that hour. He sat down. The air was carrying the vibrations of the show to him. His skin ached and, even though he couldn't see in the dark, he knew his body must be bruised all over. He wondered whether Frances had returned home.

Afraid and ashamed, he cried. The night had gone quiet when he removed his hands from his face and dried them on his shirt.

The show was over and the troupe members seemed to be gathering equipment and turning in when he finally started on the way back. Careful not to meet anyone, he could see them from a distance under the lamp posts of coaches, dressed in colourful and dark costumes, figures lean and beautiful, tall and strong, odd and grotesque. Occasionally the silhouette of a horse guided by someone would appear, to vanish again with tired, dragging steps. The circus was quiet, shut in itself and its boundaries, reflective after the show. And even though discussions could be heard from small groups gathered around fires lit here and there on the site, the chords of a guitar were the only that didn't seem to fade throughout but played on, underlining the day's end.

Directing his path away from the big top, Eli entered again the village of Hallow. The sounds there were different from the numbness that presided in the circus. Excitement seemed to emanate from the main street. It was as though an enormous celebration was breaking into smaller parties and he could see a crowd up ahead, spreading through the streets. Walking along, he stepped into it.

He had never seen so many people together. Families, groups of children, couples holding arms passed all around him, a sea of faces familiar and unknown, neighbours that he recognized and strangers he hadn't encountered before. Only then did he realize the show had attracted folk from surrounding villages who would be spending the night at Hallow. Everyone was in elevated mood. Excited talking and bursts of laughter could be heard all around and even signing from The Old Swan, Hallow's only pub. Returning home or strolling about, the people had enjoyed the show and were taking some of its atmosphere back with them. He was amid a crowd of merriment and joy, yet Eli couldn't feel any of their warmth brushing off on him.

A familiar voice emerged through the noise of the crowd and he caught a glimpse of Charlie further ahead to his right. With him were Roy and Sandy and other boys from Hallow. Apparently, they had found a way in to watch the show. They were gloating, laughing and teasing each other, as they made their way down the main road. Eli turned into a side street, avoiding the crowd and the other boys, and hurried away.

*

Trees were reaching out hands to grab him. Walking on the highway from Hallow, his fear and imagination transformed the trees on either side of the road to monsters, set out to get him. The wind that blew seemed sinister and branches became evil hands in the dark, claws aiming at him. Eyes spied on him from inside the leaves, unimaginable terrors hid just off the road, following him, watching his every step, waiting for the moment to attack. Back in the village the dogs were howling.

Eli knew every inch of the road, every turn and puddle, but now it felt as though he was walking it for the first time. Any small noise made him jump and turn his head around, even though he didn't see anything or anyone. He tried not to make a sound with his steps too. He tried to convince himself that it was just the wind or small animals; he knew this was true but in that hour he couldn't believe it.

There was no moon and the road seemed to stretch on forever. He expected to have reached home already, but every now and again he saw a familiar landmark and his spirits sank lower realizing how far away he still was. His mind kept returning to the events of the morning, the man and Frances, and an irrational fear had got hold of him. His eyes wide open, he was looking around for the slightest of movements.

A shuffling sound and Eli cried out loud. Ashamed, his heart beating hard, he saw the fox he had startled pause some feet away from him. Sudden relief showered him, knowing that it had been more afraid of him than he was, and he stood and watched it for a moment. Soon he started walking again, fear closing in on him once more. When he looked back, the fox had disappeared, a blush in the night.

Arriving home, he noticed thin clouds of smoke coming up from the chimney. There was a new pile of wood outside and he knew his father was back from Birmingham. Both rooms of the house of Weathers were dark. He opened the door noiselessly and gathered by the fireplace, which was cooling but still warmer than anywhere else in the house. He didn't have the courage to join his family in the other room where they all slept and he wondered if Frances was there too. She must be. He remained awake for a long time. And when he did fall asleep, his dreams were uneasy.

*

The following days dragged on. For almost a week Eli had very few opportunities to see Frances at home. She and Harriet, their mother, worked at a neighbouring farm alongside other women from the village, raking up weeds which had been harrowed out for the wage of

eighteen pence a day. Meanwhile, Eli had to skip school as his father needed help in the fields and couldn't afford to pay another worker. It was an old field in particular that he was working in, which they called 'the bog' and lay a long way out from the rest and where they lived.

Its unimaginative name described at least what it was: an expanse of lingering waters, drab russet mud and clumpy moss. It had belonged to the Weathers for a few generations but because they lacked the means to drain it and turn it into grassland for grazing, the family had left it neglected for years until, due to its location, gathering the rain and the drift of nearby streams, the field had transformed into a bog of brown, soily peat. From time to time, Jon Weathers made plans to reclaim it from the elements, yet another summer had gone by and the circumstances hadn't presented themselves. Observing that the sky remained relatively dry and clear, he decided to cut the turf. He estimated it would keep their fireplace going for the winter and in case it proved to be more than their needs the surplus could be sold. Apart from its remarkable perfume, turf made for very warm fires, burning throughout the night. If you covered its embers with ash, they were still to be found hot in the morning, so reviving the flame became effortless.

Long before first light, Eli and his father got up without waking the women and started on their way to the bog. The journey was over five or six miles long and their eyes only met the sunup when they approached the field, by that time soaked in sweat and the early mist. Exchanging few words, the first pared the area they would work on during the day. Employing knives and a sod cutter, they removed the top soil and roots up to six inches deep. Eli looked ridiculous in his father's old boots; he had rags stuffed inside to prevent them from going loose around his thin legs and feet. At another time, he might have made light of his comical appearance. But after what had happened, he could not see but the grim side of things and a sense of guilt was suspended in his mind all the time. As his father hadn't found out about Frances and the man, Eli hadn't told him. He knew he should have told his father what had taken place but couldn't bring himself to do it, and as a result the atmosphere whenever he was around him felt laden. The air, too, in the bog was heavy. Flies, mosquitos and plenty other insects were a constant menace and they found their ways to skin despite the clothes covering most part of the workers' bodies. The bites they inflicted on father and son grew into angry red craters in the space of a few hours.

Eli and his father took turns cutting the peat, which they called turf once it was cut, using the one turf spade they owned. Its long and narrow end with a side at a right angle lent the muddy material a shape akin to that of a brick once it was removed from the ground. Eli's arms tired quickly using the spade and he resumed working with his hands, which made the

task take even more time. Turf went under his nails and by the end of the day the tips of his fingers looked black and deformed.

His father on the other hand maintained a steady rhythm in spading. Eli observed him from the corner of his vision, planted as though he seemed in the mud. His arms came down in vigorous motions, a look of unbreakable concentration on his weather-beaten profile. The manner in which he worked the ground hinted at a sense of rustic honesty which was a characteristic undeniable in Jon Weathers. A sincere purpose dictated his movements and it was many a time that his son felt filthy in comparison, his guilt almost forcing him to open his mouth and reveal to his father about the incident, about Frances and the stranger. But then he thought of his own fear and inaction, he knew his father would be disgusted by him, and so that very same fear held him back.

As there were only two of them, Eli often had to work in the role of both the holder and the spreader. He picked up the turf that his father dug out and carried it further away to make room for the next row he would deliver. His own movements felt small, slow and insufficient next to the older man's build. Sometimes Jon Weathers had to wait patiently while Eli tossed the burden with effort and returned for a new one, watching him over from the pit, wiping his forehead under his greasy hat.

After the cutting was done, they carried the wet heavy pieces to the spreading ground at the end of the field. This space they had cleared up on the first day, burning off the grass and heather. There they footed the turf, which glistened brown under the light. They placed the bricks upright together in cones to dry in the sun, allowing room between them for the wind to come through and assist the process. They went about and turned them around, too, every now and again, to make sure they dried out equally on all sides.

Late into the afternoon they stopped, to determine which pieces of turf from the previous day's work were dry. Once its colour had turned darkish or black and it felt soft and weighed light, the turf was ready to bag. Eli balancing one load on his back and his father three, they then started for home. The distance, however, appeared even longer now than it did in the morning. The road stretched on endless, their footsteps landed heavy on its dust and they had to pause from time to time and sit down for a breath. And on they plodded again. More often than not they returned long after dark had fallen, when Harriet and Frances had already gone to sleep and the house of Weathers was a silent shape against a dark background.

If Eli had thought the hard work would in some way offer his troubled mind some kind of redemption, he had been wrong. The constant presence of his father next to him reminded him what an honest man the first was and how different the latter –himself– had proved to be.

Physical toil was diminishing his spirits further. From bending to pick up the turf all the time, Eli's back and legs hurt in the mornings. The original stiff feeling retreated after an hour of work to be replaced by an indifferent numbness, but it returned again as soon as his body cooled down at night. He became accustomed to the work at the bog and to time moving sluggishly like the turf they extracted, but this was accompanied by a growing sense of uneasiness.

Nights dragged on even slower for him than days. In the small room where the four members of the family slept, Eli lay awake trying to listen for his sister's breathing. He wondered if she was awake too, in the other corner of the room across from his. He often thought she was and he wondered what she would think of him had she known he had been there when the terrible thing happened. She would call him a coward for not intervening, for sure. That was what he called himself at any rate. The more he recalled the scene with the man and his sister, the more it tormented him. He was alert to the little sounds of the house or the other bodies in the room with him and the shadows on the ceiling turned heavier. He lay in silent panic for hours, unmoving until physical exhaustion took him in, for the terror to play again its sickening sequence in his sleep. His father's hand on his shoulder, shaking him conscious in the dark before dawn, either felt like a blessing or roused him bolt upright.

The weather persisted to be clear and they kept at their work. The stacks of turf in the shed multiplied every evening they returned. Eli would have been almost content to stay away from home and the nightmares, despite his muscles aching all over during the daytime, but for the aloofness and guilt that surfaced in him around his father. Jon Weathers was as ever calm with his son, unbothered by his lack of adeptness in his work and unsuspecting he might be hiding something from him.

After two weeks at the bog, an unannounced drizzle arrived in the afternoon.

'Quick! Get the 'paulin!' his father shouted from the other end of the field.

They both dropped their tools and ran to cover the turf with tarpaulin. In a hurry they splashed around in the mud, wrapping the small pyramids of the precious material under pieces of canvas. They kept the tarpaulin at the spreading ground, putting it over the turf every evening before they left for fear of the damp.

When they finished, they stood for a while looking at the protruding white shapes, powerless as their work was ruined from underneath. The ground was slowly filling up with water, and they knew that there was no way any turf they cut from now on would remain dry. The tapping of the rain on their shoulders in the end convinced them to leave.

At home, and as they had returned early from the bog, they sat to eat with the women. They talked little as they always did around the table. But Eli, perhaps more sensitive to it due

to his own condition, couldn't help but pick up a tension hanging in the air between his mother and Frances. His sister kept looking across the table at Harriet who seemed to be avoiding her eyes every time.

When they had finished eating, Jon Weathers smoked one cigarette of rolled tobacco as he always did and retreated to the other room to sleep. Harriet, watching him go, left her embroidery work on her chair and followed him, closing the door behind them. Eli and Frances remained alone in the room with the fireplace. He tried to catch her eye, wondering what had happened, but Frances had covered into her corner and wouldn't look back at him. There was something askew in her expression and she seemed to him terrified.

A moment later the door opened to reveal Jon Weathers. He was holding in his hand Frances's second of two dresses, which was covered in blood. A large stain had dried up on it, covering most part on the back of the dress. As red as the stain was, equally pale was Jon Weathers' face.

'Come here,' he said to his daughter and she, terrified, hurried to get up and enter the room.

'Get out, Harriet,' Eli heard his father say and his mother returned to the room with the fireplace.

Sitting next to it, Eli tried to read what was happening on her face but she turned her back on him. He didn't need to guess however. Their mother must have discovered Frances's dress by accident. Or if his sister had hid it, she must have demanded her to bring it forth. The amount of blood on it was too much. It was telling.

For a few moments, nothing could be heard from the adjacent room. Eli had pinned his eyes to the door, dreading the crisis behind it. Then he thought he could hear something and true, his father and sister's voices were more distinct. Planted in place like a statue, ignoring the fact that his mother had gone as immobile as himself, Eli listened. His father's voice carried over, although he couldn't tell what he was saying. He thought at the pauses it made he could discern a whisper, Frances's voice. What was he asking? What was she telling him?

'Tell me the truth!' his father's voice echoed next and was followed by a series of thuds, from skin to skin.

Eli thought he heard Frances crying.

'Go outside,' his mother as much as breathed to him.

He obeyed and exiting the house stood at the yard beside their pile of firewood. A few moments later Jon Weathers came out and with long strides left on the way to Hallow.

His father didn't return home that night. Neither of the women followed him when he came out of the house and when Eli dared to go back in he found them in their beds, unspeaking. Frances was turned facing the wall and he couldn't see her expression. His mother had her eyes closed but he knew she wasn't asleep. He lay down next to her, doing the same. Closing his eyes, as if blindness could erase memory too.

Jon Weathers returned home the following day and woke them up at dawn. He seemed changed, tormented and terrifying. Barely speaking and with his features set in cold determination, he ordered his wife and daughter to resume work at the neighbouring farm. He told Eli to go to school and announced he would be working at the bog on his own.

Other than that incident, nothing happened on the days that followed and they didn't find out what Jon Weathers had been up to when he had left the house. But the atmosphere at home had changed for the worse. They ate in silence, moved around in silence, communicated with the eyes mostly. Frances herself seemed a frail thing, afraid to look at any of the others around her and Eli had caught her crying silently where she was sitting a number of times.

As Jon Weathers had dictated, the next days, the last of October, Eli resumed going to school. But even there, among the company of boys his age and with all the games they devised, he couldn't forget the situation that waited for him at home. Quiet and aloof, he barely spoke to Charlie and he was so distracted that the teacher made him stand on the form more often than ever before. From the form, as they called the place in the classroom designated for silent, standing punishment, Eli could see out of the window. At other times, he would have been standing on his toes and stretching out his neck to get a better view. And that, because their school was opposite one of the four roadside ponds of the village, where the herds of Welsh cattle stopped during their journey south, to Blackwater Fair, which was on the 8th of November, and to other smaller fairs around London.

It used to be a spectacle for such a small place as Hallow. The drovers led the short, black beasts with the long horns to the pond outside the school to drink and then away, for the next herd approaching to be watered, and then the next, and the next, in a haze of dust, clanks of hooves, and shouts in Welsh by the drovers. The previous years, Eli had tried counting the animals as they went by, reaching up to the number of four hundred. He knew the drovers came from the west, avoiding the turnpike roads in order not to pay the toll, and followed the route of the commons toward London, near where they changed course south and to the sea. He used to be fascinated by the fact that these cattle were shod, an uncommon practice, as shoeing was for horses and mules. But due to the long journey, these herds of Welsh cattle were shod and when he was lucky, Eli got to see that happening right there, on the road. The drovers on

horseback hustled the beast that showed signs of footsore apart from the rest, drove it over laid rope trapping its legs, lassoed it and threw it over to repair its shoes on the spot with pincer and hammer and nails they carried with them, the latter stored in a fat piece of bacon to prevent them from rusting.

All that mattered little these days. The Welsh cattle came and went and Eli barely noticed them from the form. Neither they nor the flocks of geese on their way to London to be sold in the same fairs caught his attention. He spent less and less time bird catching and tending to his traps too. His thoughts were monopolized by the tense climate within his family and the role he himself had played. His guilt was greater than ever because Jon Weathers had seemed to come to the conclusion that Frances had slept with the man on her own will. And Eli had said nothing to the contrary, despite being the only other person that knew the truth. As he hadn't saved his sister the first time, he didn't step up to defend her the second time, when she was accused and her innocence was tarnished. His regret ate him up inside but simultaneously he was terrified of his father's reaction if he ever discovered he had been present at the scene and done nothing.

Everything at home had changed. Jon Weathers was abrupt and detached; the previous warmth he seemed to emanate was gone. He became impatient if anyone failed to do what was asked of them, his manner was cold and commanding. And even though no one touched upon the subject again, an air of suspicion and blame remained.

Then one afternoon they all found out where Jon Weathers had been after discovering Frances's blood-stained dress that night. Or, more precisely, they observed the consequences of his actions. Eli was returning home from school and he happened to coincide with his mother who had finished working at their neighbours' farm. They met each other on the way and walked back together. Frances hadn't been to work that day, telling them in the morning that she felt ill.

When they arrived at the yard and saw the carriage tracks on the ground, Eli's mother let out a horrified scream and ran to the house. Eli followed her but Frances wasn't there. Only Jon Weathers stood in the empty house. He hadn't been to the bog and he had been the one that had instructed Frances to say she was sick the night before. They also learned what he had arranged for her a couple of days ago, when he hadn't returned home but in the morning. Jon Weathers concluded his few words with a single sentence, saying that he had sent Frances away for good, his voice threatening them to confront his decision.

They didn't. And after that, everything was beyond repair. Eli lasted one week at home without Frances. Later, he would remember this time as one of heavy grief, as if his sister had

died and they, left behind, were mourning her. Of those heavy days, two memories of his parents would be carved in his memory.

The first was one afternoon that Eli stepped into their shed in search of a rake and didn't at once understand what he was looking at. His father's great figure stood bent on a haystack. His back was turned to the door, head held inside his hands, elbows on his kneecaps, and his shoulders were shaking. No sound escaped him, no voice but his breath coming in and out in short, sharp gasps. Eli had never seen his father crying. The spectacle shook him and before Jon Weathers could turn around and notice him, he had walked backwards out of the shed.

The incident triggering the second memory that Eli would never forget happened a week later. His mother and he were watering their garden. Harriet had changed too after Frances's departure, but in a different way. While Jon Weathers never showed his grief at sending his child away, the mother carried it about her at all times. It was a visible presence in her features and her very movements at any time of the day hinted at a pain she was not allowed to speak about. But in that occasion, she did. In a moment that Eli didn't expect it, she had turned to him while they were working side by side and said,

'Had you been there, you would have saved her.'

After that, Eli knew his mother had believed Frances. And together with saying that sentence to him, she had smiled a faint smile and turned away to hide her face. The words themselves were excruciating.

*

In the early hours of October 26, 1868, a small glow appeared on the window. A heavy silence ruled the house of Weathers.

The boy blinked at the low light and lifted himself up from the bed. He had been awake the entire night, as most nights in the past weeks. He waited for some time, listening to the steady breathing of the other two bodies in the bed next to him. Then he got up, crossed the room and slipped through the door, his bare feet cold on the wooden floor.

At the main room of the house, the fireplace was still warm and when he stirred the embers the fire got going again. Everything was blue in the dawn. He picked up his shoes by the door and opened it quietly.

His steps echoed in the yard. After a hundred feet, he looked back over his shoulder at the house.

Eli started running.

*

He woke to thunder. Eyes darting around in panic, he sought for shapes in the dark. Blackness was everywhere he turned. Then Eli remembered where he was and his surroundings began to take form as though summoned into existence by his memory. Walls appeared, then the roof and its beam that slackened sideways leaving open a triangle to the sky. Through it, the outer black was just distinguishable from the inner. Of course. The stable.

The boy sat up. His hand sank into something muddy and retreated immediately out of instinct. Dung. The floor was covered in it. He had cleared up a space earlier to lie down, shoving it aside with a spade he had found. Now everything was wet and he couldn't see clearly.

Eli listened. When had the rain started? Certainly not before he had fallen asleep. It was still bright then and the dog was outside. He had heard it running around the stable barking and scratching on the walls, howling sometimes. At first he couldn't calm down with the animal so close trying to break in. Only when he had made sure there weren't any other holes in the building apart from the one in the roof he had felt safe.

He had been saved by pure luck and he shuddered at what might have happened hadn't the stable been so near when the dog started after him. He was crossing through a grazing field he thought empty until his ear caught the distant growls and he saw it. A farm collie the size of a sheep, with a mane of brown and white hair flying all around its neck as it sprinted towards him. He had started running and the dog was almost at his heels when he shot into the stable and pushed the door shut with all his force. He had stood against it trying to breathe.

The cold made him shiver. Rain dripped in from the opening on the roof and the sides of the poorly placed wooden boards. The whole place, and he too, stank. He got up and navigated his way through the puddles to the door.

The dog had left. Angry flashes of light came up on the horizon. Quickly he took off his clothes and walked a couple of steps away from the creaking building. The wind lashed at him as he washed, running his hands over his hair, face and body. Teeth chattering, he stumbled back. He picked up his trousers and shirt and started brushing them together under the stream falling from the edge of the roof. He couldn't feel his hands.

He was shaking whole when he returned inside. He hung the wet clothes on a nail on the wall and picked up two old hay sacks from the corner of the stable. Placing one on the floor, he crouched on it and covered himself with the other. He regretted going outside now, it was a

very stupid thing to do. He had hated that he smelled so bad, but he shouldn't have stepped into the rain. He would catch his death.

Rocking back and forth, he tried to warm up rubbing his palms together and against his legs. His breath was clearly visible when it came out. It had been four days now that he hadn't slept in a warm place. Or was it longer? It didn't matter. Time was a vague thing in his mind ever since he had left home. Back then, it was measured by the things he had to do. By working or going to school, by when he sat at the table with the rest of his family to eat, by attending church if it was a Sunday. Now he had nothing to do, therefore time was irrelevant.

Since he had left, Eli had been wandering. Like a wild animal he had roamed here and there in the commons and the woods, avoiding any place where people might recognize him. Afraid to approach strangers too, he hadn't spoken to anyone in entire days. A couple of times he had turned to go back but he always changed his mind and didn't return home. The previous day he had headed southwards to Worcester. This decision was without real purpose; the small town just happened to be the closest place he knew. But remembering his father had relatives there, he took a different course and followed the river Severn to the north. Shortly after crossing the river before Ombersley the incident with the dog had taken place and he had taken refuge in the stable.

A second thunder echoed with a deafening crack that shook the building and Eli jumped upright. The door had blasted open and he expected to see someone coming in. It was just the wind. The thunder sounded as though it had struck right outside the stable. Gathering the sack tighter over his shoulders, he looked around. The old building seemed ready to fall apart any moment, he thought.

He could hear his stomach in the silence; the cold made the pain worse. He had been eating berries whenever he could find them and once he had tried chewing on some leaves. Only the first day he had stolen apples from a field near Hallow but he hadn't been intelligent enough to carry many with him and he had run out. You'd think he would have been fit to survive on his own, being a country child, but that was far from the truth. His existence until then had relied on the care of others, Eli slowly came to realize although the confusion in his head didn't allow him to form any coherent plan about what he was doing.

The pangs became more intense and he felt as though he would double up in two by the pain. He walked a couple of steps trying to ignore them. Returning to the entrance, he looked outside. The rain came down heavy and he could hardly see a few yards away. He couldn't leave yet. Then he thought he saw something glimmering in the distance. Pulling the sack over his head, he stepped out of the stable.

He hadn't been mistaken. There were definitely lights of sorts down there. How weird. It couldn't be houses. He had passed by that spot that very morning and there was nothing there but fields.

Eli stood watching the lights. They looked like small fires, one after another in a straight line. He counted at least fourteen of them before realizing they weren't flickering as he had thought at first. They were moving, disappearing and reappearing behind trees. But there was no road down there. Why didn't the rain put them out, he wondered.

A third thunder struck near the hills and Eli shouted. The stable's roof creaked in the wind. When he looked again the lights were still there, progressing slowly into the night, undeterred. Not disappearing, not dying out.

Then it crossed his mind that it was All Hallow's Eve. He remembered following his father the previous year on this anniversary to a hill, where other men and women from the village gathered. They had burned straw on a makeshift hearth they had built and prayed, kneeling around it in a circle. Back then, he hadn't taken the custom seriously or understood its significance, but now his eyes widened at the thought that crossed his mind. He was alone and the fires in the dark seemed uncanny and he thought for a moment he might be watching the dead. Walking in the night, holding lights that wouldn't go out. Going where, he thought madly. Back to the houses they had lived in when they had been alive, he gave the answer to himself and chills climbed up his spine. Quickly he stepped back into the stable and closed the door, wedging the spade between the handle and the wall as he had done earlier with the dog. Lying down on the other sack, he covered himself and gathered as tight as he could. The pangs in his stomach returned, this time accompanied by his heart beating like horse hooves on dry ground. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't keep his eyes shut for longer than a few moments and it was hours before sleep claimed him.

When dawn finally broke, a stain of pink growing slowly at the edge of his vision, he had already been walking for an hour. Dressed in his still damp clothes, he had left as soon as the rain had stopped. Leaving the stable he couldn't see anything across where the lights had appeared during the night, nor did he dare approach to explore further. He wondered if he had really seen lights or if they had been hallucinations of his mind due to hunger and exhaustion.

By noon, the sky had been covered in clouds again. Eli was still walking vaguely in the direction of Birmingham, as he calculated. Suddenly he had an idea of his legs giving way and the earth coming closer and closer to his face. When he regained his senses, he had no idea how much time had passed. He got up and forced himself to continue walking.

He met again with the road in the afternoon and shortly afterwards with a small stream where he stopped to drink. It must be the Hardley Brook, if he was correct. He had a vague knowledge of the area from accompanying his father on his rare journeys to buy tools or sell their harvest. This meant that he probably wasn't far from Droitwich Spa if he kept on the road. Perhaps he could spend the night in the church there, where they might also give him something to eat, he thought.

Eli started on his way once more but before long, near the Great Pool whose waters looked murky green from the road, he discovered a wild pear tree and fell on the fruit like rabid. The wild pears were small, yellow and hard for his teeth but he fancied their taste the most delicious he had tried. He ate and filled his pockets with as many as he could, then sat heavily under the tree.

When he woke up it was dark and the few lights from the village of Droitwich were visible across the lake. Even though he wasn't hungry, he ate some more pears before starting again. The wind blew lightly and he thought it carried with it the sound of laughter and voices. He remembered that night the circus had come to Hallow and the terrifying morning that had preceded it. How strange that the two incidents had happened on the same day.

And yet. Maybe it wasn't strange, the thought now occurred to him. Maybe the two events weren't irrelevant to each other. He remembered how the coming of the circus had attracted people to their village from the great area. The fact remained that the stranger wasn't from Hallow or he would have recognized him. Maybe the man had come with the circus or he was connected to it in some other way.

However, all this did not matter. Frances had been sent away to an institution of sorts and Eli didn't know anything about its location. His father had refused to give them more information about Frances's whereabouts. And the man, whether he was with the troupe or related to it, could be anywhere now. Eli had no chance of finding his sister or the man, and he knew he was powerless to do anything in either case. The circus itself must be miles away since then. He didn't have the slightest hint that he was about to meet it again in less than half an hour.

Consequently, his bewilderment upon arriving at Droitwich Spa was such that he halted in his tracks when, at the outskirts of the village, his eyes met the big top, its flag waving before the outlines of houses. An uncanny coincidence or was this a different circus? He also realized that the mysterious lights he had seen the night before had been the troupe's coaches and carriages.

As he moved closer to the encampment, any doubts about the troupe's identity vanished. There was no denying the circus was the same one and that he had found it on his path a second time. The drawing of the laughing clown and the roaring lion on either side of the red-lettered inscription '*Drayden's Travelling Circus*' was visible on every other coach and carriage even from the distance where he was standing. What was the troupe still doing in their area after nearly a month, he wondered and started towards the coaches.

The big top was empty. Apart from workers entering now and then to fetch equipment and, once, a woman chasing a monkey that had stolen her wig, it appeared that the show was over for the evening. Eli had peered inside from an opening at the back of the great tent, but this time he had kept an eye out for the tiger-boy with the cane.

He was ready to retreat and consider what to do next when a different figure entered the big top from the main entrance. With steady steps she approached the ring, around which remained the only lamps still lit in the big top. She climbed over the rail with graceful movements and picked up a unicycle that lay nearby. Eli recognized her. It was the flying woman, the trapeze artist he had seen before.

She wasn't wearing her wings tonight but a different costume. A short, white skirt with furbelows over her stockinged legs, a scaly faint green shirt that revealed her pale neck, elbow-long gloves in the same shade, and a white ribbon that kept her hair tight behind her back. Eli took a step to the right, deeper into the shadows, in case she happened to look in his direction.

The woman balanced herself on the unicycle and, after swaying back and forth once, brought it to an abrupt halt with her legs tight on either side of the solitary wheel. She then reached with her hands, untied the ribbon from her hair and, taking a look around the ring, tied it over her eyes. Pressing on the pedals, she turned and began cycling again on the big circle that was drawn inside the ring.

Eli stared in amazement. The awe she inspired in him grew as the woman stopped, performed a 180 degrees turn on the spot and –with her eyes always covered– started cycling counter-clockwise and backwards, never for a moment missing the circle outlined inside the ring. She seemed to be aware precisely where she was all the time and didn't hesitate nor lose her balance at any point, going around the ring with such ease as if she had her eyes open. Eli could stand there watching her all night.

'She can see through her ribbon.'

Eli turned around at once, trying to see who had spoken. He perceived no one, although the voice had seemed to come from directly behind him, from the door of one of the coaches. As he concentrated there, he saw movement. Then sparks emerged from nowhere, a hand

appeared and lit the lamp hanging in front of the window. He knew now why he hadn't spotted him earlier. Eli hadn't seen a black man before.

'She can see through her ribbon,' the man repeated. 'It's transparent in the middle even though you can't see it from here.'

By the time his eyes grew accustomed to the feeble yellow glow, the man had sat down on the wooden steps of the coach and with the same slow movement as before was lighting the object he held, a long thin pipe with elaborate carvings on it.

'Of course, she can do it blindfolded, too,' he continued. 'But she's just training right now.'

Bluish smoke rose in spirals around the man as he studied the boy. On his part, Eli could tell this must have been a man of extraordinary strength in his youth. Even now, in his old age, his face and hands full of harsh lines, he appeared powerful and intimidating, although something in his expression or perhaps in his careful movements bespoke a serenity of character. He wore a grey-white beard which had beads of many colours woven into it, shining as he puffed out smoke in small clouds. His hair was the same colour under his scarlet hat, which matched his suit of deep red with golden buttons all the way down to his trousers. The man's costume would have made him appear ridiculous in any other setting, but there, surrounded by the striking colours of the circus coaches and across the loud patterns of the big top, it lent him an atmosphere of belonging to the place and a strange sort of status.

Eli remained silent. His senses on alert, he was considering whether he should run away. But the man hadn't showed signs of being a threat, nor did he look like he might treat him the same way as the tiger-boy had. He wasn't armed at any rate.

'What do you think she's thinking?' the man asked now, pointing with his head at the woman on the unicycle inside the big top and surprising him.

'I... Uh...' Eli had no clue what to say. 'She seems very concentrated,' he managed, wondering what purpose the stranger had in opening a conversation with him.

'Does she?' replied the man. 'I think you're wrong. Of course, to an untrained eye her movements seem perfect. And they are. But the fact that she's training after the evening show, when everyone is packing up, resting and preparing for tomorrow, should tell you something.'

Eli looked at the woman again. She was still cycling around the ring, never missing the circular line on the ground.

'That she is very hard working?' he tried.

'Sure, that is one thing. Another thing is that she is worried. Anxious. She's restless and ends up training more and more even though she doesn't need to.'

‘What is she worried about?’ Eli said and added: ‘I’ve seen her before. She’s great.’

‘You have? Yes, she is very good at what she does. But these days everyone in the troupe is restless. The company is changing hands, you see. Down in London, the big bosses are talking. That’s enough cause for everybody to worry about their future, whether they’re at the top or at the bottom of this business.’

Eli glanced at the woman again. So the circus was going to have a new owner, according to what the man had said. And even though she was a capable trapeze artist, she was concerned. Eli wasn’t sure what this piece of information was meant to tell him. Perhaps, though, this was also the reason the circus hadn’t been far from their area after all that time. First the damage on their carriages and then a sudden change of ownership could have left the troupe headless, lingering in the area while waiting instructions from London.

‘Who are you?’ the man said now.

Eli gave him his name.

‘Are you here looking for work?’ he asked again in a casual manner.

‘I am, yes,’ Eli heard himself make a reply.

The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind until then but the man seemed to take it for granted that boys dropped in out of nowhere all the time asking for work at the circus. Running away from home had been the only plan for Eli; after it, he had no clue as to what he would do next apart from vague thoughts of looking for work at a big city. At least, following the troupe, even for a little while, would mean sleeping warm and eating proper food, he thought now.

‘We are always in need of hands,’ the man said vaguely and Eli thought he was more lost in his own thoughts than trying to have a conversation with him.

For a little while they didn’t talk. Eli sat down by the big top and was watching the man as he smoked. The latter seemed to remember the boy’s presence after a while and he got up.

‘My name is Auberón,’ he introduced himself.

Eli’s expression of disbelief must have shown on his face. The man seemed to pick up on it.

‘Don’t expect anyone at the circus to give you their real name unless it’s also their stage name,’ he said. ‘This is the name I go by. I used to be an acrobat in the past, among other things, and now I am the ringmaster.’ He pointed to his scarlet costume.

‘You were in Hallow a few weeks ago, weren’t you,’ Eli said. ‘I mean, the circus was there.’ He gestured at the carriages around them.

‘Hallow?’ the man repeated as though the name didn’t strike him as familiar. ‘Hallow. Probably, yes. We go everywhere. Always travelling. Is that where you’re from?’

Eli nodded.

‘We get runaways all the time. I will not ask you to tell me your story and perhaps it isn’t wise to go around telling people what you have been up to either.’

So the old man had read a lot more in him than Eli suspected.

‘But as I said, we’re always in need of more hands. It’s hard work because we’re always on the road, but if you’re sure you want to be here, we’ll find something for you to do.’

*

‘Again! Try again!’ Idris urged him on from behind the temporary fence they had set up.

Eli stretched his feet to the lowest point he could reach on either side of the horse’s belly and kicked back with his heels. He tried making the movement more confident this time. He sensed a skip under him in response and Arundel didn’t slow down as he was about to. Instead, the horse shot forward in a faster rhythm. Eli offered him a couple more squeezes on the sides with his ankles and the horse continued its semi-gallop.

Pressing his legs tight over the horse’s stifles, it gathered more and more speed. Eli leaned to the front to assist its motion. Now the horse was trotting, for the first time under saddle and with Eli on its back. The ground rolled beneath them in a brown blur as they broke into a canter. Idris cheered.

‘Now pull back! Make him walk!’ Idris called out after they had gone around the ring once.

Eli drew the reins towards him as he had been taught. The horse responded, gradually changing its step and easing into a smoother, more relaxed walk. From high up on the saddle, Eli could see the horizon getting dimmer.

‘Lean back so your arse rests on the cantle,’ Idris instructed when they passed by the place he stood at the fence.

Without removing his focus from the horse’s neck and his immediate surroundings, Eli straightened up his spine. Somehow, instinctively, he could tell this was the right position even though it felt strange if he thought about it and tried to visualize it from another’s viewpoint.

‘Good, good. Let him walk for a bit and then try again.’

This was the second lesson in the space of two months, both for him and the horse. Eli had been asking the equestrian and horse keeper to teach him how to ride since early November, when he had joined Drayden’s. And Idris had promised he would, but many things had come in the way since then.

First of all were Eli's new duties and responsibilities. After that night when the ringmaster, Auberon, had caught him peering into the big top, guessed him as a runaway and taken him in, he had joined the large group of boys that worked at the travelling troupe. One of them had been Punch, the older boy that had beaten him on the occasion he had visited the circus in Hallow. As a member of the tiger-band now, as they were called due to the patterns painted on their faces, Eli patrolled around the big top during shows watching out for gate crashers that were trying to sneak in without a ticket. He didn't particularly enjoy this activity but it was only one of the many roles he had to fulfil as a circus employee.

He travelled, often at night, with the rest before the troupe to announce its coming to the next city or village. All the boys would cram inside one of the fastest coaches and be driven to the next town after the evening show. They slept in there too, despite the bumps on the road, as they had only a few hours before starting work again at the new destination. Eli became a crier and sold tickets for the show and plastered posters on the way and in the cities the circus was going to. He was slowly learning how to shout in a way that attracted people, how to boast certain words, how to tell of the circus's marvels without revealing anything about them to the people.

During the day, he helped the workers carry equipment, he was sent to feed animals, cleaned tons of dung and washed the troupe's coaches. Aside from all these, the circus's tight travelling schedule too, as it had come under new management and resumed a full operation, meant that there was rarely an opportunity for him to use the temporary horse-ring. Since Eli wasn't but a worker for the troupe, he wasn't allowed there when the equestrians practiced. So it had been almost two months before he got a second chance at horse riding, in the first days of December, 1868.

Eli wiped the sweat on his forehead with his hand and looked around. It was getting dark. They would soon have to stop the practice for the fence to be disassembled and its railings to be loaded onto coaches. There wouldn't be an evening show, as the manager had decided that most of the people in the small town had attended the one at noon. It was more pressing that they headed north to Newcastle, where they would spend a week or maybe more.

This had been another of the reasons that had kept him in the circus. Big cities. Even though the troupe had been the largest collection of characters he had seen before, it still paled in comparison compared to some of the towns or cities they passed through on their route. Birmingham, Liverpool, Southport, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull, York. Places he had never visited or –some of them– not even heard of before, and which both fascinated and terrified him at the same time. Even if he had thought of leaving the troupe and staying in one

of those cities, he didn't know how to go on about surviving in them. Also, he felt he didn't belong. In a city or a town and even more in a small village like that where he came from, he was a stranger among strangers. With the circus, it was different. Everyone seemed to be a stranger there and it was the perfect place to be if you were one. Strangeness became a community.

These and other thoughts crossed his mind vaguely as he led the horse around the ring. Eli knew it would be quite a long time before he had another opportunity like this. He treasured this time and hadn't realized how quickly almost an hour had gone by.

Receiving an acknowledging nod from Idris, Eli kicked his heels at Arundel's sides. This time the horse recognized the command at once and after a momentary skip it began trotting again. Swift, it galloped around the ring. The sensation was intoxicating, Eli decided, as they cantered drawing a big circle parallel to the fence. Not without fear—he still felt unsure about what the animal might decide to do at any given moment, and he knew well that he had no perfect control over it— but the speed in which they moved, the hissing of the wind around them, the up-and-down motion originating from the muscles of the horse, just witnessing the world from such a great height, it all gave him a notion between power and a wild joy that was close to nothing he had experienced before. He almost wanted to shout.

Of course, the horse riding lessons hadn't been a whim or a random choice. Barely a week after Eli had joined the troupe, Auberon had raised the issue of him training as a performer.

'You can be a worker anywhere,' he had said. 'What's the use of being a worker at the circus than someplace else?'

The ringmaster had also commented on Eli's age. A boy so young, if he received the right training, in the span of a decade could become one of the most celebrated circus performers in the country, he had said. He, Auberon, had seen that happen before, many times. It was these words that planted the idea of a career of sorts in Eli's mind. On the other hand, he was unsure as to where his inclination might lie and the few circus performers he had dared approach and ask to teach them their art had not responded positively. The horse keeper and horse master had been the first to warm up to the boy's shy nature and agree on giving him sparse lessons whenever his time and the circumstances allowed it.

Exploring this newfound sense of achievement, he wondered now whether he would slowly turn into an equestrian. These were the most common but also the most valued asset of the circus. In Drayden's in particular, they formed a society of their own which sought to outshine other performers of the troupe. Given they were the main attraction of the show and

the one that dominated time in the ring for far longer than any other act, even that of the acrobats, they were viewed as something special even among a community that everything was special about it. No wonder they always walked with their spine up straight, Eli thought, both in and out of the ring.

He tried to imagine how it would feel to ride the same horse as he was now but under the big top, surrounded by hundreds of eyes closely scrutinizing his every movement, adoration and awe in every face. He couldn't exactly picture it, least because he rarely had the opportunity to watch the show and more because the empty grounds around him, workers going by, didn't compare with the raw excitement contained inside the canvas tent. That's where the magic happened, not outside it.

After a while, Eli pulled the reins and brought the horse to a walking pace again. Idris motioned to him from the other side of the ring and sat further away, by the long crates for the fence railings, to roll one of his cigarettes. This was the day's lesson then. He now had to walk the horse around the ring for some time to cool him down, then return him to his box, wipe the sweat off of him and leave him with hay, carrots and fresh water. Idris was of the opinion that if Eli was taught how to ride, he should also learn how to take care of a horse.

Whispering a few words in what he hoped was a tone that conveyed to the animal his appreciation, Eli patted Arundel's neck. The horse tilted its head to the side and let out a rather friendly nicker. It was the best he had got from him so far, and there had been plenty of suspicious snorts when they had first met, never mind the irate neighing Arundel had produced the last time something had startled him before sending Eli flying off his back.

This, Eli thought, was another of the day's successes. He had managed to come out of the lesson in one piece. After his last fall and despite that the ground on which the horse ring was set was always half-ploughed to make any falls less dangerous, he had acquired a deep purple and persistent bruise on the back of his waist that went all the way up to his shoulder. It had started to fade away only weeks after the incident. And this was only a minor injury compared to what he could have received had he fallen a different way, head first say, or had the horse stepped back over him, Idris had commented darkly afterwards.

It was strange but the horse master had seemed to try and discourage him despite agreeing to offer him training. He didn't know that Idris Markey's only son had died five years ago, after an accident in the ring that involved a horse and a kick to the head, followed by several weeks of tending a comatose victim of severe concussion. The real reason, Eli would discover later, that Idris had kept his promise was that if he didn't, somebody else eventually

would, and his concern was to teach the boy the basics himself before he took it more seriously to pursue training as an equestrian.

This had also been the reason –and Eli ignored it too– that Idris Markey had chosen a fairly calm horse to begin with and also one that was never intended to join the show. Arundel was a Shire, one of the largest and tallest breeds, with an enormous capacity for weight pulling. They were employed at carts and coaches, to transport goods from the docks to cities and the countryside, and were popular for pulling the brewery wagons that delivered ale. Shires were draught horses and although sometimes they might be trained for the show, muscular stallions like this one were kept in the circus for the heavy work and for breeding. Arundel would never become a performing horse.

‘Are you teaching us to jump next time?’ Eli asked as they approached the smoking figure of Idris Markey near the fence crates. He had dismounted with some difficulty and was leading Arundel by the reins.

Idris laughed.

‘In a hurry, aren’t you, young Astley?’ he ironically summoned the famous equestrian master’s name to tease him.

‘Nah, he’s too young yet,’ he added. ‘At this stage he has to learn to wear a saddle, to walk, trot, halt and turn. Shouldn’t work too much either. Let his bones close first and then, maybe next year, we’ll see what else our fellow Arundel might learn.’

The horse lifted his long ears at the mention of his name, realizing they were talking about him. Eli untied and removed the pigskin saddle and, picking up the cloth, he quickly began drying the horse, starting from its shoulders. It made him anxious to think that, as Idris had explained, a horse could so easily catch a cold and die if it was left wet even for a little time while not moving. At the same time, Eli had to stand on his toes to reach better at the horse’s back and couldn’t help but admire its commanding appearance. If he didn’t know, he would never guess that Arundel was a foal, not yet three years old and ungelded. He stood at about eighteen hands tall or six feet, and still hadn’t reached his mature height. He had a deep and oblique shoulder, a wide chest and his back was short compared to that of other breeds and muscular. All over he was black except for the white feathering on his lower legs and a circular white dapple around his left eye which made him look as though he was wearing a monocle.

It was night when Eli hung the saddle and reins outside Arundel’s box in one of the horse coaches. After exchanging a few words with Idris, he set about wandering in the grounds. Most of the big top and the various side-attractions surrounding it had been gathered and loaded on carriages, and most artists were either in their coaches or on their way there, only workers

moving around with any real job to do. He estimated he had about an hour before he would have to join the rest of the boys that would travel ahead in the night to announce the circus's coming to the next small town.

It was in these rare moments of inactivity that his mind returned to his earlier life, to his home and his family. Hallow felt worlds away and even though he had left the house he had grown up in no longer than two months ago, they seemed like entire years to him. He didn't intend to return to his parents and he had given up hope on finding Frances again.

Less than a month later he would be with the circus in London. The vast capital would amaze and awe him. He would even be there among the crowd, on the 16th of December 1868, during the installation of a strange tall column in the middle of the road, between four lanes of horse-drawn traffic, at the junction of Great George Street and Bridge Street. The column would be painted green and boast on top of it a big globe of glass in the shape of a diamond. The semaphore, as they would call it, the first device of its kind in the world, would control traffic before Parliament Square with the wooden signs at its sides; stopping it for pedestrians to cross when its posts were turned at ninety degrees and allowing it to carry on when the signs were turned at forty-five degrees. At night, the gas lamp on top of it would turn green for 'go' and 'red' for stop, the same as in railway signals. Eli would be there on the 3rd of January 1869 too, a day before the troupe left the capital again, when the semaphore would explode due to a gas leak in the pavement underneath and burn off the face of the policeman operating it. It would be immediately uninstalled and only a whole sixty years later traffic lights would appear again in the world, in the US this time.

But before all that even took place, Eli would be there in December during the semaphore's installation. And he wouldn't know that Frances happened to be across the street from where he stood with other boys of the circus, only she would be in a fast-running carriage and unable to get a view of the strange machine dictating people's paths with its simple movements.

Chapter Two: Frances

Later in life, she would often remember that first journey and what it had meant, although at the time she couldn't have predicted its aftermath. However, even then part of her had sensed that things were changing and that after a certain point they were beyond any means of repair. She just didn't suspect how much her world would be affected.

The first hint she had had, accompanied by that sense of foreboding, was when her father had instructed her to say she was ill the following day. Frances hadn't guessed why such a ruse was necessary but she suspected it wasn't for good. She had, in fact, fallen asleep after her mother left that morning. Then, the waking. She had opened her eyes to the image of her father standing grim over her bed, a ghost in the dim light. He had motioned her with his eyes to get up, gather her things and follow him outside. She had obeyed. The others weren't there, the house silent.

The second hint that something irreversible was about to take place was what he told her next. It was more *how* he had said it rather than the announcement itself. Jon Weathers was pulling on his boots at the front porch of their house when Frances opened the door and came out into the cold. It wasn't morning yet. His voice had sounded unnaturally calm and steady, as if he was repeating a statement he had gone over many times in his head already, a conviction. He had told her she would be accompanying a woman to London, where she would be living with her from now on.

At the time she hadn't understood, not properly at least, that she was being sent away from home for good. She knew she had offended her father with her action, but in her young naivety she thought, perhaps, that this relocation, whatever it was, would be only temporary. A means of punishment, staying with someone that was supposed to teach her manners, correct her in some ways and then return her to her family. Or maybe the shock of being sent away was too strong for her to accept it at once.

In hindsight, this would be the only grievance Frances Weathers would hold against her father: the fact that he had not allowed for her to say goodbye. Not that he had sent her away – after all it was his house, his family; he chose who left and who stayed– but that he had done so in secret.

She would remember then the long walk to Birmingham and relive every moment of it, many times over. Her father, unspeaking, a few paces ahead of her and her younger self walking

behind, trying to catch up. Although the fantasy of it wouldn't help, in her memory she would often try to change the course of things, make them happen in a different way. She forced the younger version of herself to turn around and run back home. But somehow this trick never worked, even in her mind. When she ran back, the home was empty, her father reappeared and forced her to follow him again. It was as though it could not have happened otherwise. And she would have never disobeyed anything he said, back then. So even in remembering the past, everything remained unchanged for her and she walked on and on in the chill of morning behind a silent father whose face she couldn't clearly see.

Jon Weathers didn't know the stranger they were travelling to meet, that woman. He had only heard of her before and knew of another case, another family that had used her services in the past. She had passed by Hallow a few years ago and someone in the village knew how to contact her. Frances had figured this out later, when she pieced the story together and explained in her mind her father's disappearance that terrible evening after he had questioned her. She had deduced it was since then that Jon Weathers had made up his mind, weeks before the actual meeting. But on the specific day she had just understood that her father had arranged to meet this woman and leave Frances with her, nothing further. And she had done as she was told.

The sun had come out strong and a powerful light illuminated everything it touched by the time they arrived in Birmingham, where the woman would be waiting for them. Or perhaps Frances remembered the day brighter than it had been in reality; she realized she often coated the days of her childhood in more light than there could have been, as though before leaving home all her days had been brighter. Nevertheless, up to then she had never been in a big town. Had never been in any town, in fact. Hallow counting as the biggest place she had seen until that morning, it was no wonder that Birmingham made such an impression to her as the day revealed the people's activities before them. She would have been even more impressed had she known she had just entered a town of three hundred thousand people and about thirty thousand homes, when Hallow numbered at the same time around thirty or so families at most.

The City of a Thousand Trades or the Workshop of the World, as Birmingham was called, seemed to well deserve its name. Never before had Frances encountered such busy activity, such a multitude of people gathered in one place, all so different between them and from her. Crossing the town to the inn where the woman was staying, they passed by slums and working class districts, wealthier neighbourhoods with gas lamps on the pavements outside houses, through big and smaller streets and markets, and Frances even got a view of the river Rea. There were many pumps and wells in the city, some of them private and others public,

while Frances also saw water carts from where the poor bought their water supply. Such an assortment of characters, old and young, was unprecedented to her and she watched, dumbfounded, all this life around her. People were up and down the streets everywhere. They stopped to look at the windows of shops or buy a newspaper from the boy that carried a handful of them and ran around shouting pieces of the news, competing with the vendors advertising their goods in praising manner and loud voice at the market. There were workers in dirty uniforms, maids carrying bags and bundles, children running about in groups, men sitting in coffee shops, couples strolling in the parks and beggars dressed in dreadful rags lying down on the ground. Frances had wished she had more than two eyes and had almost forgotten she was there to be handed over to a stranger.

Then they had called on the woman. Her room was at the top floor of the inn on the northern side of town and she had appeared entirely oblivious to the frozen mood between father and daughter. Frances's first thought was that this woman resembled a giant, colourful bird. She was so different from her mother and the women she knew from Hallow, dressed up in enormous skirts and beaming unashamedly all the time as she was.

The woman had first introduced herself as Mrs Swyft. She kept saying what a happy coincidence it was that her way brought her through town just when her services were most needed. Frances had taken a look at her father. He had seemed taken aback, perhaps not expecting the woman to be such a chattering character. Frances had made to say something but Jon Weathers had pointed at the window at the other end of the woman's large room and commanded her to go and sit there quietly, allowing him and Mrs Swyft to discuss.

Of course Frances could hear all they said but she supposed it made it easier for her father not to have her standing by his side during the exchange. So she had stood by the window and listened to Mrs Swyft explain about her work and what she did. Personally, she had said, she was something of a recruiter and her role involved a lot of travelling. She didn't mind it, because it was for a good cause. That good cause dictated that she travelled all around the country in search of families with daughters they wished to place in respectable situations. Now, that was a strange turn of phrase she had used there. Frances had understood what the woman meant even though the words themselves didn't say it. She travelled around looking for girls that had been *unrespectable*, and she was responsible for returning them to grace.

The woman worked for an institution, 'Swyft's House of Society Ladies' as she called it. Although it was her name too, it had been officially titled so after her older brother, a quite charitable and sympathetic man who had set up this establishment for the sake of helping others. She seemed to take a lot of pride in this and described Swyft's House as a place for

unfortunates, a haven where girls were offered a second opportunity in life. The woman had never overtly mentioned the reason for which these unfortunates had lost their first opportunity, but she had tilted her head slightly to Frances's direction while speaking.

When Jon Weathers seemed to fail to make a reply to this statement, Mrs Swyft had carried on talking. She had blathered on about what she did not being as much of a profession as a vocation, truly, or that was at any rate how she viewed it. She hadn't pressed to learn more about Frances's story and had simply accepted the one sentence Jon Weathers provided her with as a reason for imparting his daughter to her. She had filled in his silence with more words, comfortable and sympathetic. Almost kind, even.

At the time, none of it had seemed ominous to them. Only later, after having witnessed the horror and having become acquainted to it, would Frances be in a position to see all the little clues that might have given away the hoax. Later, she would look back and wonder at how naïve they had been, her father and herself, to trust that woman.

But Swyft hadn't come unprepared. If anything, she was a professional in what she did. She had lots of papers with her, papers bearing stamps and signatures that she placed on the desk before Jon Weathers to read. And he had looked at them, her papers, as though trying to figure out what they said, since he had never learned to read. Frances watched her father as he pretended to pore over those documents, while Swyft kept up a continuous flow of talking, her voice soothing and comfortable like soft music. And she made promises, fair promises that she accompanied young girls to London, where the establishment was housed, all the time. Girls from all over the country and she had made the journey a hundred times, nothing to worry about, the girl would be taken good care of. After she delivered girls to Swyft's House other women took over, engaging them as tambour workers or seamstresses or in other, similar genteel occupations. The name of Swyft's House, she had said, guaranteed that the girls both obtained some useful skills for life and acquired better prospects of a wedding.

She had carried on explaining, for nearly an hour and a half. Frances had stood at the window, watching the life of the town outside and occasionally turning to receive a smile from the woman. She had given Jon Weathers an address in London for correspondence, too. Then she had called Frances to her and asked her to sit on her knees. In front of her father, Mrs Swyft had brushed her hair and told her to forget all about that horrible 'accident', as she called it. She told her all about the many other girls she would meet, how many friends she would make and what a good time lay ahead for her at Swyft's House.

Frances had cried. She had suddenly realized with a very real feeling that her mother wasn't there and she was the only one she would rather see or have her hair brushed by. Mrs

Swyft had enveloped her in a brief hug among her skirts and, as Jon Weathers had lowered his eyes at his lap opposite them, she had filled the silence with her prettiest shaped words. Mistaking Frances's reason for crying, she had talked a lot about how unfortunate things happen all the time, more often than people would imagine. She, herself, knew. Accidents should pose no reason for one to live the rest of her life in misery, she had said. That was what she was there for and that was the mission that Swyft's House of Society Ladies stood for. They, father and daughter, had made the right choice in calling on her. Of course, Frances would miss her family but she should think of all the things she would learn and what a beautiful, skilled young lady she would be next time she would see them. She had a future lying ahead of her at Swyft's.

Frances would often think, in the future, that there had been one moment just before Jon Weathers left when he might have changed his mind. The full weight of separation hadn't dawned on her at the time, she was simply in shock. But for him it must have been different. As an adult, he must have felt more vividly the implications of that meeting. In her mind, the moment when her father looked at the cross he had signed instead of his name –which Mrs Swyft tactfully pretended not to notice– was elongated tenfold. She often imagined herself at that moment jumping from Swyft's lap and pleading with him to take back the signature, tear the papers, return home with her, rid her of the ominous future he had subscribed her to. In reality, it had only been a moment. Jon Weathers had handed the paperwork back to Swyft, stood up and after an awkward, brief greeting left the room.

This would also be Frances's last memory of her father. Specifically, the image of his back as he exited Swyft's room at that inn in Birmingham. The one last person she had trusted and who had walked out on her.

As soon as they were left alone, Swyft had changed. Swyft was not her real name but swift she was, for barely a couple of minutes had passed after Jon Weathers' departure when she called for her carriage. She had it ready beforehand, the driver awake and waiting, and they had set out for London immediately after she had closed her packed suitcase.

The peculiar thing about her was her solid grasp of authority. Even though her behaviour betrayed there was something wrong, she had maintained that unshaken attitude, expecting what she said to be accepted without question and her commands executed at once. Frances was unsure why she hadn't reacted at the time but she guesses a great deal of it was due to the woman's sheer force of character. The way she talked, moved, looked even, inspired domination. There was this underlying feeling that if Frances as much as voiced a doubt or made to escape, she would step in and govern her very thoughts away from doing so.

Her real name was Maudslay, she had said to Frances coolly. Madame Maudslay. That was how she should call her from now on and Frances had better watch out for her. This hadn't been a threat as much as a fact presented to her; Maudslay hadn't tried to scare her but just outright spoken her rules. She had asked Frances to sit opposite her on the carriage and herself she had taken to reading the bunch of papers resting at her side. Frances had simply obeyed.

Certainly there were things she could have said that would have terrified Frances at the time. But that never was her purpose and perhaps it would have undermined her authority. After all, even if Frances had tried to escape, for the thought had crossed her mind, she wouldn't have succeeded. There were two of them, Maudslay and the driver, and Frances knew that even if she rebelled against Maudslay's authority she was no match for either of them physically. And even supposing she had somehow managed to run away from them, where would she have gone and what would she have done? Her own father had signed this woman as her guardian.

These thoughts offered her some sort of comfort when she explored her past and wondered what could have happened differently. She blamed herself, her father, and of course the criminal Maudslay most of all, but the inevitability of things at least presented her with an acceptance for her past, if not the desired peace about it that she sought. If nothing could not have happened differently, this absolved her of some responsibility for everything that had followed.

Frances had spent most of that journey to London in silence, looking out of the window at the slowly changing landscape. From time to time she stole glances at the older woman sitting opposite her, legs crossed, eyes running over the papers she was reading. Her mind of course must have been in a blur but she couldn't remember the state of her feelings at the time. The cold acceptance that she would later gain about her life, accompanied by a sense of sin that never lifted, couldn't have been present then. She must have had little idea of what was actually taking place and just a notion that things were altering for the worse. When that latter sensation had become unbearable, together with the silence prevailing in the carriage, she had started sobbing. Frances couldn't relate to her younger self any more.

Maudslay had just looked up at her and said, 'You are going to get used to it.' A simple statement. She had stared at her until Frances had stopped crying. That declaration, neither compassionate nor threatening, had affected her. Then Maudslay had offered her a biscuit she had taken out of her bag. The gesture was so abrupt and so queer, given the entire lack of emotion on Maudslay's part, that Frances just took it. She was unsure what it meant. Was it a reward? The sweet and the pleasure from eating it –Frances hadn't tasted anything with such flavour before– had been in such contrast with the whole menacing atmosphere about the scene

that she couldn't make sense of the conflict. Maudslay had also seemed to notice something about Frances's complexion and said she wasn't very pale but, still, pretty. That last comment Frances didn't understand at the time either.

The rest of the journey was uneventful and at some point Frances had lay down on the seat and fallen asleep. The rocking of the carriage must have induced it. So it was that she saw almost nothing of London when they arrived. It was night when she felt the carriage had stopped moving and a hand shaking her awake. She had jumped, for a moment wondering wide-eyed where she was until she recognized Swyft before her. And then she remembered her real name was Maudslay.

If by that time she still nursed any illusions as to what Swyft's House was, the moment she beheld it they collapsed. Of course it wasn't called that nor did have a proper name other than 'the house'. It was an old building in the court just off Gray's Inn Lane. From outside it looked just as any other old, badly preserved and poor house. Once they had taken a step inside, however, Frances realized this was only a façade. The interior was much worse.

The environment itself forbid any room for delusion. Not for one moment did it allow Frances to fail to see what was truly going on there. Immediately upon entering there was noticeable a foul smell in the air that seemed to permeate everything, from the faded tapestries on the walls to the cracked floorboards to the few rickety furniture lying about. Voices could be heard from upstairs. In that first room by the entrance, a group of men sat around a table close to the door. They were drinking and some of them smoking. As soon as they walked in, their eyes scrutinized Frances. She couldn't understand what she read in their expressions. One of them whistled, some made comments under their breath she didn't hear and a couple of them appeared to be grinning. This infuriated Maudslay who commented on it. 'She's not for the likes of you', she said raising her stature over the sitting men. Some of them growled inaudible replies to her though none seemed keen on opposing Maudslay directly. This was strange in itself but it seemed she held a degree of power that placed her above these men.

Frances didn't know it at the time but this was only one of the numerous houses that the establishment, if it could be called that, used. The building off Gray's Inn Lane was one of the many that she would be forced to live in the following years. For that was what they did: they kept an address only for a certain amount of time. Then they changed houses, vanishing suddenly one day from one side of town and reappearing in another, becoming untraceable. This way their whereabouts couldn't be monitored regularly and the act of relocating protected them from maintaining any tangible bond with the families. That is, they continued writing to them, for years after they had assumed guardianship of their daughters. They sent letters every

few months, giving the parents news about their daughters and detailing how well they fared in their new tasks, how well they progressed in the activities taught to them, that they were acquiring new skills, that they were healthy and content. It was fiction, of course. At some point when they sensed it was safe to do so, they wrote to the families saying that their daughters had left the employ of the institution. They provided a reason such as that they had ran away or gotten married to a respectable man, and stopped forwarding the money the girls supposedly earned from genteel work. By the time anyone travelled to London to look for their child –if they did– or visit her at the new address where she was supposed to have set up home, the entire establishment was gone. Different house, different area, different temporary name. In Golden Lane, at the Haymarket, at Waterloo Place, Piccadilly Circus. All over the capital. And of course it had to be the capital, since it provided not only the necessary cover for their activities but also the clientele supporting them.

The strangeness of the whole business was that they didn't take extreme care to keep up pretences, at least locally. It all just happened, out in the light of day and often before the eyes of passers-by. But those who chose to see, saw, and those who didn't, didn't. Of course, 'the bullies' were always present, as they called the men who were employed for the protection they offered. Frances soon learned there were always some of them nearby, usually six or seven, and that they watched over her and the other children. Their role was clearly double; to make sure no harm came to the girls or boys and at the same time to prevent them from escaping.

On that first night at the establishment, Frances was left by Maudslay on the upper floor of the building off Gray's Inn Lane. The woman told her she would be back for her first thing in the morning before pushing her into a small room. There, all sorts of wicked activities were going on. The single piece of furniture was a bed. On it lay packed over a dozen boys and girls, both younger and older than her. The bed, as well as the room in general, was filthy, it smelled and was full of vermin. Soon she saw that all that could take place in words and acts between boys and girls did happen. She was shocked by the precocity of these children and by the fact they did not mind that what they did was done in the midst of others.

Back at Hallow, her family always slept with clothes on and in different beds. Here, some of the children slept without clothes and they didn't seem bothered to walk around the room that way too. There was that heavy human smell in the air which Frances didn't know then what it was but which she would later associate with the establishment, herself and the sexual act. When she first saw these children she was afraid, but she also realized how wicked they were and she felt ashamed for them. Both those feelings would soon be immaterial to her.

In the day and at night most days of the week, they were led away and did what others wanted them to do. In houses nearby or further out of the capital, in private rooms, on the street sometimes. There were rich clients and there were poor clients. Some of them gentle, others drunks. Swyft's made no discriminations, as long as the clients could afford them and didn't damage the children. The bullies watched closely at any rate. At night, the children's psychology reverted. At least when they were locked in due to patrols and didn't have to work. At those times, everything inside them that was oppressed seemed to turn the other way around. And what in the day was done to them, at night they did to others between them.

In the space of a few months, Frances would know men of all ages, though not of all classes, not immediately. As she had been judged pretty and relatively untouched, Maudslay would at first keep her for those of her customers who could afford to pay a higher price. She was lucky in that respect –if something like this can be considered remotely luck– that she had to accompany one, two or at most three men in one day. Other had it worse than her. Maudslay used to send a circular to those who visited the establishment by twopenny post, advertising the new girls and boys she had acquired. This was quite the regular newsletter, seeing as children being taken over by Swyft's kept coming, some from the countryside and others from foreign countries, from France, Italy and elsewhere. The boys were fewer and were brought in from other sources. There was a different façade for that trade, since these would never be willingly sent away from their families to be placed in respectable situations.

A circular was sent round for Frances too when she first arrived at the establishment. She would find out about it only later, witnessing its results before figuring out how the business worked. And by the time she had the opportunity to try and escape for the first time, an entire three months later, she would be a different person. Change would be a constant factor in her life and personality throughout the years that followed, if that sort of psychological undoing counts as change. Because that was the immediate and the long-lasting effect the establishment had on its children, making them rougher, colder and –those that survived– more desperate.

The first and in many regards worst change for her, however, would take place on her first night at Swyft's. Before she learned to tolerate invasion, her first and most feared oppressors turned out to be those who had been victimized too. Whether Madame Maudslay had planned for this to happen, by not surrendering her to the bullies guarding the building downstairs but to the other children, was not clear. She was only one of the many gears of the machine that ran the establishment. On the other hand, she must have known the children's character but perhaps she calculated the damage they would inflict would be relatively smaller.

It wasn't kindness at any rate, since she hadn't judged Frances pretty enough to be kept for only a minor selection of customers. And surrendering her to the perversity of those without power, to exert any power they had, whenever they could, had the most humiliating effect and was in many ways crueller.

Frances would always fail, in the future, to extract from her memory her introduction to Swyft's and the world that enveloped her since then. Not even drinking, which she would discover almost immediately in her new environment, would have that effect although it did make life more tolerable. In the space of a few hours she had been transported from her family home where she had spent all of her fifteen years into what for all matters and purposes closely resembled an asylum, inhabited by unbalanced creatures that themselves verged on madness due to the madness inflicted on them by others. She didn't know what she had done to deserve inclusion there but even the knowledge that this repercussion wasn't fair to any action of hers that had led to it made little difference.

There was a tradition for newcomers at Swyft's. It was led by the boys mostly, some older, others younger, but the girls joined in too. Before then, Frances –or any mind sane as hers was at the time– would have never been able to imagine the things children are capable of doing. However, human savagery can be taught or imposed, and after cruelty was imparted to her repeatedly that night, she grew accustomed to it and the boundaries between sanity and madness were blurred in her perception thereafter.

Chapter Three: Isa

The man's shoes echoed like hooves on the street. Their heels were made of hard wood and clacked as he walked. People turned to look and upon glancing at the stranger most of them stepped out of his way. Something about his appearance made them instinctively assume he was someone important or, more likely, the representative of somebody important.

It wasn't just the man's perfectly groomed hair or the dark, double-tailed vest he had donned over his shirt and bowtie. There was a golden watch chain visible on his pocket and his long trousers were impeccably clean, a feat for someone walking around London and that specific area for longer than a couple of minutes. Obviously this fellow had arrived here on coach which meant he was moneyed. This didn't constitute such a rare encounter after all, but some element of his demeanour commanded authority, his rigid posture perhaps or the formal air of his movements.

At the corner of George Street and Seymour Place he stopped. A couple of laundresses that were bringing in the morning's linen halted their work and set down the basket they were carrying to get a better look at the man. He paid them no attention. Observing his surroundings he seemed to decide on his direction and carried on, sidestepping the washerwomen. A minute later he turned left into Montagu Square.

Here he appeared even more out of place next to the crummy, shabby houses and the obvious poverty of the street's dwellers. Nevertheless, he seemed oblivious to the fact he attracted more curious looks than anybody else in the alley and he failed to be alarmed by the threatening stares a group of suspicious-looking men directed at him from a doorstep as he passed by them. Almost at the end of the road, before the second to last house, he stopped again, this time without hesitation.

If the other houses on the street gave the impression they were ready to fall apart, this one was a particular marvel how it remained standing. A squat old building, it would have appeared uninhabited save for the wet clothes hanging outside some of its gaping windows. Other window holes on it had been shut with rotting timbers and the door hung in place by a single rusty piece of iron-band which shrilled when the man reached and opened.

The corridor he entered was dark and seemed to lead to a dozen rooms on either side, most of them without doors. A mixture of voices reached out from them. On the frame of the room closest to him, a woman was resting with her arms folded. She had a vaguely vagrant

appearance; her complexion was pale and her clothes tattered and dirty. She kept her arms crossed, squinting her eyes at the light that entered with the man.

Apart from flaring his nostrils once at the foul smell in the interior, the man didn't move. He stared at the woman. An infant was heard somewhere. Then, someone shouting. When she didn't say anything but kept looking at him, scrutinizing his expensive clothing, the man opened his mouth:

'Mr Malton,' he said.

He had judged she was a sort of gatekeeper and he didn't feel the need to cause trouble by bypassing her. Not if it could be avoided.

'Who?' the woman snapped. 'What's your business?'

The man didn't answer but his eyes seemed to narrow imperceptibly.

'I don't know of any Malton's here,' the woman said again.

The man took a strange step closer to her. She uncrossed her arms.

'Who asks?' a voice came from another doorstep.

The woman that approached now from the shadows had long, straggly grey hair and a swollen face. She was smoking; her lips paled when she dragged. She stood tall but her body was fat and disproportioned and her dress filthy. Something hinted that perhaps she hadn't always been this way. Her eyes sparkled a clear, bright blue as she fixed them intently on the stranger.

The man examined her and allowed a hint of a smile to disfigure temporarily his lips.

'Am I addressing Mrs Marjory Malton?' he said.

'Margery,' she corrected him. 'What can I do for you?'

Her look was plainly suggestive but if the man had been offended by her gesture, he didn't let it show.

'Is your husband home?' he said.

The woman eyed him in a different way now.

'Who are you?' she said.

The man's lips twitched further up.

'This... is not in my convenience to reveal,' he made a reply. 'I'm here as a representative, seeking to discuss a business proposal which might be of interest to you and your husband.'

'Yes?' said Margery Malton.

But the man didn't continue. He only turned his head to the direction of the other woman, who cursed under her breath, and then back to Mrs Malton. He made it clear he demanded privacy or there was no game.

Margery Malton regarded him for a moment longer, noticing the velvet linings of his vest and its ivory buttons. Then, with a gesture that might have indicated resignation or might have been a motion to the stranger to follow her, she shrugged and started walking down the corridor. He promptly went after her, not sparing another look at the first woman who spat behind his back and remained at her position by the entrance.

At the end of the corridor, Margery Malton stepped on her cigarette and led the man into a small room. While he observed the faded and at places torn upholstery on the walls, she crossed through the litter on the floor and prodded the man that lay asleep on the bed.

'Get up. Someone's here.'

The man turned around with a groan and sat up on the filthy mattress.

'Who's he. What's he want,' he said. He was small and looked sickly, with a square jaw, protruding ears and a large mouth. He scratched his stained beard as he focused his eyes on the stranger.

'Mr Malton,' he said.

The man ignored this and reached for the half-empty bottle that lay on the floor by the bed. The stranger continued as though this had been a natural reaction to his greeting.

'I'm afraid I'm not entitled to reveal either my identity or that of the person whom I represent in this circumstance, however I am here to propose-'

'What. What's he saying,' Malton turned to his wife in an ominous temper. Despite being several heads shorter than the stranger, he appeared annoyed at his presence and seemed negatively dispositioned against him.

The man continued undismayed by this show of hostility:

'My employer, who wishes to remain anonymous, has assigned me with the task of inquiring after one of your children.'

When this odd turn of phrase was met only with the couple's silence, he went on.

'A boy, in particular,' he said. 'About ten years of age and-'

'Isa,' Malton said, suddenly enraged. 'What's that little fart done again.' He drank from his bottle and the stench of heavy rum filled the room when he spoke to his wife: 'If he's got himself into trouble again, I'll break his bones-'

'Sir,' Margery Malton interrupted her husband, addressing the stranger. 'Are you sure it is our boy you're talking about?'

‘Positive,’ the man said. ‘My employer was taking a stroll near Hyde Park a few days ago when this boy-‘

‘Now, wait a moment here,’ Margery Malton said quickly. ‘Our son has been accused as a thief before but this is a terrible misunderstanding as-‘

‘It’s not about that,’ the stranger cut her short, momentarily losing his temper. He hadn’t raised his voice but his tone had become impatient and, unexpectedly, menacing.

‘My employer, as I was saying, was in Hyde Park when your boy happened to engage his sudden interest. Now. Given that there is a vacancy for a presentable, young member of staff in his household, and as my employer seems certain that your boy would fit the position perfectly, I was sent here to discuss with the child’s family on his behalf. I’m ready to negotiate with you the terms of his potential employment.’

‘Bollocks. The boy’s good for nothing,’ Malton said, taking another swig from his bottle.

‘On the contrary,’ Margery Malton intervened, a new gleam in her eyes. ‘Sir, don’t let yourself be put off by my husband’s temper. He has a strange humour to show his affection for Isa. May I ask what exactly does your master need our boy for?’

‘My employer needs a young personal valet, as it so happens,’ the stranger said. ‘It has to be someone young so that they can receive training before developing flaws in their manners and they have to be of a certain presentable quality. I’m sure you understand. It’s a generally light and entertaining occupation that the boy is intended to fill. Of course, my employer, who is the owner of a rather large personal fortune, will ensure that no comfort will be in shortage to the boy, should he fulfil the role’s duties in a satisfactory way.’

‘Our boy –all our children, but Isa most of all– is a great child and a very hard worker, I must tell you. He is sure to go far in anything he undertakes to do,’ Mrs Malton said. ‘But tell us, please, how many days in a week will your master need him for?’

‘My employer, Mrs Malton,’ the man corrected her. She bowed her head slightly, grinning.

‘I believe I haven’t made the terms clear on this occasion,’ the man went on with a new, stern look. ‘The nature of the position is permanent.’

‘What does that mean?’ groaned Malton from the bed, eyeing the stranger curiously.

‘Let us get this straight, sir,’ Margery Malton blurted. ‘Are you asking us to sell you our son?’ She let out a dramatic gasp and rested her hand on the wall as if for support.

The stranger seemed unabashed by her theatrical ways and, if anything, appeared even more impatient.

‘I wouldn’t adopt this exact term, Mrs Malton,’ he said. ‘My employer entertains a very busy schedule as it happens and it would be impractical for his valet not to be available at all times. As you understand, it would be reasonable that the boy lived in the premises. Of course,’ he added, observing a new gasp from Margery Malton, ‘you might feel you are being deprived of your child but concentrate instead on the marvellous prospects opening up for your son. My employer is a powerful patron.’ This little speech of the stranger seemed to have momentarily a numbing effect on the Maltons. But when Margery Malton spoke again, there was a peculiar flash in her eye.

‘Your words, sir, are very touching. But the value of a child –and a son, come to that!– only a mother may know.’

The man seemed ready to interrupt another show coming from her, but Mrs Malton didn’t let him.

‘Naturally, we are very happy that our little Isa is valued so much. But were we to lose him, we would miss him terribly and I say that not only in an emotional sense.’

At this, the stranger raised his eyebrow.

‘As you can see with your very own eyes, we have not been in luck of late. Myself I cannot seem to find employment under the current climate and my husband here is out of work due to a terrible illness-‘

‘Ay, a terrible illness,’ confirmed Malton, catching up to the game his wife was playing and bringing the bottle to his mouth.

‘...that forces him to stay at home. We manage to get by but with great difficulty,’ Mrs Malton said. She gestured around at the worm-eaten furniture and a few filthy garments in the room.

‘We are not proud of it but this is thanks to the help of our children, our three girls and Isa himself.’

Already knowing where the conversation was heading and irritated lest it continued indefinitely, the stranger stepped in at the moment when Mrs Malton paused, bringing her hand up to wipe her perfectly dry eye.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I can see how unfortunate your situation is. Naturally sympathetic as he is, my employer would like to endorse you with a certain sum as compensation for your loss.’

At this, Mrs Malton’s breath became noticeably faster.

‘How very generous of him,’ she said. ‘Could I ask what might this sum be?’

‘I am entitled to deliver to you the sum of £7 as soon as I have recognized the boy and agreement has been made for him to follow me,’ said the man.

The Maltons were now regarding the stranger with their eyes wide.

‘And what if we say no,’ Mr Malton said. Then he turned to his wife: ‘I say we could get more for the boy.’

‘Believe me when I say so, Mr Malton,’ the stranger answered, facing the husband fully for the first time, ‘that if my employer didn’t count on your cooperation, it wouldn’t have been me visiting you today.’

At this, Malton turned abruptly towards the window as if expecting to see someone there.

‘What? Are you threatening me!’

‘Of course not. My employer believes in fair agreements and claims that you should be rewarded for allowing your child to enter his service.’

And without further ado the man inserted his hand into his vest, removed a plain leather pouch and counting seven coins he placed them on the empty table beside him.

‘May I see the boy now?’ he said.

Had he placed upon the table the seven bright stars of the Big Dipper constellation, hardly would they have competed with the attraction the dull coins imposed on the Maltons. The couple seemed unable to tear their eyes away from them. When they succeeded in doing so, still stealing glances at the table as though afraid the money might disappear if one of them lost them from sight, husband and wife exchange a look and a silent agreement passed between them. For a moment their faces, the gaunt and the overblown, gloated with ugly excitement and then the man’s averted to the door.

‘Isa!’ he shouted.

When there came no reply, his wife move towards the door and stayed there wearing a worried expression. Sending an anxious look to the stranger and the coins she left the room and was heard calling the boy’s name too.

‘It’s from Isambard, my name,’ Mr Malton said proudly and finished the rum in the bottle.

A few moments later steps were heard again and Mrs Malton reappeared, this time holding from the shoulder a young boy whom she directed first into the room. As he came in, the space seemed to be transfigured. If there was indeed a Creator of all things, He had been unfair in distributing the gift of beauty to his creatures, blessing some with a certain handsomeness while others shaping them unbalanced – but with this boy alone He had wronged

them all put together, for what this child's appearance possessed was impossible to justify but in terms of the divine being partial. His features demonstrated such perfect symmetry that the eye couldn't sate its desire to see no matter how long it strayed upon him. His hair was black and tangled and reached down to his shoulders and behind them gleamed his eyes in a blue not like his mother's, but darker and fiercer, like the sky before nightfall. His skin was light gold and upon his lips played an expression mysterious, some strange quiet innocence. Looking at them, one started to fear lest they opened and never again fell into the same perfect of positions. As for the filth that covered him and his ragged clothes, if possible it added to his favour, like an unnecessary imperfection that makes a work of art perfect.

Even the stranger's breath was caught for a moment at the boy's appearance though he tried not to show it. He must have recognized him, for he finally removed his hand from the corner of the table where it lay beside the coins and brought it forth to greet the boy.

'Good day to you, young Mr Malton,' he said.

The boy shook his hand, flinching slightly at touching the glove. His eyes darted to his mother.

'Now, Isa,' Margery Malton said walking into the room. 'This gentleman here is looking up to you to work for his employer.'

Isa regarded the stranger with renewed interest.

'What sort of work, sir?'

'You don't ask questions!' Isambard Malton exploded. He sent empty the bottle crashing on the wall. 'You will do as you're told!' His face had gone red.

'Listen to your father,' Margery Malton added. 'You will go with this gentleman and he will explain all. You will stay in a big house and train to become a valet.'

'Yes, mother.'

'Shall we go then?'

The stranger gently set his hand on Isa's shoulder and taking a last look at the Maltons guided him forth and out of the room. The couple's attention was already diverted to the table and before the steps of Isa and the man had faded they could be heard rushing across the room, their voices excited.

The stranger and Isa left the street and after a few minutes of walking they stopped before a four-wheeler with two crosses that was waiting on the main road. It either belonged to the stranger or it was prearranged to meet him there, for the coachman greeted them with a nod as they approached, climbed swiftly down his seat and opened the door to the carriage for them. The stranger helped Isa inside.

The journey lasted less than an hour. Isa, who had never been in a carriage before, felt a sudden nausea surging in his stomach at every turning. The world outside moved incredibly fast and it looked different even though they passed by places he knew all his life; everything seemed foreign if you looked at it from above. At first, the stranger was occupied reading his newspaper but soon Isa found the courage to bother him with his questions about his new occupation. The man responded briefly to each of them and his answers seemed satisfactory but for a vague sense of something being amiss that Isa couldn't put his hand into. He then made an effort to guess where they were heading but as they reached parts of London he hadn't been in before he soon lost his sense of orientation and had no idea what to expect at the end of their journey.

*

An enormous house such as he had never seen before rose in the middle of the equally vast gardens where the four-wheeler stopped. A high, stone wall perimeter surrounded it. On one end, from where they had entered, heavy wrought-iron gates separated the estate from the outside world. On the other end stood an impressive country house. Its façade was covered in ivy and from its enormous windows divided in smaller ones with cross frames stared out. The house's crenellated walls made it resemble a castle, as did the tower stretching above the roof on its right far side. As the carriage departed towards another building near the back which must have been the stables, the man put his hand on Isa's shoulder again and guided him towards the building.

Climbing the marble porch, they crossed through a series of different rooms the vastness, elegance and rich decoration of which Isa witnessed in complete awe. This was not a house but a small palace. Instinctively he knew he didn't belong there. What would somebody so rich need of a street urchin like himself? It didn't make sense.

The stranger guided him through the central hall. Its ceiling was covered by a ridge and furrow glass roof that allowed a view of the sky. All around it, encircling the vast space, an internal balcony overlooked the hall. Crests and coats of arms were carved over its arches. Then Isa and the man went down a passageway, past window of stained glass and benches of oak panelling. On the walls, oil paintings hung in golden frames. Occasionally they encountered members of the household's staff rushing quietly on their errands but they didn't stop to talk to anyone. The man's station seemed to be different or above those they met; they

acknowledged his presence with a nod of the head or a curtsy, while he didn't make any gesture in return.

The first stop where the stranger directed Isa was a bath. He asked him to go in and clean himself while he waited behind the door. Isa walked into the strange room almost scared that he was allowed to enter such a place. At home, of course, they never had a lavatory, just as everybody else in the neighbourhood. They all used the earth closet at the back yard of the building, in the privy. They sat on the wooden chair with the hole in the seat and, after they were done, they removed the bucket under it and emptied its contents at the tank behind the pail closet. Here Isa couldn't see a bucket. Also, the lack of any smell was peculiar and he wondered whether the man was playing a prank on him. The toilet pan was made of porcelain; it had flowers and leaves drawn on it while at its bottom sat clean water. As Isa stood there unsure what to do, he noticed a weird lever poking out from the toilet's back. Without thinking, he pulled it down. The sudden noise and the water coming down inside the pan made him jump and at first he was terrified he had broken the lavatory. Then, relieved, he understood how it worked. Would that be among his privileges as a valet working in this house? But how would his street skills be useful to anyone here? The bath, too, was already filled with hot water – another unexpected luxury. Stranger yet, this water seemed clean as well. Back at the Malton's house, Isa was usually the last to use the bathing water once every two weeks when they filled the tub, and by then it was never clean. Perhaps he was just lucky now and happened to be the first of the household staff that the tub was intended for; he couldn't imagine anyone wasting water that had been used just once.

When he was done cleaning himself, he felt a different person. He spent some time observing his reflection in the mirror on the wall until the man's voice from outside asked what was taking him so long. When he came out, the stranger handed him a package of new clothes that he had procured in the meantime. Isa looked at it for a moment, uncomprehending. Then he re-entered the room to change into it. He was almost afraid putting on these garments and he made sure to slow down his movements not to damage them. Such clothes he had only rarely seen the children of wealthy families wearing, and he had never expected to find himself dressed in them. When he looked at his reflection again, he found it hard to recognize the person staring back at him.

The man outside seemed impressed by the apparent change too, when Isa emerged, although he didn't comment on it, just his eyes widened in surprise. The new apparel suited him perfectly and was strangely even more comfortable than his old rags which by then had taken on the shape of his body.

Once more, Isa fell behind the man as they made their way through the enormous house. As they were climbing a spiralling staircase to yet another upper floor, he looked out the windows. They were in the countryside, fields stretching out all around the estate. Their trip this time ended in what was apparently a dining room. In its middle stood a long table of dark, polished wood which could have easily accommodated the needs of forty people. At the moment, however, the place was empty but for them and a footman who silently started laying out dishes on a sideboard next to the table upon seeing them. The man sat, gestured Isa to occupy a seat beside him, and the other man began serving them until the surface of the table before Isa was so heavily laden that he couldn't touch it between dishes if he tried. The footman then bowed to them and resumed his position in a corner of the dining room.

The stranger that had brought Isa here seemed to have very little appetite for eating. After nibbling on a couple of dishes he retrieved a cigar from his pocket, lit it, and comfortably arranged in his seat regarded Isa as he went through the various meals before him. He seemed amused by the boy's excitement. Isa himself was somewhat bewildered by the selection of edibles and most of them he didn't even recognize. Of those that he could name or guess what they were, there was a variety of cheeses, eggs, cold cuts of meat he hadn't tasted before, potatoes with butters, honey, bread and even wine that the footman had poured generously into two crystal glasses. As he ate, Isa observed the heavy curtains on the windows, the carved fireplace, the thick rugs covering the floor, the ornate ceiling, and in the end he couldn't restrain himself but ask:

'Sir, what am I to do here?'

He suspected that whatever his new duties entailed he would fail terribly. There was no chance he could ever be useful in such a place and he wondered how long it would take his employer to realize as much and kick him out the door.

The man brought forth a new glass and poured himself a second fill of wine before answering.

'All in good time, young Mr Malton,' he said. 'I was just commissioned to bring you here but you will have to discuss your occupation with your employer.'

'Who is he, sir?' said Isa, sensing at the same time that it was a mistake to press on the matter. Perhaps these sort of questions were rude among these people.

'His name is Mr Klyber,' the man said to Isa's surprise, 'but other than that you should let him tell about himself in person.'

That was a curious statement but Isa read nevertheless the man's lack of interest in conversation and decided not to bother him further. They exchanged no further words until Isa

had finished eating. Then the footman gathered the dishes before them and served them tea. They seemed to be waiting for something, perhaps to be called by Mr Klyber himself, but the stranger made no effort of explaining anything to Isa. After half an hour had passed in silence, however, the man appeared to make up his mind. He approached the footman, exchanged a few words with him, and returned to the table.

‘It seems Mr Klyber is out at the moment,’ he said to the boy, ‘and I must return to my other tasks. I think I shall take you to your apartment where Mr Klyber can call on you when he returns.’

‘Of course, sir,’ Isa said, unsure whether the man was asking for his opinion and standing up to show his eagerness.

Their third trip through the estate led them to a room at the west side where the man left Isa, instructing him to wait there for his employer. If Isa had been expecting poor dwellings, he had been mistaken. It was a bedroom richly decorated as the rest of the house, its walls painted in bright colours depicting scenes of nature. The furniture in it too was old and expensive. Despite the comfort it promised, the room seemed in some way emptier than others to Isa. There was a bed, a desk, a set of drawers and a couple of armchairs. Perhaps it was one of the secondary bedrooms in the estate, serving the purpose of a guest room.

While Isa was still exploring the space, the man closed the door behind him and locked it. His footsteps were heard leaving. Suddenly, all was quiet and still. Why had the man locked the door? Isa was worried, perhaps by instinct, and tried to find an explanation for that strange final act. Perhaps the man didn’t want him wandering around the estate on his own or he didn’t trust him not to run away. After all, if he had been commissioned to bring Isa here, he wouldn’t want the boy making empty of his promise to their employer for whatever reason. Yes, that must be it. The stranger had seemed clever street-wise and was just ensuring he delivered his service. Despite his different appearance, Isa was for all means and purposes a street urchin; he guessed people would need some time before he had proved them they could genuinely trust him.

But again he couldn’t help feeling trapped somehow. He tried the door handle and with a quick look around the room he knew he could open it. He could fashion a simple tool from the iron cord on the curtains’ rail. But that would be a hostile action and certainly bear repercussions, so he decided not to do anything of the sort and prove to his new employer, whoever that Mr Klyber was, that he could be trusted. After all, he had been given new clothes and had been fed. Food and clothes meant safety, and Isa who had had plenty of dealings with police officers and had been imprisoned overnight twice in an actual jail knew that no captor

provided their victims with comfort. No, if you had done wrong and were arrested, you were put in a cold cell and the bread was stale. This couldn't be entrapment.

So he lay on the vast bed wondering when his employer might call on him and what his new job may be. The rain that started pattering on the window was lulling him. The food and the wine took their toll too and soon he was asleep.

*

It was several hours before a second carriage entered the country house's courtyard but the sound of its wheels wasn't loud enough to reach and wake Isa on the second floor. The man that came out of it was waited by a small number of servants the moment he set foot inside the estate but he waved them all away but one, the footman who had news about the boy. They discussed at the central hall and then the owner of the house dismissed his footman too.

Outside the room where Isa was, he hesitated enough to remove a small phial from his vest and pour a few drops from it on his handkerchief. Next, he removed his clothes until he remained naked and they lay on a pile beside his feet. He reached for the key which had remained on the door for the last couple of hours, turned it and entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door behind him.

There was a brief silence. Isa's voice rose then, crying out startled:

'There's a man in the room! Who are you? What are you about to do?'

*

At the age of ten, Isa Malton had known some of the wealthiest members of London society as well as foreigners from the Continent in such a way that nobody by their own free will would have chosen to meet. Wealth was the common denominator of his visitors; the reason for it were his own looks that made him expensive to afford. Other than that, they varied in demeanour, age and everything else. Sometimes sober, other times with ill intentions, the frequency of their visits increased with time and occasionally they joined in in twos or threes. For if Mr Klyber had kept Isa during the early weeks at his exclusive company, soon whatever fondness he had nursed for the boy became habitual and was then lost entirely, partly due to the child's recalcitrant behaviour. Despite repetition, Isa would put up a fight every time. So the potential of profit didn't take long to rise in Mr Klyber's thoughts.

The first times when Isa understood he was going to be shared with others as well, terrified he posed an even more desperate resistance than before. Despite the fact that his efforts seemed to offer the men an additional amusement, he couldn't help it. It was in his nature to resist their advances, regardless that his helplessness kindled their fantasies even further as they devise a plethora of means to constrain him. They were strictly not allowed to harm him in any visible way, which made things more difficult. And he seemed unable to learn to abandon himself when he was with them, so more often than not his feelings of panic and intense agony didn't diminish during their visits but accompanied him throughout the ordeal. If he was lucky, he worked himself up to such anxiety that he passed out.

After the dreaded first afternoon when his parents had sold him –for he had soon interpreted the meaning of the money on the Maltons' table– the world for him turned not just upside down but also shrank to the confines of a single terrible room. For entire months after his entrapment he hadn't been out of his cell at Klyber's. Despite the room being fancy and well decorated, there was no doubt as it was – an expensive prison was still a prison. And when he did leave it, it was to be transported temporarily to new ones. A couple of Mr Klyber's 'friends' were affluent enough to request that Isa was brought to them instead of running the risk of visiting him themselves.

On the very first instance that he was hired to a gentleman in central London, he attempted to break the window with his fists and jump from the moving carriage. At the time, he had assumed they were done with him and were taking him somewhere to murder and get rid of him. But he didn't escape the grip of Klyber's chaperone who had been given the duty of administering him throughout the visit. Since then, a hand cuffing device was employed during future visits. It tied his wrist to the chaperone's with a discreet but strong chain. The chaperone used the key only after they entered and before leaving the customer's house each time. Once inside, there were no chances of flight.

Nevertheless, one time he did escape, but briefly. He had been taken to a certain Mr Marmaysee, who was a barrister. Isa knew as much since the visit took place at the latter's offices, in a neighbourhood that Isa recognized; he had passed by there several times in the past. On the specific day, the man was drunk beyond his wits. Once exhausted, he fell asleep or more likely lost his senses, and he didn't feel the boy slithering away from underneath him.

Isa took care not to produce any noise and he was wise enough not to try the door. The chaperone always waited outside. Instead, he made for the window, his knees shaking. He was bleeding. As they were on the ground floor, he hoped he might be able to make it to the street before either the man or his captor got wind of it.

Lifting the wooden casing over his head, he placed his legs outside. But before he had managed to put both feet solid on the ground, his hands gave way and the window escaped his grip. He succeeded in grabbing it before it hit the ledge but the damage was done. Its scraping noise against the wall didn't go unnoticed. The man inside woke with a startle and looked around. At the same time, the chaperone opened the door and rushed in.

He dropped and started running. His heart beating fast, he dashed between pedestrians and carriages on the street without looking back. The day was a blur and everywhere he looked strange faces stared back at him in shock. He turned left at the first side street he met. The thought crossed his mind to find a spot, at the corner behind the fishmonger's bench or behind a house's garden wall, and hide. But it wouldn't be of use. Everywhere he passed, people stopped and stared as he was stark naked. He carried on running, turned right at the next cross and continued until his lungs were burning. When he couldn't go on any longer he stopped, having no idea where he was. People all around drew away from him. Some laughed. Klyber's chaperone appeared a moment later on the other side of the street, running towards him. He wasn't followed by the barrister, apparently. From the other end of the street, a police officer showed up.

Isa looked around and immediately he spotted what he was searching for. He picked up the stone and aimed. The glass window of the bookstore before him came crashing down, shards scattering everywhere. People cried out, startle. He saw the chaperone slowing down and the police officer quickening his step, shouting at him as he approached in great strides. The bookseller came out of his store too, threatening him. Isa picked up a second stone and letting a scream rise in his throat tossed it, breaking the adjacent tailor's window too.

As he intended, he was caught and the chaperone, after a moment of hesitation, stopped running and blended in with the crowd. Isa was jailed for two weeks. This imprisonment was a temporary escape, though only marginally better from his earlier confinement. Isa hadn't counted on the officer's help; he knew that had he approached him and told him he was being chased after, his word would weigh nothing against that of Klyber's chaperone. And due to his condition and the crime he had committed, the constable had no other choice but to escort him to jail. Isa had just been relieved that his pursuer hadn't got hold of him.

Perhaps if he had been dressed, if he had been wearing the suit Klyber had provided for him, they might have taken Isa more seriously at the police station and transferred him to a care home or attempted to trace his family. But barefoot and naked as he had been, he was just another street urchin that had gotten into mischief. Furthermore, Isa hadn't given the officer any reply as to why he had broken the stores' windows. During a short inquisition, he had just

stared at the man, his mouth remaining firmly closed at the officer's questions. He had possibly thought the boy mad or a half-wit. But Isa had thought it pointless to ask for help. He had had dealings with police officers in the past and he had learned not to trust them. Plus, even if he asked them to take him to his family, what good would that do? The Maltons would either turn him in again to Klyber's men or send him away. These, however, weren't the only reasons for his silence. Either as a reaction from prolonged shock or because he had witnessed his words had no outcome whatsoever, Isa had stopped talking long ago.

When his two weeks in jail were over, Isa was allowed to keep the shirt and trousers he had been given as well as a couple of shillings. The sum was negligible, nevertheless it was a practice of the police station to provide those that had served their sentence with the means to survive at least for a couple of days after their release back into society. During the time he had spent in jail, Isa had come up with only one plan as to what he would next. He had concluded that he had to flee, as far away from London as possible.

He did not make it more than two streets away from the prison. His street skills dulled, he was entirely unaware of the fact that he was being watched from the moment he stepped out of the building. His release date was known to his earlier captors beforehand and he had not suspected as much. He froze as the carriage stopped in front of him, one of the horses almost knocking him down, and two men jumped outside and wrestled him in. He shouted but they were fast and efficient. He recognized in the face of one of them Klyber's chaperone. His expression foretold nothing short of a nightmare.

When he was returned to the manor house, Klyber took time out of his other occupations and invited over a couple of his friends. He was intent on punishing Isa, since the incident of his arrest had threatened not only himself but a number of others associated with him and his private business. Had the boy talked, he would have had to flee the country, if he managed not to get arrested in the first place. During the two weeks of Isa's imprisonment, his former captor had come close to abandoning everything and running away himself. So for three days, they slept very little and ate in turns off the trays the servants kept replenishing in the room. Klyber and the others didn't leave the room for their needs, drank nonstop and conceived new tortures to be played out on Isa who received them helpless to react. By the end of this affair and his suffering, Isa believed, and certainly wished, that he would die.

It was a couple of weeks before he was restored to proper health by the indifferent efforts of Klyber's valet who had been assigned to tend to the boy after his punishment was over. Whether the man nursed any pity for Isa was not obvious. After all, he was an employee in this house and he was conscious of the business that took place there. For the estate was not

Klyber's home but only one of the premises he used for his illegal endeavours. Naturally, all those that worked there were either oblivious to the martyrdom of the children involved or paid enough to tolerate and be silent about it. Therefore the man showed no signs of personal interest while taking care of Isa. He forced him to eat, tended to his wounds and bruises, and cleaned up after him. Only when he tried to bathe him did his mask of indifference lift briefly and he spoke to the boy a few words of encouragement as he helped him climb into the tub. Despite this being a necessity, since Isa's right leg had been broken, the child had developed an instinctive reaction to being touched that made him extremely violent. He would scream, try to hit the valet, and thrash about, regardless that he had never been abused by the specific man.

Once his health had improved, he was again rented out to clients. Klyber, however, stopped visiting him in person and seemed not to care now whether the boy's visitors inflicted any damage on him or not. His price seemed to have gone down and security, when he was transported to clients' houses, was double than before. Nevertheless, there's a means of escape from every prison or at least Isa's had one weak spot. It was several months after his escape and recapture when he discovered what would ultimately become his weapon of liberation.

Isa had grown the habit, when he was left alone, of crawling under the bed and, pressing himself between the side plank and the wall, lying there for hours on end. Unmoving, this position somehow seemed to comfort him, as though reducing the amount of space he occupied, becoming smaller, might turn him invisible or make him vanish. One of those times he hid there, his leg was pinched by something dark. Fumbling around in the dark, he found the object and climbed out from underneath the bed to examine it in light.

It was a metal fork. As he hurried to hide it away, he realized it must have been left behind when the room was cleaned after his punishment. They never brought him cutlery with his food at Klyber's and this fork was certainly the sharpest item he had been close to for the past seven months.

With a clarity of mind of the sort revealed rarely, if ever, to the tormented, he realized the fork by itself wouldn't be of much help to him should he use it to escape from the manor house. Even in the best of scenarios, where he managed to take by surprise and wound his next visitor and escape the room, he knew he had very little chances of making it outside. Apart from the guards in every entrance, the estate was full of household staff that would immediately spot and detain him. So he realized there was only one occasion when the fork would prove useful to him. And he waited.

In the meantime, during another of his hiding sessions under the bed, during the endless nights or early mornings when he was alone, he discovered something else that occupied his

mind. The times when he was not disturbed were better than those when visitors entered his locked room, however they bore a torture of their own, different to the one inflicted by Klyber's clients. It was a separate anxiety: of being trapped, aware that there were no means of escape, and of being forced to wait for the next act of violation.

Someone was scratching on his wall sometimes when he hid under the bed. He hadn't noticed that sound in months. Perhaps whoever the other child was that was trapped in the adjacent room from his had heard him shuffling under the bed at night and did the same. The walls of Isa's room were thick and he never heard sounds from the room on the other side, so he expected no noise carried over from his own either. But perhaps the other boy had heard him moving in some moment of silence under the bed, perhaps if he happened to be lying close to that spot himself.

This realization shocked him at first. He had heard from his visitors that there were other boys in the building too, but he had never seen one of them himself and this knowledge now somehow appeared to ease his burden. He was not entirely alone; there was someone else there, another boy who he didn't know, who was going on through the same nightmare as his. The first time he heard the scratching noise, he lifted his hand and scraped his nails against the wall too, listening. The sound stopped from the other side, and then resumed. Isa waited and after a while he repeated the noise from his side of the wall. It was a sort of communication and simultaneously it wasn't. Even if Isa had ever learned to read and write, he doubted that the other boy was trying to send him a specific message. It was just an instinctive act, showing him that he was there and perhaps asking to know if there was someone like him on the other side too. So he scratched back at the wall.

This strange method of correspondence with the boy in the adjacent room was irregular. Although Isa spent more and more time under the bed, his ear stuck on the wall's cold surface hoping to hear for a sound, the noise came irregularly and some nights didn't come at all. From this, he concluded that the other boy must have been a prisoner far longer than him. He couldn't explain this with logic, but he somehow sensed that whoever was on the other side of the wall was more broken than himself. He sought this weird companionship more than the other boy, but at the same time he thought he could tell when his friend had no courage to attempt it. There was a strange sense of shame and understanding in their connection. But it was certainly another human being that sometimes scratched on his wall and that meant something. The noise would start, imperceptible as always; Isa would scrape against the wall too, making the noise stop for a while; when he stopped, the noise picked up again after a moment of hesitation.

Although in some ways the knowledge that another was suffering so close to him sometimes depressed Isa even more, other times the same knowledge was a source of unexpected relief. So it became a sort of psychological crutch for him for some time, for almost a month and a half until the opportunity presented itself to him to escape.

Klyber's chaperone entered his room one afternoon and told him to wear his shoes. This meant he had been rented for a home visit. He obeyed and the man, as always, passed the chain around Isa's wrist and his own, locking them together.

'What's the matter with you? Walk properly,' he said to Isa when they were descending the stairs and he noticed the boy grimacing and climbing down the steps in a strange way.

They entered the four-wheeler and sat as usual with the chaperone next to the door, curtains drawn. At their destination, Isa realized this must be a new client since he didn't recognize the house or the neighbourhood where the carriage stopped. He was brought inside and the chaperone stood guard at the front entrance. A well-dressed man guided Isa upstairs and into a grand room with a piano. He looked delicate; it was a good sign, Isa thought. Maybe he could overpower him.

The man asked him whether he wanted something to eat and after Isa didn't respond he sat next to him on the couch. He caressed the boy's hair a couple of times and then awkwardly put his hands inside Isa's clothes, feeling his chest, waist and lower. After a while, he removed Isa's shirt and then bent to take off his shoes.

'I will do it,' Isa said, his voice colourless.

The man didn't protest. He just smiled. Perhaps he was thinking that Isa was warming up to him.

Isa crouched on his knees, untying his shoelaces. He took off his left shoe, then the right one. Then his hand seemed to slip into the shoe again. Before the man had any time to realize what was happening, Isa retrieved the fork and with a fast movement brought it up and buried it into the man's eye.

The man's scream echoed around the big room. Shrieking and shaking, he brought his hands upwards, fumbling around the fork but not daring to actually touch it. Isa didn't wait. He ran and opened the door.

From the base of the big staircase, Klyber's chaperone stood staring back at him, his expression momentarily shocked.

'You little rat,' he spit the words as he started climbing. Behind him, a servant of the household appeared, looking alarmed.

He was on the first floor. Out of desperation or inspiration of the moment, Isa didn't run back but rushed forward down the stairs, straight towards the chaperone. Taken aback he slowed down, and Isa, a few steps before meeting the man, jerked to the side and dived over the ledge.

His fall was more than a metre's height and he landed on the floor with his back. Hurting wildly, he immediately stood up as other people seemed to be rushing out of rooms nearby, alerted by the agonizing screams upstairs. Klyber's chaperone cursed but didn't follow the boy over the ledge. He turned and started running down the stairs again.

Isa pushed aside a boy that had appeared and was standing before him on a doorway. The tray of dishes he was holding fell and crashed on the floor. Isa ran inside; the pantry. Crossing it, another door led him to the kitchens. Despite the pain in his back, he kept on running. Behind him, the chaperone's shouting followed him, alerting others to his escape.

'Stop him! Stop him!'

Isa dived between a man and a woman that were working in the kitchens before they had time to react. Startled, they hesitated to obey the shouting voice and he was outside, at the back of the building.

His terror mounting, he realized he was trapped once more. The back yard was surrounded by a tall wall, over two metres in height. Trying to ignore the frantic shouts from inside the building that were getting louder and closer, he ran across and grasped a stone protruding higher up on the wall's surface. Pulling himself up, he searched for a place to steady his foot. He scraped his legs a couple of times but he managed to balance his body and get hold of another stone with his other hand. As he was barefoot, it was easier to climb and the moment Klyber's chaperone appeared in the yard he was reaching the top of the wall.

He jumped, landed on his feet and hands, got up and started running in the small alley. He came out of it in a street and decided he wouldn't stop this time. A loud thump and cursing alerted him that Klyber's chaperone was over the wall too, in the alley. Probably men from the household would be after him soon as well.

Dashing right and left between pedestrians, a glance over his shoulder revealed the chaperone had made it to the street. His face was contorted in rage and he yelled, spotting the boy immediately. Isa hadn't expected the man to be so fast in following him or climbing the wall. Afraid that he had no chance of outrunning the man on the street, he turned into another alley, making his way against other people that were going in the opposite direction. Everyone had seemed busy on the main street but here, too, there was a lot of activity and pedestrians were rushing back and forth everywhere.

As the number of people thickened around him, Isa elbowed, pushed and forced his way through the crowd, ignoring the shouts and curses directed at him. It took him a few moments to process that he had just surged through a crowd that was gathered in the alley. What was their purpose for being there and why did so many people around him look alarmed?

Before him, the building was ablaze. More and more people were coming out of it, shouting and joining those that were watching from further away. In his panic, Isa had ran straight into a dead end with a house on fire.

Smoke and voices from everywhere around made it hard for him to concentrate on what to do. People were still coming out of the burning building, others were rushing into the alley to see what was going on, shouts and chaos spread like the fire in front of him. Isa looked at the building. It seemed to be burning from the ground floor up. One of the front rooms on the right side was entirely engulfed in flames which had climbed on to the first floor and were spreading fast in every direction. Soon the entire building would be burning and the fire would extend to the one next to it.

A loud scream made Isa turn around and with his breath gone he saw Klyber's chaperone on the other side of the alley. He was coming through the crowd himself, undeterred by the exclamations of those he pushed away or crashed into. The crowd would barely hold him off for long.

Isa turned again at the burning house. It would be impossible to climb the wall adjacent to it as it was over five metres tall and he had no time. On the other side of the burning building stood another old house, the entrance to which was barricaded with enormous planks of wood. The same with its windows, they had been shut off and he couldn't have broken in through them. There was nowhere to go but into the burning building.

Looking back, he saw the chaperone was only a few strides away from the edge of the crowd. In a few seconds he would be free of the last people in the alley and nothing would come between him and Isa. The crowd was watching the building mesmerized, people murmuring as they witnessed the flames or shouting when planks inside the house collapsed with a loud noise. Maybe the back of the building wasn't yet consumed by the fire. If he made it through the house, perhaps he could find a way to another street and then run away or hide.

At the other end of the alley, more shouts and screams echoed as the fire brigade had arrived and was struggling to get through the crowd. Isa could see a mobile escape ladder held over the heads of the crowd. Almost in front of him, a metre or two away, Klyber's man was pushing to the side the last of the people before the burning house.

Isa brought his hand over his mouth and ran to the entrance of the burning building. Amid the smoke, he could see the floor inside burning, but there were a few places which hadn't caught on fire yet and where he could step. Shouts and a scream from Klyber's man accompanied him as he jumped through the flames consuming the house's entrance.

Part Two

1876

Chapter One: Eli

Yet another failure. Sometimes it seemed to him that his life was nothing but an endless series of them.

Eli Weathers had landed on the vast safety net stretched out under the big top, a couple dozen feet above the ground. He lay there for a few moments, head facing upwards, feeling his body as it swung slightly with the net, the impetus of his fall fading away. A myriad times he had attempted the specific movement, once more without success. He should be glad he hadn't broken his neck he knew, nevertheless the sense of failing to achieve the act diminished the importance of not getting injured. In the past eight years he had learned how to fall and appreciated the knowledge that even the most accomplished acrobats could end up dead within moments due to an unlucky landing, safety net or not. There were a million things that could go wrong. The net could break, the acrobat falling straight through it, a helpless puppet; he had seen that happen with his own eyes. The acrobat could fall sideways, snapping a limb that irreversibly ended their career or becoming paralyzed for life; he wasn't sure which of the two was worse. One could even faint mid-air for a few seconds, the uncalculated risk of the body switching off briefly due to shock, which in turn could result to landing on the outer sides of the net and bouncing off at terrible speed to the seats or the ground. But he had grown accustomed to this danger, it was part of his daily routine and merely escaping it didn't do anything to lift his mood.

Forcing the muscles in his back and lower legs, he lunged upwards, jumping and landing on the net on his feet. The only other presence under the big top, the boy waiting for him, was watching Eli from the far end of the ring. His eyes were wide and Eli wondered whether it was awe, fear or shock he saw in them. Perhaps the boy thought he was a failure too. He couldn't be older than ten, had only been in the circus a few days and Eli was certain the boy had no clue as to who he was.

Walking steadily across the hanging web, he approached the ladder on one of its four ends and considered climbing up again. The trapeze he had dropped from was still swinging in the air above him. He decided to try one more time.

Climbing up the seemingly frail structure, he attempted once more to explain to himself why he had failed. His body was good today, awake. His limbs reacted to his commands with precision and he felt in absolute control of his trajectory. He was patient, he waited for the

correct moment to jump, the right moment to let go off the bar, his calculations felt accurate. He performed the triple flip consciously, fully aware of his position and his surroundings at all times, he was in the right form for it. Then why did he invariably fail to get hold of the catcher in the middle of the big top?

Standing now on the small, narrow ledge at the top of the ladder, he eyed the stationary trapeze bar waiting for him under the vast dome. It was like a nightmare; he was supposed to catch it, yet he always failed. And fell. Eli was certain it was placed in the correct distance; he had after all tried a thousand different variations without exaggerating. Closer to the swinging trapeze from where he started and he would hit the bar at awkward angles; further away, even by a few inches, and he would be flying off the mark, too far for him to catch the stationary bar. The few times he had managed to get hold of the catcher it had lasted only an instant or he had caught it with one hand. Awkward contacts with the bar that left him dangling weirdly in the middle of the big top or too unsure a grip for him to maintain it. The last time he had actually managed to grab the catcher and hover for a few moments by it, two weeks ago, he had been alone in the big top and thankful for that. The boy hadn't started working for him and Eli was glad he hadn't witnessed his embarrassing attempts to climb back on the trapeze, eventually quitting and dropping in the void below.

He caught the bar swinging towards him and steadied his hands on either side of it, wiping first one and then the other on his uniform until he felt they held the catcher securely, just the right amount of friction. Out of the corner of his vision he could see the boy, a tiny figure from up where he was, still staring at him. He was now reconsidering his decision of hiring an assistant; it meant his failures had to be shared with another, despite the boy being too naïve to understand how impossibly difficult this particular act was. Not even the famous Jules Leotard had succeeded in completing it and certainly no one after his death from typhoid six years ago had come close to claiming they had.

Pressing on the elastic ledge, he jumped. He sensed the strength from his calves directing his motion upwards, his feet leaving the surface of the ledge, his body shooting into the air. He swung back and forth a couple of times, waiting for the right instant to let go. The waiting could practically go on for hours; he wouldn't get tired easily and his arms wouldn't yield soon. Training had prepared him for as much. But he knew it was best to make the jump as soon as possible, reserving his strength for swinging on the stationary trapeze once he caught it. If he did, that is.

This time he tried concentrating on the hovering bar under the big top, although he didn't need to. He was physically aware of its exact location, but maybe watching it closely as

he was in the air would grant him a marginally better sense of direction. The big top, the boy and all of his surroundings became a blur as he swung back and forth, approaching and distancing himself from the shining bar. He counted internally and let go.

One, two, three times he spun around himself in the middle of nothingness, glimpsing the stationary bar from different angles as he turned. Shouting out, he propelled his arms forward right after completing the third turn and for a single moment his fingers clasped around the catcher, his fingertips actually coming to meet his palms around the metal. He'd done-!

Then, the fall. One more failure. A sinking feeling, literal and real as the bar escaped him again. His grip had been but mild and he had been thrown off by his impetus. As his body continued turning he had sensed his hands losing their grasp on the bar above him, slipping away. While in the air, he struggled with his own body and positioned himself horizontally to the ground, keeping his neck slightly stretched over his spine. His back came to meet the net, sinking momentarily in it and making it drop lower, a graceful motion followed by his entire figure bouncing up at a slower speed.

This was it for today, then. This was not the day that he would invent his own act. Perhaps another acrobat, in London, elsewhere in the country or even abroad, maybe in the US, was at the same moment achieving the same jump he was failing at and soon it would be named after them, not him. The triple jump wouldn't be known as the Weathers Somersault as he dreamed. Maybe the acrobat that would beat him to it would be a woman, too. He had a vague notion that female acrobats were better at this type of movement, flight; the fact that their bulk was slightly more uniformly balanced across their body than that of male acrobats, he thought, gave them better chances at controlling their impetus the moment they got hold of the catcher.

Walking to one of the four ends of the net, Eli grabbed the pole and slid down to the ground. The boy was still watching him from the far side, his face a marvel, and he motioned him to approach. Was his name Charles or Charlie again? Whichever it was, the boy hadn't realized the acrobat was done with his training when he fell. Perhaps he couldn't even read the disappointment in Eli's face or detect the resignation he thought was obvious in his movements now. But at least the boy was quick; he swiftly came over and handed the man a warm towel, waiting next to him holding the big blanket Eli usually covered himself with after practice.

It now occurred to him that of the few boys he had considered hiring as an assistant, this one didn't particularly stand out from the rest. At that age it was nearly impossible to tell a child's potential without training at any rate. But, Eli now thought darkly while the boy regarded him closely as he wiped his sweat, maybe he had chosen this boy because of his name. In appearance he didn't remind him of his childhood friend from Hallow, and in terms of

character Eli couldn't even remember what that first friend had been like anymore. So what was this choice that he had made? Was he seeking some connection to his past? If so, this was a ridiculous way to go about it, he considered. At any rate, it didn't matter. If the boy showed potential, he would train him in the future. Not yet though; he felt he had enough things to deal with at the moment.

Eli thanked the boy when he handed him the blanket and he threw it over himself, tying its edges loosely around his shoulders. He then gave Charles instructions to gather his equipment and told him he had the rest of the day off until the afternoon show. He asked the boy to be at his carriage one hour before his act and walked out of the big top.

Dawn had just broken and activity was resuming its normal rhythms at the circus. As the troupe's most treasured asset, Eli Weathers reserved early practice hours, before everyone else, when he could train for longer and undisturbed from workers setting up or checking equipment. No noise when you were the first in line.

They had been in London for a week now, the third time this year that Drayden's visited the capital. Eli had lost count how many times he had travelled to and from the big city in the past eight years. After his first few months in the circus, location didn't matter to him anymore. His surroundings remained the same wherever the company travelled and as he became more and more familiar with the towns and cities they passed by, they, too, seemed to stop changing. Of course, this was only a matter of perception. The places where they set up the big top changed, as did the troupe itself, slowly; it just wasn't noticeable from day to day. Or maybe, concerning the latter, Eli didn't want to acknowledge the changes he saw taking place. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that Drayden's Travelling Circus was in decline compared to the days when he had first joined the troupe.

It wasn't an uncommon occurrence. Ever since ownership of the troupe had passed on to external managers who didn't follow the show and owned smaller or bigger shares of its components, the quality of the show had gradually but unmistakably deteriorated. As travelling supervisors overseeing the troupe came and went, the only solid piece of management had remained with the old ringmaster, Auberon. But his authority too seemed to flail as he got older. He was of the opinion –and Eli subscribed to it as well– that a successful circus should be owned by those who ran it daily rather than by those who invested in it for profit from a distance and didn't have to face its daily troubles. Hundreds of circuses operated all over Britain, all of them owned in varying degrees by performers and managers, but the biggest ones, the most successful ones such as those of Saunders, Hengler's or Fanque, mostly belonged to one family around which the rest of the troupe concentrated. The same was true

for the big circuses in America; Barnum, Bailey, Ringling, all commanded a number of talented artists who leagued around a few integral figures of the show for guidance.

Nevertheless, despite Drayden's relatively average size as a troupe, the show had managed to keep most of its stars during the last decade and maintain a respectable name. The ties between artists and the smooth cooperation they had developed between them were often reasons not to sign up to a different company even when pay was more promising. So Drayden's somehow still managed to survive financially, despite the main decisions being made by the owners of its property, and even succeeded in producing a few rising talents. Eli was among them and at the same time undeniably the one with the most prominent career so far. Having completed the basic training as an equestrian and realized he was capable yet not highly gifted in it, he had switched to aerial acts, trapeze and group-oriented alike. Intensive, relentless training and eight years with the troupe transformed him into one of the best young acrobats not only within Drayden's but nationwide. He had yet, however, to create his own signature act or monopolize the public's attention with sold-out performances as other, more famous acrobats of his day did.

And yet he had been approached a few times by agents offering him work in bigger shows than Drayden's. But he had so far refused, sometimes wondering at himself for not abandoning the sinking ship that the troupe was clearly turning into over time. On the other hand, he preferred being the main attraction of the show in Drayden's rather than just part of a more resplendent acrobatic group elsewhere. And, of course, Drayden's was his only family. Although a move to a bigger show would be financially wise for him, ever since he had run away from Hallow, the people at Drayden's had been the only ones he knew. It had been them that had trained him, them that he had occasionally fought and argued with, them that had employed, paid and offered him the opportunity to be included in the show for the first time, them that had shaped his career and to an extent his character. He might not openly admit so but he was wary of leaving the troupe yet, as it was the sole place where he felt he could put his trust safely.

Maybe he was naïve, he thought now crossing the grounds towards his coach. Filiberto the flea master waved his hand at him as he went by his carriage and Eli nodded back at the man. He had sat outside waiting for the light of day to become stronger and sharpening his tools before starting work on the board in front of him. He was building a new playground for his fleas. A deft carver of wood, the Italian produced extraordinarily detailed miniatures decorating the sets wherein he placed his tiny insects. Minuscule chairs, tables, pianos, houses, framed paintings, glasses, cups, bicycles and so much more decorated the half-rooms he created

and had on display next to the big top during the show. Under his orchestration, his talented fleas pretended to drink tea, play symphonies, paint minute canvases, perform athletics and even ride flea-dragged carriages. All of these within the rooms he built and painted for them which looked as though cut in half by a knife. Of course, as many things in the circus, this was the façade. The Italian had shared his secret with Eli years ago, when he was younger. The fleas didn't live longer than a couple of months and at the same time they weren't, nor could be, trained. Advertisement took care of propagandising the opposite. Filiberto simply glued their limbs on the board with transparent glue prior to the show and then lit the smokeless coals in the concealed compartment underneath his sets before parading his flea act. The insects, trapped in place and sensing the heat rising underneath them naturally strived to break free, making those frantic movements that so amused Filiberto's audience. Maybe, Eli thought, he was like them too. Maybe, like the people who fell for that simple trick, he couldn't see the bigger picture regarding his own act and that was the reason he was failing. Or perhaps similar to the fleas he couldn't understand why he was failing due to invisible obstacles he hadn't realized yet were there.

At the door of his coach, he hesitated. He had the entire day to himself until the afternoon show. He could spend a few hours in a quiet pub or visit one of those streets that he knew so well and where his coins were greatly appreciated by the women. In London, unlike most cities in the country, it mattered not whether it was day or night. But he reminded himself of the afternoon show and shook his head. He entered his coach and fell into bed with his uniform still on.

*

The first time it had happened, he had been terrified to an indescribable degree. It had been a couple of years ago that he had woken up and couldn't move. He had been aware of his eyes resting half-open, the coach around him still and silent. Back then, he had just started training as an acrobat and shared a carriage with two other boys who he didn't get along with very well. Naturally, they were competitors. At that moment, upon waking, he had been alone in the carriage. But he had also felt that something was wrong, amiss. He had tried breaking through that strange haze of his mind, commanding his limbs to leap into action.

Nothing had happened. Panicking, Eli had tried to move his hands, one hand, his wrist, his left leg; nothing. He couldn't even move his toe. It had been as if his brain was alive inside a dead body.

That first incident had stretched out for a horrifyingly long time, although he could never tell exactly how much these episodes lasted. Because after it, they had continued until now. Eli had noticed they occurred more often when he was at his worst. And his worst usually coincided with his failures to establish his own act, lately when he failed at performing the triple somersault, as that same morning.

At least now he knew he was safe, although that knowledge did little to diminish the feeling of agony accompanying his paralysis. In an attempt to calm down and assess the situation, he tried taking a deep breath. It was difficult, concerning he was fighting against his own body. Or, rather, his own body was fighting against him. It was always like that; it seemed to develop its own unrelenting will. His attempt didn't work. He became desperate when he realized he wasn't breathing, that he couldn't force any air into his lung. He expected the shock to release him from the paralysis but he remained limp, his muscles unwilling to obey the commands of his brain.

This was going to become worse. As Eli tried to thrash around with no effect, he noticed the magnified silence about the room. Then, the noise outside his front door. He was distracted by it for a moment and the next it was the only thing his mind concentrated on. Who was there? There was somebody outside, doing something. They were tampering with his lock, looking for a way to break it and come in. Whoever they were, they knew he was helpless. They would pick the lock, enter and kill him.

Of course, this episode had repeated itself so many times that a part of him knew nothing would happen in the end. But in the grips of the waking nightmare it was impossible to trust his logic and not sink into the paroxysm.

Eli tried to speak. Sometimes this did the trick and he snapped out of this agony. His lips were numb and he heard no sound escaping them although he was effectively screaming in his head. Now the noise outside his carriage became more pressing. He was trapped. Whoever was out there was only moments away from breaking in. Harm was coming. The more his mind focused on the sound, the more it resembled a voice although he couldn't tell who it belonged to. He thought it was a man's voice, but from where he slept Eli couldn't see the door or the small window on it. Nevertheless, he was vaguely aware of a shadow looming outside it, a certain presence there. Then the voice belonged to Frances. It was implausible, but the more Eli listened the more he was convinced that it was his sister's voice coming from out his door. In some strange way, her voice was there together with whoever was trying to break in. She sounded distressed, terrified.

The need to control his body became more eminent and he was afraid he would go mad with the anxiety he was experiencing. He tried to turn to his side, anything, any movement would be a blessing, but his body was as unresponsive as though it never belonged to him. A pang of terror surged through him as he heard the lock on his door give in. He heard the unmistakable sound of the carriage door opening and someone shuffling inside. Their steps echoed in the dark room.

Where was Isa?! Couldn't he hear the noise and come to his rescue? But the intruder was so silent. The only reason Eli heard him –he felt sure it was a man, his sister's voice now vanished– was because he lay there motionless, his hearing the only sense useful to him. The way he slept he was facing part of the ceiling in his carriage and a few of his possessions on the shelves, their shapes dark as it was late in the afternoon. The intruder came closer.

Eli thought his heart might suddenly snap like a broken muscle. He more felt than saw the intruder creeping into his bed and climbing up on his chest, first a shadow in the periphery of his vision and then–

A monstrous figure sat on Eli's chest. A grotesque goblin of sorts, he now strived with every remnant of his sanity to look at it as it positioned itself on his chest and stared down at his face. Short black wings that ended in thorns grew on the creature's back. Its dark body was wrinkled all over and its yellow glistening eyes, prominent over its snout, pierced into his own. From its mouth, a long thin oily line, two short but sharp tusks protruded. Its ends were smeared with dried blood.

Eli jumped, screaming and punching the air. Or so it felt because in reality he sat up releasing a terrified cry and falling sideways to the floor. Immediately he turned around but the demon had vanished. As always.

He remained on the floor, hands over the wooden planks, aware that he was awash with sweat and trembling. His eyes were wide and he was drawing great gasps of air. Eli looked around the peaceful room. Everything was in place and no sign of the devilish creature was anywhere to be seen. Remembering the voices, he instinctively stared at the door. It was, as ever, shut and locked. The sounds of the circus lay beyond it, reassuring and vibrant with life. There was nobody coming for him.

Shuddering, he climbed back into the bed and lay there, wondering whether these episodes would continue for the rest of his life. He had on several occasions consulted a number of doctors but none of them could shed light into these torments of his. They all agreed it was a medical condition but they couldn't find anything wrong with his diet or habits. He was an acrobat; his lifestyle was active and healthy. His body was one of the strongest and he normally

showed no signs whatsoever of any oncoming paralysis. It was therefore beyond logic that he demonstrated these troubling experiences after sleep.

Judging by the light in his carriage, Eli calculated he still had a few hours before the show. He would pay Auberon a visit. Sharing his weakness was something he never did, not even with the ringmaster who had proven to be a friend he could trust, but talking with the old man always seemed to calm his spirit. Unfortunately, his condition would be explained only much later. Five years into the future, Eli would come across an article about it in the newspaper; it would originate from an American encyclopaedia and name the condition ‘The Nightmare’ although it happened while the victim was awake. By then, he wouldn’t have these episodes any more and the article wouldn’t be of use to him. Sleep paralysis would be studied more carefully after his lifetime and he wouldn’t guess that the creature’s demonic form, a product of his imagination, was only such because he was evidently more religious than himself he believed he was.

*

He couldn’t find a circus boy so he had fetched water by himself from the pump at the far edge of the circus grounds. As Eli washed himself in his coach, he considered knocking on Isa’s door but immediately he changed his mind. It wasn’t entirely dark yet, some light still stole through into the carriage even with the curtains drawn and Isa Malton never seemed comfortable with that. Maybe he would meet him after the show. He would see Auberon and after the show perhaps visit the city, Eli decided.

As he finished drying himself with a towel, he watched his reflection in the basin. Something about it troubled him. When he looked at his own face, Eli thought he saw that of his father. He hadn’t met Jon Weathers in eight years, ever since he ran away from Hallow. His father’s features, however, seemed not to have grown faint in his mind. The more he looked at the mirror the water provided, the more he was convinced his father stared back at him. That was curious, given he didn’t think they looked that alike. Jon Weathers had had a stronger jawline, more determined and clearly defined than his. Furthermore, Eli’s own lineaments of face were obscured by the short beard he had grown in the last years. Jon Weathers never kept facial hair; his face had always been clean, despite his profession not allowing for the luxury of caring about his appearance. Then what was the similarity that Eli observed and why did it trouble him so much? Perhaps, he thought, they shared the same air of determination. His own face appeared stern and strict, nothing like that of the boy he had been the last time he had seen

his father. That self was behind him, dead. But again, it was a different tone of the same thing. He had lost the innocence he used to carry in his features, which he now considered his father hadn't. Eli's eyebrows had grown more into a frown, the lines near his eyes seemed more deep set; he thought he looked more severe than he ever remembered his father.

Picking up his earlier clothes, the smell from the still drenched material struck him. His sweat. Another connection. For the first time in years, Eli realized another thing about himself that reminded him of Jon Weathers. His clothes always smelled of his physical efforts during the day, proof of his unending training and hard work. His father's field clothes had stank the same way too, the smell of the working man. But his father would have never approved of his career and choices, despite both of them being set on their respective routes with equal determination. In what way did they resemble each other then?

Dressed in a clean set of clothes and leaving his coach, Eli breathed in deep the cool air. Still shaken from the nightmare and the memories of his father and Frances, he slowed down his usually quick step and took the longer route to Auberon's coach. The haze in his mind was clearing away gradually and he remembered the first time he had worked for the show, all those years past.

He hadn't. He had pretended to work, that is. After the ringmaster had made him a member of the tiger band, he was given a cane and told to patrol the grounds for gate crashers with the rest of the boys. Punch was their head, the same one who had beaten Eli at Hallow, and he had been still scared of the older boy. Nevertheless, when Punch had told him which area to stick to, Eli had just nodded but not obeyed. Night and the city had seemed to flow into the circus. The gates to the grounds had been open an hour before the show and people were coming in, gathering here and there, families and couples and groups of youngsters, buying their tickets, strolling about, their excitement building when a side attraction caught their attention.

It looked the same now. But what now was to Eli the familiar hum and buzz of the circus, back then had felt different. He had crouched and crawled under a coach with his cane, hoping no one would try to gain illegal entry through the area he was assigned to patrol. He had remained there, under the carriage, for over three hours, at first watching the entrance from a distance and the people gathering into the grounds, more and more of them until they became a flood that covered all the space before the big top. He had been clenching the cane in his hand with force as though trying to displace the constriction in his chest. He had felt lost. The sheer amount of people before him had attracted and scared him at the same time. Their presence mystified him even when the entrance to the big top had been opened to admit them, a slow

river from the city vanishing under the canvas tent. They had come and gone and they had appeared bigger than him, something that didn't have to do with his viewpoint from under the coach. They had seemed happier, with their families, their friends, in some way knowing their place in the world. And that hum of their conversations and laughter, how it had echoed in his head that first night.

It had all changed. Now the visitors of the circus were just another normal part of its music, sometimes a discordant note, other times a fulfilling resonance, but at any rate a familiar noise. Part of the larger noise that he recognized as home. Any more, he could not imagine living away from the travelling troupe. Curious how the circus's almost constant hubbub had become for him the most reassuring sound.

Approaching Auberon's carriage between the coaches of the snake charmer and the bearded lady, he noticed the dissonance. Several of the circus boys were running about while a few artists and workers of the show were gathered outside the ringmaster's quarters.

'Sir, Mr Weathers!' one of the boys called him as he approached and several of the adults turned around upon hearing his name.

'It's Mr Auberon's carriage, sir!' the boy continued excitedly. 'It's been broken into!'

Was it some kind of expectation he read in the adults' faces? They looked at him as though he was the one who knew what to do, a figure of authority. This never ceased to surprise Eli.

Grabbing the boy by the shoulder, Eli stopped him from running away as he was about to do.

'Do not tell anyone,' he commanded. He raised his voice a hint, to be audible to the others present in the scene as he neared the ringmaster's carriage.

'Those of you that are here, tell no one about this, whatever it is, yet. Go about your jobs and we will figure it out after the show. Do not let any outsiders know.'

Some of the artists and workers nodded at his words though they were slow to move away from the area. He knew that by the end of the hour the entire troupe would have heard of the incident, but he hoped his word of caution would be enough to prevent them from spreading the news outside the circus. Whatever they were facing, it was no good business.

Letting the boy go, Eli walked straight for Auberon's door while a few dancers and the knife thrower made way to let him pass. The ringmaster's door was closed. Light could be seen inside although the curtains were drawn. He knocked on it calling Auberon's name and when the old man's voice responded for him to enter, a long moment later, he went in quickly and closed the door behind him.

In the past eight years Eli had been inside Auberon's carriage perhaps more frequently than in any other artist's quarters but nothing had prepared him for how unlike itself it looked today. The ringmaster was a neat man of very few possessions. The scene Eli came across now was one of chaos: the couple of chairs Auberon owned were flat on the floor, their simple cushions torn. The ringmaster himself sat on his bed, the mattress of which was sliced through in various places as though with a knife. He was resting his elbows on his knees, his head bowed to the floor. All around him lay his few articles of clothing and several uniforms, torn as well or otherwise smeared. The few books he kept on his shelves were on the floor too, open, most of their pages removed in haste. The ringmaster's small chest was agape at the far corner, whatever small items it used to contain thrown all around the room or broken.

So the intruder had been looking for something, Eli concluded. Auberon was a man of habit. It would have been easy to break into his coach if one knew his schedule. So whoever was responsible for this mess must be someone from the troupe. Although most artists and performers locked their personal carriages, they relied on the community's trust of each other for protection rather than metal devices.

'Do not mistake this for a simple crime,' Auberon said, lifting his head and looking up at the younger acrobat.

Eli was surprised at his words.

'What do you mean?' he said.

'They weren't looking for money or anything else.' He pointed at a wooden-carved figurine of an elephant that lay on the floor before him. The intruders had broken the small statue in two pieces and Auberon hadn't made an attempt to pick it up. Eli hadn't noticed the figurine, although he knew what it was; a carving Auberon himself had made decades ago in memory of Chune, an elephant he used to be a carer of in his youth.

'This is more of a message,' the old man said. Strangely, he didn't appear disquieted by the fact his carriage had been vandalized.

Eli knew what Auberon was referring to. The ringmaster had lately confided to him plenty of times his worries about losing his authority within the troupe. Apart from that, Eli had seen the hatred of people directed against the old man a number of times due to his black skin too.

'By who though?' Eli said. He was mentally reviewing the troupe's members, trying to see which of them might have more reason than others to despise the ringmaster and want him to leave the circus. But Auberon directed his thoughts elsewhere.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ he said, and it would only be years later that Eli would eventually guess the ringmaster didn’t want him to go after the perpetrators. He was protecting him even then.

‘Whoever they were,’ Auberon continued, ‘it makes little difference. The message is clear.’

‘You cannot-’ Eli started but the older man raised his hand.

‘Next time, it won’t be my carriage but me,’ Auberon said.

‘No!’ Eli gasped, understanding what conclusion the ringmaster was leading him to.

‘This is just how things are,’ Auberon observed, opening his palms. ‘I have made my decision and what you have to say won’t convince me to do otherwise.’

Eli felt powerless at his words.

‘I can change neither the colour of my skin nor the weakness that comes with my age,’ Auberon said. He didn’t look weak at all, Eli thought, although he was certain the old man felt so. He had certainly caught him struggling with tasks more than he used to half a decade ago and he seemed to tire much faster than before.

‘Tonight will be the last time I present the show,’ Auberon announced. ‘I will pass on the ringmaster’s duties to Isa.’

‘Isa?!’ Eli exclaimed. ‘He will never agree to-’

‘He will have to,’ Auberon interrupted him again. The ringmaster had always seemed to expect Eli’s reactions, ever since the latter had been eleven and a scared child. Eight years later and the transformation he had undergone apparently did little to obscure his mind from the old man.

‘I will talk to him after the show. But I wanted to talk with you first,’ Auberon said.

Eli picked up one of the chairs and setting it properly on the floor sat facing the man he thought of as his mentor for the past eight years.

‘Despite what many may believe, I am one of the reasons this troupe is still carrying on its journey,’ the ringmaster said. There was no sense of pride in his voice, just a flat observation. ‘Following my retirement, you will find it a lot harder to keep people together. Isa does not have a ringmaster’s gift and it has been my mistake that I never trained another boy for the task. But he will command their attention for a time. Once I’m gone, more people will take their leave. The Popov twins have been considering working for Saunders for some time. Norman Ricketts is dissatisfied that we can’t afford to pay him as much as other tiger tamers in other shows. Even yesterday, the bearded lady complained to me that our photographers aren’t as good as those of the Royal Circus. You know, they place their models in small chairs to

make them look bigger and add fake hair to their beards to make their appearance more bizarre for the pictures they use in newspapers. They do tricks with light too. The people we can afford to employ are regular photographers, they don't know nor have time for such planning.'

The ringmaster seemed to lose his trail of thought momentarily. The older he got –by Eli's estimation, Auberon must have been in his early seventies– the more he stopped talking suddenly, letting long silences intersperse his speech.

'Other than you, I see no other performing able to gather the others around them,' Auberon said, shocking Eli once more. He knew this was probably true, however he had never felt up to the task nor had expected the day would come that he would have to step up into Auberon's duties.

'If you truly care about Drayden's, change its name. Claim ownership of the troupe. Disband it and reassemble it under a new formation keeping as many of its current stars as you can.'

Eli was beginning to protest but Auberon stopped him.

'I will tell you more of how I think you should proceed, I will give you ideas,' the old man offered. 'The core of it is, if you step up people will gather around you. Drayden's, as any circus, as any human group, needs leaders. If you adopt that title, you will gain your own following.'

'You are an excellent acrobat, Mr Weathers, but you are facing a difficult choice right now,' the ringmaster said. 'Pursue your career elsewhere or build your very own show here.'

*

Eli hadn't watched the entire show in months. Usually, he stayed in his coach until it was time for his act or joined the others in the big top when the acrobats came out. Following the discussion with Auberon and as he felt a new weight on his shoulders, he decided to do something he hadn't done in years. He dressed in civilian clothing and blended with the crowd. The ticket man at the entrance recognized him but didn't say anything if he thought it strange that the show's best acrobat was joining the spectators. On his part, Eli didn't offer an explanation. He nodded to the man and followed a family of four that was trying to get as close to the ring as possible. Eli could have chosen to occupy a paid seat among those fewer customers who preferred watching the show with more comfort, but instead he went and stood amid the great flow of people spreading all around the ring.

He attracted a few curious looks, however no one seemed to recognize him. His face had been in newspapers and posters, some of which were handed out and stuck on walls all around the city, not to mention the immediate vicinity, and yet he was a stranger among others. He realized this was due to the clothes; people associated him with the acrobat's uniform, his face and body dressed in everyday attire weren't the elements that distinguished him from the rest. On the other hand, he felt slightly uncomfortable in the buttoned up shirt and trousers and he realized he had gained even more muscle since the last time he had worn this pair of clothes. This wasn't entirely positive, although it did wonders for his reputation. Acrobats strived for strength, not mass, and he was no exception. He needed to be agile and well balanced if he wanted his movements in the air to be defined by precision and grace, not bulky. That was also the reason that acrobats, as well as dancers, performed more repetitions in fewer sets during their exercises, as this technique enhanced their strength. Strongmen, on the contrary, concentrated in more sets of exercises each of which contained fewer repetitions, their training designed to make their muscles grow as large as possible.

Eli had watched his body transform in the past eight years and sometimes still couldn't believe the striking difference between who he had been and how he was now. The change, and the strength that he had gained with it, had improved his confidence visibly. At the same time, his attitude towards others had become more comfortable and was characterized by greater authority than before. He doubted whether his internal world, however, had altered completely.

The clowns kept entertaining the crowd with an endless array of jokes and tricks until they got the signal that most tickets had been sold and the mass of their audience was inside the big top. When the lights lowered under the canvas tent and the orchestra slowed down the music's rhythm until it faded, they dispersed, waving at the people, and left the great ring empty for Auberon.

He took some time before appearing, the audience's whispers filling the atmosphere. When the ringmaster stepped into the ring, the crowd's voices rose higher and many cheers echoed under the big top. The circus was likely the only place where people would welcome a black man with such excitement and warmth, however Auberon's stature and way of movement was a perfect fit for his role. Tall, calm, his gait proud, he commanded attention and the audience's respect like few artists did. And yet, it was his voice that was his strongest suit.

When the old ringmaster opened his mouth, his voice echoed all around the enormous tent, easily and loud. Eli knew this was almost a feat. He had tried himself to deliver the usual line in an empty big top: 'Ladies and gentlemen and children both young and old! Welcome,

welcome to Drayden's Travelling Circus and the many mysteries and marvels it holds for you! Gather round, gather round...' But when Eli had attempted to make his voice loud and clear and tried to send it everywhere under the tent, he had discovered it empty of colour, weak and awkward. Auberon's gift was a rare one, and he could and did control the audience with his voice. He built their anticipation, excited their imagination, often joked briefly with them, promised them magic and awe-inspiring acts; he knew how to make their eyes thirst for spectacle and their feet kick the dust floor in nervousness. Eli listened to him without paying attention to what the ringmaster said, concentrating on his voice instead of the words. It was rich, warm and communicated safety.

When the equestrians came out, the crowd let out a wild exclamation, while the orchestra started playing again simultaneously. Eli had never belonged to that group, nevertheless he had always nursed a liking for these artists. Their field, after all, had been the first he had explored before discovering his own path. Riding mastery aside, their balance and acrobatic demonstrations were impressive. They rose on the horses' backs upside down, resting on their hands while the animals were in motion. They jumped from one horse to another while the mares crossed paths around the ring. They rode two steeds at once, one leg on each, their feet solid on the horses' bare backs as on steady ground.

While the riders represented strength and directness, the dancers that followed communicated subtler grace and refinement. Their act was followed by knife throwing and fire eating. It was a rule in the show that subtler and rougher episodes should intersperse the course of the programme. Eli wasn't sure whether the audience noticed as much; it had been Auberon that had pointed this out to him. How the people became excited, then mystified. How next their shock was triggered again only to be relieved by laughter. It was like the sea, in a sense, the show delivered in waves of up and down designed to keep a steady motion throughout. This way, the performers moderated the crowd's mood; no one got too much of death-defying acts following one another, nor were the spectators allowed to get bored by slower moving components of the show appearing close together either. The presentation itself was an art.

The same rule was applied to the animals. Being one of the elements that intrigued circus-goers the most, the troupe took care never to let them claim away the awe that its human resources inspired. The big felines appeared after the bearded lady and only several acts later did the trained dogs follow. The monkeys, the birds, the zebras and a number of other exotic species were offered to the audience teasingly, a few now and a few later. The two elephants of the show would only make their appearance at the very end, following Eli's act, while he normally rode on of them at the very end too.

In the meantime, Auberon's sonorous narration preceded and followed every act that passed before the people's eyes. If the performers' art was excellent, his delivery and charisma added to it tenfold, presenting it as pure magic. Suddenly, Eli felt indescribably grateful to this man, realizing he had been building up all their careers every single night all these years.

When the archers, the pygmies and the Biggest Man on Earth retreated to the back of the canvas tent, the band stopped playing. All around the big top, circus boys put out many of the lights illuminating the space and they, too, waited to see, their eyes wide. They were supposed to constantly walk behind the crowd keeping an eye out for pickpockets, but the man that would come out now was a spectacle even to them, seeing as he only ever appeared in public during the show. Auberon walked to the middle of the ring, announced the next performer's name and said that not even the troupe knew anything about him or his history. Unlike with the Man without Legs, the Camel Girl, the Human Owl and other freak show acts, he didn't build up on this next one's story. Nor did Auberon make his epithet, the Skeleton Man, sound too loud over the crowd's silence. Entire mystery was the desired effect and the act's foundation.

When Isambard Malton walked into the ring, the band of musicians picked up a sombre, low tune that resembled a funereal chant. Eli had seen the audience's reaction at the sight of his friend many times, but once again he experienced the conflicting emotions that always accompanied it. The people seemed to draw forward to get a closer look at Isa first took a silent walk around the big ring, not paying them much attention.

What Auberon had said, that Isa's story wasn't known even to the circus's performers, was only partially true. There were two among them, the ringmaster himself and Eli, that knew most part of the Skeleton Man's past. The rest of the troupe was lost in assumptions. They guessed that either he had been born that way, a natural disfigurement, or that at some point his entire skin had been burned. The latter guess, despite uneducated, was closer to the truth.

If Eli's appearance was one of strength, raw power and measured balance, in the past eight years Isa's body had transformed into something that could only be described as the opposite. The man now quietly parading the empty ring was tall, imposing. But his skin was not like human skin, not a normal one at any rate. Apart from a tight pair of leather tied under his waist, he was naked and it was obvious to every eye that his skin was tougher and rougher than the piece of cloth covering his masculinity. It was skin burnt and charred; of that there was no dispute. But instead of becoming loose and hanging as is the case was burned skin, this man's flesh seemed to cling all over his bones. The burned skin appeared as though hacked over a million times, innumerable lines covering the man's bare feet, legs, waist, arms, back

and neck. The image one summoned upon seeing it was that of a knife tracing the flesh, which was later left to heal and wrinkle closer to the bones. But it wasn't just the unnatural thinness and frailty that characterized the man. His skin had been painted over with the faintest white lines, in the style of the art known in France as 'tatouage'. The effect was of a tall skeleton not unlike one would imagine Death himself, bones protruding, skin charred and hacked, white and charcoal black alternating in every inch of his body.

And his face. Even Eli rarely had the opportunity to watch his friend's face so clearly as their meetings always took place in the complete dark of the latter's carriage. Whatever Isa's face had once been, under the dim light of the big top it was now nothing but a hollow skull. He had no eyebrows or hair, his lips were but a grey shadow, and the rest of his features, as the rest of his body, resembled a charcoal painting on a white sheet. Only his eyes betrayed the life residing in this ghostly body, glowing a fierce, deep blue inside their dug out sockets.

Eli Weathers the boy experienced an unwanted pang of pain at the reaction Isa brought out of people. They gasped, stared in shock, a great many of them were simply terrified. Eli Weathers the man and the circus artist was proud of Isa's ability to command horror with such apparent grace. He considered it art. And it was not dance, nor acrobatics, and at the same time no simple walking and gesturing that Isa did around the ring. His tricks were not terribly complex yet not simplistic either. He produced a tall blue flower out of thin air and handed it over to a girl in the audience, who was shaking when he approached. He picked up the flame of a lantern that a circus boy was holding and kept it in his hand for a moment before extinguishing it. Opening his hand, the flame reappeared and he stared at it calmly, apparently feeling no burn. He stood in the middle of the big top and contorted his body so that it occupied minimal space, becoming a small mass on the ground. Reaching out his hands again, he started getting up again in such slow, controlled speed that he seemed not to be moving at all. He didn't shiver or tremble one hint, and like a human tree he spread his arms and fingers out, growing taller and taller until he was a towering figure in the middle of the big tent and the crowd blinked at how he had moved without movement.

Eli's act would be announced soon now, after the next one, and he had a mind to move to the back of the big top and warm up his muscles but he waited a few moments longer. Isa always demonstrated a new trick at the end of his performance, different each time. On this night, he approached the edge of the audience and gestured silently to a young woman to join him. She followed him, somewhat fearful and wary of standing too close to him. Isa looked over at James Caplan and the strongman brought forth a large chest, from which Isa removed several big articles of clothes. Voicelessly, he showed them to the woman and communicated

that he wanted her to dress him in these garments. Taken aback, she started picking up the enormous pieces of clothing while he remained perfectly still next to her. The dark clothes were rags held loosely together by string. The young woman passed one of them that vaguely resembled a shirt over Isa's neck, her movements very careful; it was obvious she was afraid that contact of the clothes with his skin might cause him pain. But Isa didn't move, so she proceeded and dragged his hands into the sleeves. Next, he lifted his foot, then the other, and she dressed him in the large set of trousers that he'd taken out of the open chest. There were gloves too, which she put on his immobile hands, and a pair of large shoes that he stepped into when she placed them before his feet. The last article of clothing was a hat without proper shape which the young woman balanced on Isa's skull. He now looked like a tall scarecrow, barely breathing. In the end, he beckoned with his head to the woman to come closer, as though he had something to tell her. She leaned in. Instead of talking, he opened his mouth. On his tongue rested a sizeable ball of unknown material. The young woman wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, as Isa's eyes were fixed straight ahead. She ended up picking up the ball from his tongue, but her hand had barely moved away from his mouth when the ball exploded into a blinding light, making the woman shriek.

When the audience's vision was restored a few seconds later, only the young woman was standing next to the closed chest. Isa had vanished in thin air, the awkward shoes, trousers, shirt and hat she had dressed him in remaining behind. Dumbfounded, she was looking around for him until the strongman reappeared, shook her hand, gathered the clothes back into the chest and carried it with ease outside the ring, crossing ways with Auberon who was re-entering to announce the next act.

Eli smiled and made his way back through the crowd and out of the big top, hurrying around it to get to the space for performers at its other side. On his way, he saw James Caplan placing the chest outside Isa's carriage, which was parked back to back with his own. The strongman swiftly returned to the big top and Eli lurked around only a few moments later to watch his friend emerge from inside the chest. The shadow that Isa was in the dark spotted Eli's figure, waved at him and climbed into his carriage.

*

Eli had changed into his striking red uniform and made himself sweat with a fast and fierce session at the stationary trapeze behind the big top. His muscles were burning and tense. He

was ready for his act, waiting on the other side of the curtain before the ring. He was listening to Auberon's voice enumerating the vast array of acts he was about to perform.

The rest of the acrobats had come before him, warming up the scene. Their uniforms were pale blue, so that when he joined them he would be a red bullet shooting through the air in their mist. He couldn't help but smile a little; it was these moments that would follow that he truly lived for. Then...

'...a great welcome to Elijah Weathers and Emerence Toynbee, the newest gem of our acrobatic squad!' Auberon's voice echoed loud around the ring.

Eli did a double take as a woman stepped in line next to him. His eyes widened at her stark red uniform that was the same colour as his. Had he heard Auberon right? Was she joining him in his act?

'...of the night. But first,' Auberon was saying, 'Ms Emerence Toynbee!'

The crowd's voices echoed excited through the curtain. The woman smiled at Eli and went through to the ring.

This was not happening, Eli decided. What was going on? He had heard of her, she was a rising star of Tower Circus at Blackpool. Whatever was she doing in London and when had Drayden's signed her? How? Why hadn't he heard a thing about this?

'...like a dragon in flight! Ladies and gentlemen, Elijah Weathers!' the ringmaster's voice boomed from the other side of the curtain.

Eli stepped into the big top as in a dream. The woman's inclusion to his act had startled him and for a few moments his mind shut out his entire education at the circus. A blur of faces and cheers enveloped his entrance to the ring, temporarily dizzying him. It was like the first times he had started performing with the acrobats. A vast, featureless crowd facing him expectantly, noise, confusion and panic.

The woman was standing on the left side of the ring facing the audience, while the others were already in the air above them. Instinctively, Eli headed in the other direction, symmetrically occupying his place on the right edge of the ring. The ringmaster failed to look at him as he retreated to the back of the big top again. The band of musicians picked up the tune that accompanied Eli's routine.

He noticed the woman running to the pole opposite his as he started out, unsure, his act as always. Would she follow the same routine as his, mirroring his movements? Perhaps Auberon had neglected to tell him about Emerence Toynbee's participation in his act amid the earlier confusion when his carriage had been broken into. But Eli had a bad feeling this might have been on purpose.

It was a recipe for disaster, he thought, climbing swiftly up the enormous pole. They were bound to make mistakes like this, and it would ruin the act. An unpractised act endangered all of them. The moment he was in the air, he started searching the faces of the rest of the team but they didn't seem to be in the know either. Most of the acrobats went about their jumps as normal, although a few of the younger ones looked upset. Their expressions betrayed shock and they were clearly wondering what to do about the newcomer.

Eli began his ascend higher in the middle of the big top, jumping from trapeze to trapeze and from acrobat's arms to acrobat's arms, turning, twisting and pirouetting in mid-air. The crowd cheered. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the female acrobat. She was occupying roughly the same part of the big top a few couple of feet underneath him, though she was using only the stationary trapeze bars.

Eli raised his right arm, signalling a change to the team. Only the acrobats understood the gesture; it otherwise looked like a casual motion of his before he dived down lower. Running on the thick rope tying together the four poles at the edges of the ring, he watched the acrobats reforming for one of their practise acts. It wasn't largely impressive but they would execute it perfectly while it gave him time to think. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Auberon at the far side of the seats, watching them from below.

'Include her!' he hissed at one of the Trollope twins as he swung by him. Within the next half a minute, his command would have reached all fourteen members of the aerial squad. Now watching the opposite side of the ring, he noticed Emerence Toynbee had climbed down to the rope and was walking on it in a line parallel to his.

Eli jumped, making the spectators underneath him gasp and shout. The last moment his arm shot upwards and caught the rope, causing another round of cheering. Swinging himself, he stepped on it again gracefully. Emerence Toynbee, when he glanced, was doing the same thing, only a second slower than him. From the audience's perspective it would probably looked as if they fell and climbed again on the rope at the same time.

So she was following him, he thought. Now running he reached a pole, caught it and pressing hard against it catapulted himself into the air, grasping one of the trapeze bars dangling by the hands of the other Trollope twin above him. Emerence Toynbee did the same with apparent ease, ending up hovering by the trapeze that Myra Macaulay was holding. The team seemed to have understood they were working with two leading figures tonight and breaking in two had spread over the left and right side of the ring in roughly the same shape they did when working with Eli alone. Half the number of acrobats wouldn't make Eli's routine more

difficult, just doubly dangerous in case something went wrong. Otherwise, he could spare half his squad mirroring his movements on the opposite side under the big top.

All right, he thought, let's see how fast you are. Judging that his half of the team would be at the right places, he performed a series of double somersaults, climbing higher and higher on trapezes just materializing before him when he needed them. The people held their breath, the effect accentuated by the booming noise of the orchestra. He was in excellent shape, not one badly judged grip, and although his squad seemed to respond to his spirals in the last moment they didn't fail at being at the right place at the right instant. They recognized his movements very well, despite having to cover almost double the distance they normally would, now that there were half of them.

On the left side of the big top, the other half of the aerial squad responded equally well, picking up and lifting Emerence Toynebee across the same series of trapeze catchers as Eli's. Her movements were full of grace and she terribly adept, as though she had been training with Eli's team for years. He realized then she must have watched his act and studied it, as it would be nearly impossible to operate functionally amid a troupe of acrobats if one didn't know their movements. This impressed Eli more, if anything, and he wondered what she thought of the programme he had shaped.

A few minutes later, with the first half of his routine completed, Eli started climbing higher and higher in the big top, now unassisted, from one swinging trapeze to another, while the rest of the team climbed down lower and performed slower movements. Circus assistants rushed into the ring, setting up the enormous protective net, tying its edges tight on the four poles under the tent. Normally, this was a precaution that was taken more for the sake of impressing the audience. Nothing communicated danger better than a protective measure, regardless that Eli hadn't fallen during this routine in three years. But tonight it might come in useful, he considered. He had no idea how to proceed from then on. This was the part of his act that he did alone and he couldn't split in two.

He stood on the tall ledge and Emerence Toynebee smirked at him from the other side. There was no ledge there; she had climbed and was hovering upside down from the second tallest bar across him. Absurdly, he thought she looked splendid upside down, her body clearly lined out by her tight uniform. He also noticed that Emerence Toynebee wasn't waiting for his lead any longer but had started out on a routine that was her own and the pattern of which he didn't recognize. He hastened to begin his act. Despite speed running differently for those that were on the ground, if he lingered inactive a few instants longer even the audience would see the discordance in their movements.

By the time he had completed his second round, having traversed the length of the big top jumping from bar to bar in a circle twice, he was amazed. If he had not understood his companion's routine, it was because it was the exactly opposite of his. Emerence operated on those trapeze pieces that were free of him, Eli realized. This was ingenious and his respect for her grew even more. He wondered whether this had been her idea or Auberons; he imagined the old ringmaster advising her to use 'the Eli-free trapeze bars' and he chuckled in mid-air. All in all, apart from the one solid trapeze, the tallest, hanging exactly in the middle of the big top, there were just eight swinging bars. Once Eli realized that the female acrobat was occupying the spaces he left empty, he made sure to direct the catchers at her or leave them swinging at the right speed for her to grasp. It was a subtle action, one that the audience would never even guess at. But Emerence seemed to notice as much, and he thought he heard her muttering 'thank you' to him one moment they crossed under the tallest bar.

She was talented, there was no doubt. Eli was unsure whether even himself he would be able to join another acrobat's routine without exercising with them first. But Emerence seemed to fall into his act naturally, complimenting his raw speed with graceful pirouettes and spirals. He was a rocket traversing the air under the big top in high speed, one moment here, the next there, twisting and turning in powerful motions; she was a fast grace, subtly adding character to the piece, enveloping it in a second, more intricate bluish that contorted and jumped around the primary red that he was.

The crowd was thrilled. Their necks craned, eyes searching and striving not to miss one movement of the fast bodies that revolved above them. Eli relaxed a bit more and, joyful, performed three swift double somersaults that led him to the rope on the far end of the tent opposite the ledge. They were about two minutes from closing their act, but he noticed that Emerence was occupying the ledge now.

This was strange. He hadn't intended to jump from there himself, nor was there anywhere that she could go. Apart from the stationary trapeze, that is. Momentarily numb, he wondered what she was about to do. Then, in a panic, he saw her concentrating hard, her eyes fixed first on him and then on the trapeze. Instinctively, he knew she was going for a triple somersault.

Blazes! The woman was mad. There was no way she could triple somersault her way there. The country would have known. She wouldn't have been signed by Drayden's; she would have been famous, the triple somersault known named after her. Whatever in the name of hell was she attempting?

Wildly, Eli watched her run across the ledge and jump while the audience held its breath. With a mounting sense of terror, he realized Emerence Toynbee was indeed aiming for a triple somersault, but not the move everyone tried to achieve. She was expecting him to be there at the end.

Almost frantic, Eli sprang forward and with a somersault caught on the closest bar swinging before him. Before it had completed its motion he had stepped on it and propelled himself upwards, grasping another. His third jump was performed upside down and he caught on the stationary trapeze with the back of knees, striking the metal hard although as much wouldn't be detected by the spectators. He barely had time to calibrate his motion and secure his legs' grip on the bar before Emerence's hands grasped his.

'You're mad,' he hissed at her face as she swung under him, the crowd cheering wildly.

Had he not managed to climb there in time or had he not caught around the bar well with his legs, they would now be both shooting downwards together. Death in a tangle, as neither would be able to position themselves properly for the fall.

The madwoman smiled at him and let go, landing on another catcher, while he swung around and jumped back on the ledge. Stepping on it, his calves mildly hurting from his earlier awkward grip, he shivered thinking he had just in time realized she wasn't going for the unaided triple somersault. Was his obsession with the move driving him insane?

Eli was about to conclude his act, bowing from the end of the ledge and then signalling his squad to begin their closing manoeuvres when he noticed Emerence Toynbee watching him expectantly from the rope across him. She was occupying the position he had. Was she waiting for him to do the same movement?

Quickly scanning the faces of the crowd beneath them, he realized that everyone seemed to expect as much too. It probably felt like the natural conclusion to the show. It was beyond logic. He had caught her once, but what were the chance they would be able to perform the same marvel twice? She was lighter than him and they had never exercised together before. Would their coordination work again? Would Emerence support his weight and manage to toss him to another trapeze? Or would his bulk make her grasp open or, worse, drag them both under?

The cursed band, picking up at the crowd's anticipation, changed the rhythm to –
impossibly– an even faster one. Eli had no choice in the matter, as it was.

Emerence was a blur in his vision that started to move the same time he did, shooting upwards while he traversed the space horizontally aiming forward and up to the stationary trapeze. He reached the end of the ledge and with a powerful motion shot into the air. Master

of his trajectory, he revolved thrice around his own body, the big top an indistinguishable turning blur. A blush moved somewhere above him and Eli, recognizing his position was correct, stretched out his arms and caught Emerence's.

She held him. The audience let out a loud cheer that rose all the way up to them, shaking the vast tent with excitement. Eli looked up as he swung to meet Emerence's smiling face. Her palms were rough like his. She seemed to be holding him with ease, which surprised him. Then Emerence let her grip relax a hint and Eli felt himself sliding away.

It was a marvel he didn't shout. He would have done so instinctively. Shouting while falling alerted the other members of the team to either catch the dropping acrobat or clear out of their path, a safety measure that was drilled into their instincts by practise. As it was, he hesitated to shout but it wasn't necessary as almost immediately Emerence's grip on his hands had tightened again.

Confused, he looked up to see her grinning madly. She had been teasing him! Sixty feet above the ground. Joking, pretending she would let him go. Apparently, the crowd had caught on to her joke too, for the big tent was roaring in laughter at Eli's startled face.

He felt his cheeks blush. Emerence was laughing too, above him, and when he looked at her she was beaming. She was insane, dangerous, not professional and owned the most beautiful laughter he had ever heard.

Picking up speed mildly, Eli swung around and landed on top of the stationary trapeze above Emerence Toynbee. She grasped the side railing and, once he had bowed to the audience, climbed onto his shoulders, her feet on either side of his neck. From there, she bowed to the cheering crowd of people too. It was a success. Eli felt almost blissful.

While Emerence was climbing down his shoulders, he jumped backwards into the air. The young woman let out a startled shout and he felt her cling on to him, her arms swiftly grasping around his chest. Of course, when he saw the bar passing by the level of his nose, Eli reached up and grasped the catcher.

They swung from the trapeze like that, while the crowd was first gasping and then laughing wildly once more. From the side of his arm, Emerence's face appeared and looked at him. Her expression was startled, then offended, then relieved and, finally, she laughed too.

'We should be clowns,' she whispered in his ear before letting go.

Eli shook his head, then opened his grip on the trapeze too. The acrobats below them had been in position and caught them. Then, they all started their normal closing-the-act manoeuvres.

*

When Eli knocked on Isa's door he didn't get a reply. This wasn't uncommon. London had a curious effect on the traumatized man; he seemed to want to be left alone whenever the troupe was there. Perhaps this was because in London Drayden's grounds were always busier than in any other city they passed through. Here, many artists, workers and performers had family and friends visiting, while it was also the place with most journalists seeking interviews with the troupe's members. Or it was because the city itself held terrible memories for Isa.

Eli gave up when his friend didn't answer the door. He didn't hold this against him. After all, he had been the very first person to discover him all these years ago, when they had both been boys. As he entered his own carriage, washed and changed into better clothes, he remembered that night when he had discovered the other boy.

It had been one night a few weeks after he had joined the circus and, partly because of the heat in the coach, partly due to his own troubled thoughts, Eli couldn't sleep. He hadn't been accustomed to sleeping close to so many other people. Apart from him, another dozen or more boys that worked for the troupe shared the same carriage. So Eli had got up and treading carefully amidst foreign hands, heads and feet in the dark had reached the door and climbed outside. It must have been around three or four in the morning and the cold was sharp. It had also been the first time that the show was visiting London since Eli had joined it; the year was 1868.

Despite the late hour, he could still see figures around in the grounds. This was one of the first lessons he had learned about the circus. No matter the time, there was always someone awake and working, the great machine that the show was never stopped turning entirely. It only slowed down for a few hours so its components could rest.

Eli had lowered his trousers and was relieving himself facing the bushes on the other side of the boys' carriage when a small noise caught his attention from somewhere higher up and to his back. He turned around scared; back then, the circus was still a hostile place for him, it hadn't become home yet. Pulling up his trousers, he searched in the dark, his eyes scanning the roof of the carriage where he had thought the noise had come from. There was nothing there. Probably a stray animal, he thought, hopefully not one from the circus itself.

But something in him had seemed awry, so he didn't immediately abandon the scene. When he was done with his business, he retraced his steps back to the front and the entrance to the carriage. There, he opened the door, making sure he pulled it a bit faster than needed so that it creaked. Someone groaned from inside. Eli removed his shoes and, walking around the

other side of the carriage, returned to the back. He stood in the shadow of the coach where the moon's light wouldn't reveal him and waited.

He hadn't been wrong. Someone had been on top of the carriage. And he had to be around his age, for the boy that silently started climbing down the carriage looked as tall as Eli. The thin figure walked up to where Eli had been standing earlier. He was looking around, likely for anything that Eli might have dropped. So, the boy was an outsider. A scavenger perhaps?

Eli was about to step out from the shadows and address the boy. The thought of turning him in hadn't even crossed his mind, despite having been a member of the tiger band for a few weeks by then. But before he had made a step, the boy had stepped into the moonlight himself and, turning around, faced him.

The reason he had never ran away immediately, which he had also never admitted to Isa, had been that Eli was petrified by fear. He had never seen a burned person before but even if he had, nothing would have prepared him for the sight of Isa's body and face a couple of days after he had ran away from Klyber's. Skeletal, skin burnt and torn and covered in enormous callouses, the other boy was a product straight out of a nightmare.

Isa on his part had frozen in place too. He had been discovered, and Eli was the first person he had met since he had survived the fire and taken refuge one night on one of the troupe's carriages. That first night, neither boy had said anything. Isa had waited a moment and then fled, running into the bushes and the cluster of trees at the end of the field which the circus had rented at the city's outskirts.

Over the next day, Eli had thought about the incident and concluded that the other boy, whichever the reason for his condition and for running away, would probably not return. At night, however, he noticed something peculiar. Lying inside the dark coach surrounded by sleeping boys, he realized a few holes on the roof that they had failed to fill in against the rain now were obscured occasionally. The other boy must be there, moving from one side of the carriage to the other on its roof.

On his part, Isa Malton had returned to the circus for two reasons. In his condition, he had concluded it was his only ticket out of London, which he had decided to give up forever. At the same time, he didn't think the other boy would betray his presence there. In an irony of fate, he had possibly made the best decision, seeing as the troupe would be perhaps the only one place that could use him and employ him. At the time, however, he was still in terrible suffering from his open wounds and in an agony of mind that left no space for structured thoughts. It would be several weeks later that he would actually tolerate the other boy's presence, for Eli started bringing him food at night and insisted on talking with him. Isa would

speak his first words to Eli two months later, in February 1869. Soon afterwards, Eli would carry him down from the roof of the boys' carriage and deliver him to a very startled Auberon one night. Isa had succumbed to his illness, his body had deteriorated due to the cold and the rain to an extreme degree, and he had fallen into a sleep he seemed not to wake from. Since he hadn't climbed down the carriage nor responded to Eli's whispers, the other boy had gone up and discovered he had fainted.

Since that day, Isa Malton had lived in Auberon's coach who slowly nursed him back to health, before presenting him a year later before the rest of the troupe as a new addition to their freak show's characters. So it had been that only Eli and the ringmaster knew of his story. Meanwhile, since Isa became a full time performer and he could afford it, he lived in his own carriage. He had never again been who he had used to be before Klyber's and the fire. Sometimes Eli wondered whether that self of Isa's was as dead as his own was before he had ran away from Hallow. Nor would the Skeleton Man ever be a functional term of society, as indeed many other freak show artists were. That wasn't due to his external appearance but his inner wounds. Isa had grown into a man that was terribly distrustful of others, almost terrified by them. He could barely tolerate another's presence close to him for long and he disliked words. Only with Eli and the ringmaster he entered conversations and even with them he preferred silence. As though the mere presence of another nearby was enough and not much else needed to be discussed.

At any rate, Eli thought now, he would see Isa soon. The following month the troupe was scheduled to leave London again, so his friend would again turn less tense as he used to. Ever since he had discovered and partially helped the younger boy recover, he had seen the progress he had made and hoped to slowly expand his world. Maybe one day he would convince Isa to visit the city with him, perhaps wearing the mask that Auberon had carved for him and which he used when rarely he was obliged to meet other performers or the troupe's managing directors. Eli was never fooled by Isa's persona during the show – he knew it was only as much. The moment his friend stopped being the Skeleton Man and was outside of his act, he reverted to the scared animal he was around people.

The strongman, James Caplan, didn't respond when he knocked on his carriage too and his colleagues informed Eli he had left for the city after the end of the show. This was unfortunate, since the acrobat and the strongman enjoyed going out together and they were both heavy drinkers. Eli knew which haunts Caplan normally occupied inhabited, but he didn't feel like going from one place to another on this night looking for him. On the other hand, he

didn't want to visit the ringmaster again either. Whatever explanation he had for setting him up with Emerence Toynbee's inclusion to his act, it could wait for the time being.

Was it that he was upset? Over what? He recognized that the female acrobat was a tremendous asset for the show and his act. Auberon, as always, had made the right decision. This new star would help keep the troupe together for some time longer. And Eli had been amazed at how well the two of them had coordinated in the ring. Then what was bothering him, he asked himself. He should be happy, but instead he experienced plain anxiety.

Asking around, he learned where Emerence Toynbee's carriage was, on the front side of the grounds near the entrance. It had pulled in the same afternoon, a few hours before the show but the news of the vandalism in Auberon's carriage had overshadowed those of her arrival. Eli approached it and noticed that the lights inside were still on, despite the lateness of the hour. He considered knocking on her door.

But if he was honest with himself, he knew what was amiss. He had liked the female acrobat, a lot, and he wished to know her better. However, as it invariably happened, his fear held him back and his thoughts argued that she was no match for him in any sense other than in the ring. Eli Weathers never felt up to the task. With Auberon's departure from the troupe soon and the show's slow but constant decline, he felt too great a burden on his shoulders. Specifically in regard to Emerence Toynbee, he didn't know how to act either. In the past eight years, his only relationships with women had been casual things. Encounters over the course of one night with women eager to cheat on their husbands, women that were attracted to his physical appearance and whom he met whenever the circus went by their city, or visits to prostitutes.

Eli Weathers was at a loss what to do or say next, so he turned away from Emerence Toynbee's coach and left the circus grounds, summoning a carriage to take him to the city. He would do what he always did in such occasions.

*

Eli brought the glass to his lips. The wine's sweet taste was underlined by the familiar bitterness of laudanum and he lay back on his seat, resting his head against the wall. Although he still visited opium dens occasionally when he was in London, while the troupe was travelling he exercised abstinence from the drug, since he had heard that prolonged use dulled the senses. The habit was a common one among working class people. Even though since 1868 sale of opium had been restricted only to licensed chemists, the drug and its derivatives were quite

common and not yet frowned upon. Eli was only worried that if he got too used to it his muscles might start underperforming.

After a few sips, his mind started running into scenes that had taken place earlier in his life. In a warm state of dizziness, he closed his eyes and let images form in his imagination. An array of different women, lovers from his past, were visiting him, each accompanied by different settings, smells, sounds. He remembered and relived certain moments, his own self the only solid point of reference as the scenery around him changed. Different bodies came and went, women's limbs tangled and untangled around him, light and shadow alternated in his memory. He concentrated on one affair or another, but soon he began confusing them with each other and few details seemed to belong to one woman only.

As this procession of ghosts made its way in his mind, he thought of them, the women he had known and been intimate with. At some point in the past, he had been desired. Would he still be? If they saw him now, would any of them be willing to follow him? It was rare that non-circus folk ran away with artists. The partners of circus performers came mostly from the same world too; people who were prepared to call 'home' a number of travelling carriages and the entire country. And he had been, in the past, quite an insignificant circus member; now that he was a successful acrobat, would things be different? He certainly had not met any woman that was prepared to join her life with his. He suspected they had all cared for him in their own different ways, but Eli had always had a sense that none of his former partners had seen him as a life companion. But, come to it, had he? He thought about them, and yet none of them rose in his mind clearer than the others.

Did he remember them the way they were, he wondered. Or did he remember them the way he wanted to remember them? And why did he see them naked in such moments when laudanum claimed control of his senses? Perhaps of all the times he had spent with each of them, these moments were the most intimate and therefore most important. But if they meant little in the end, seeing as he had never been tied to any of the women in his life, were these memories real? Slightly drunk, he thought they might be just an instinct or a wish, a representation of what he needed and still lacked.

It was true that the circus was his family now and had been for almost a decade. And yet, it was not all that he sought. This, strangely, he had only admitted to James Caplan during one of their visits to an opium den. The strongman had not made a reply. Although he was older than Eli, he didn't have a family either. And Eli would never admit as much to Auberon or indeed to Isa, despite them being the closest to him. And although they might suspect, they didn't know where he went when he wasn't at the circus nor about the gin palaces, such as the

one where he was now. This particular house he had discovered two years ago with James Caplan, and even though the strongman preferred other places in the East End because they were inexpensive, this one had become Eli's favourite.

From the outside, one wouldn't even guess at the business that took place within. The house looked just like any other a few alleys away from the main street. In fact, if anyone noticed it they were likely to think it was uninhabited. Its shutters were fastened and no sound came from inside. The doorkeeper himself stood behind the door, which he opened only if he recognized you through the eyehole.

But if the gin palace lacked in exterior qualities, inside it put up a show that could almost compete with the circus. No sooner had Eli been admitted than he was blinded by an all-encompassing light. Business had been going splendid; he hadn't been here in several months and apparently they had invested in more luxury than he remembered. Proof to that was the entrance hall itself which he didn't remember so bright and which tonight was lit by dozens of sizeable gas lamps.

Upstairs, the comfortable salon had been expanded. It now offered double the space than before and was capable of accommodating an implausible amount of people. As it had been last time, the space was divided in two. The front part of the room, where the stairs from the ground floor led, was lined with three rows of tables. Given that a certain degree of privacy was necessary, the tables, as in many restaurants, were separated from each other by tall wooden screens which extended a few inches into the corridor between the rows. The lights were dimmer here. At the back of the room, a spacious dais featured which was illuminated from above by expensive and decorous lamps. These bathed in light the figures of the women that walked underneath them. Scantly clad, they competed between them for the night's customers. The finery of their appearance was the only common thing the prostitutes had between them, for some lured men just by their sideways looks and silence while others smiled, laughed, reached out over their glasses and touched them or pretended to be shocked by their remarks.

Eli had sat at a table at the end of the second row on his own. Having turned down a couple of advances from the women, they had let him be, assuming he was taking his time before reaching a decision. In reality, he wasn't occupied by such thoughts. His mind kept returning to his past, in which no one female figure stood out from the rest, and to Emerence Toynbee's performance earlier in the afternoon. At other times, when he had been here with James Caplan and others, they had sat at the front row of tables, spending most of the night teasing the women, tossing coins at them and laughing with them. Drunken and delirious, they

had done things he wouldn't dare of doing alone or perhaps at all this moment. He had been loud. The place had seen Eli very different from how he was now and the memory of some of his actions made him uneasy. On the other hand, this was a haunt of his so his steps had led him here almost out of instinct.

It was near midnight now and more and more clients started coming in. This was another reason that the place held an attraction for Eli; it was frequented by high society men, not your common pub dweller. And since entrance was allowed to those who could afford it and to the aristocracy, it complimented Eli that he was included in the guest list. Most likely he was one of the less known customers, given that MPs, famous journalists, actors, lawyers and generally the cream of many high paying professions visited, but he was one of them. The world of the gin palace was a secret world for men, but those who entered it often struck new business deals, forged financial alliances or acquired strong patrons, and it was in a man's favour to be known to others and cultivate relationships with them.

Tonight, however, it all seemed different in Eli's eyes. The wine, the smoke and the laudanum enveloped him in a cosy warmth, but something inside him wouldn't go to rest. As if he was viewing his life through a telescope lens, it seemed to him distorted considering the new burden that Auberon had left him with and Emerence Toynbee's apparition in his act. He felt that he wasn't in the right track. He had lost years to pointless and brief relations, squandered his hard earned money to stupid pleasures, made one wrong decision after another. All of it resting on that first wrong decision, to run away from home and Hallow, which was in turn based on that first fear of his to confront the situation before his eyes. He had been talented and worked hard in the show; his success spoke for that. But as to the rest, he didn't find his own life agreeable when he thought of it and plenty of his actions, he considered, should disgust him although he tried to justify them one way or the other. If he faced the truth, he was alone and didn't know how to shape his future.

From the table opposite him, a woman's loud voice rose as one of the young men sat her without warning on his lap and sent his hands down her skirt. The guards that stood at the top of the stairs glanced over but didn't intervene; the women had to handle most situations by themselves and they were there only to prevent very serious trouble. This, in essence, was translated to making sure none of the clients hurt each other or that a girl got beaten up too badly. After all, their clientele was illustrious; they couldn't afford to offend or send away those who paid so handsomely for this entertainment.

Eli watched dispassionately as the woman tried to talk her suitor's hands out of her skirt. He had seen and done a lot worse. She was merely negotiating her price and the young

man was pressing her to drink more of their champagne. Their coats tossed next to them or the floor, this group was getting louder, as it attracted more attention from the women. There were five men and another two girls had come down from the dais and sat with them, sharing their drinks and engaging in conversation. The man that had made his advances clear to the prostitute couldn't have been much older than Eli. He thought they were of the same age, although he was aware he looked a lot rougher due to the nature of his circus work. The other man's face was clean shaven, he looked flustered from drinking and his blond locks of hair fell sweaty on his handsome face. He had untied his cravat and taken off his waistcoat and braces.

Eli ordered more wine and laudanum and fell back into his thoughts. Ever since he had met him, he felt responsible for Isa in some ways. He himself could likely survive in any troupe but nothing guaranteed that he could take Isa with him wherever he went. Many freak shows would consider him but as he had no agent and communication with him was extremely difficult, Eli doubted that potential employers would devote time to consider or care about Isa's problems. Drayden's tolerated his seclusion and minimal contact with the show's owners because of Eli himself and Auberon who acted as intermediaries. Now that the latter would be gone, would Eli succeed in signing a deal for his friend too, and what would he do in case they only offered him a contract but not to Isa? He couldn't leave him on his own, he realized.

On the other hand he was quite good at it, wasn't he, he considered, accompanying the thought with a mouthful from his glass. Running away. He had been doing it since childhood. The only reason that he had stayed at Drayden's was because the circus, too, never stayed anywhere for long. The troupe's nomadic style required of him just the one devotion, to the show, and everything else, every other tie with the world could be severed. Drinking more, Eli rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

When he woke up, it was a lot louder than before. The ornate clock on the wall told him that he had fallen asleep for almost two hours. Instinctively, Eli checked his pockets to make sure he still had his bearings. The atmosphere was heavy with the smell of food, alcohol and the smoke of tobacco. The gin palace was twice as crowded as it had been and the other side of the table where he was sitting was occupied by another man, who nevertheless paid no attention to Eli closely involved as he was with one of the dais women.

The table opposite his was the loudest. The five young men that sat there earlier had been joined by more and they were almost all engaged in various stages of obscenities with women. The man closest to Eli was offering fifty guineas to his prostitute to drink an entire bottle of champagne herself. She was making an effort while his friends laughed uncontrollably. She hiccupped and vomited on his lap and the floor. He wasn't upset by this at

all; he continued groping her bare bottom and edging her to finish the drink. Another two had obviously paid, for they were already coupling with one of the prostitutes. She was sitting on one of them while the other was glued to her back, standing up. A third from the group was mating with a woman whose back was flat against the table and appeared to have passed out.

Eli averted his eyes. He was neither shocked nor foreign to the sight, one he had participated in before, but there was a certain amount of shame that he experienced at it. He wasn't drunk enough to be here, so he reached out, filled his glass from the surprisingly untouched earlier bottle, and swallowed the clear red liquid.

A few tables further down, another prostitute had fainted on the floor and someone was pouring brandy on her, producing gales of laughter from his friends. Directly next to him, two respectably dressed gentlemen were drinking coffee with cream and tea. Further back, two women were tangled in amorous activities under the directions of a client on whose knees they both sat, their satin dresses unbuttoned for ease. Opposite them, another group of guests was dining, waiters coming back and forth with dishes. Eli shook his head. There was no other place in the world where such a marvel of coexistence between the quotidian and obscenity could be observed.

This time, perhaps because of his empty stomach, the laudanum struck Eli's senses deeper. The gin palace turned into a kaleidoscope of a thousand fantastic shapes and his mind reeled. He was too numb to seek out a woman's company and from the corner where he sat the place appeared to him unimaginably vast, so he resigned to watching the various happenings around him. He didn't have a view of almost half of the tables in the room because of the wooden screens but as the hour was late and the gin palace's activities reached their full swing, fewer and fewer patrons seemed to care about performing them under the public eye. Perhaps knowledge of that intensified the pleasure they drew from it too. Eli was used to the rhythms of the place; the orgy would continue until six or seven in the morning when the servants went out to fetch cabs for those customers that couldn't trust their feet to take them home.

A torrent of laughter rose again from the table opposite his as the man that had been bent over the woman on the table was now complaining loudly. His friends' laughter was hysterical as he announced he couldn't do it with someone that was as unmoving as that woman. Quickly they offered to make up for his misfortune, betting considerable sums between them on whether his performance would improve with a prostitute that was conscious or not, their mirth heightened even further. Calling out, they asked for more women to be sent to the table so they could inspect them and pick the one that looked the most worthy for the task,

while their so far impotent friend had raised a bottle of champagne over his head and was dousing himself with it.

Several prostitutes now came forth, most of them equally if not more drunk than their customers. They either sat or stood around the table exhibiting their breasts and called for the pot boys to bring them more drink and opium. The men started comparing the new prostitutes, offering to test their abilities themselves before their friend did to confirm they were indeed lively. Two of them proceeded without much preamble to do exactly so on the spot, while the rest were still laughing and refilling their glasses.

Eli almost thought he had died, so hard did his heart beat inside his chest when he saw her. It couldn't be. Leaning to his left, he reached out and pushed to the side the man and the woman that had joined his table, while trying to get a clearer view. They grunted but otherwise paid him no heed.

He felt as though struck by thunder as the woman approached last in line after the other prostitutes gathering around the loud table. Her face had changed with time and age but it was recognizable nonetheless. She had a small, pale scar over her right eyebrow and her blonde hair has now dyed black and gathered in a chignon at the top of her head, two long locks escaping and falling on either side of her neck. She had gained weight and her form wasn't as he remembered; last time he had seen her she had had the figure of a girl while now she was a woman, her curves accentuated by her tight garment.

The same effect that the prostitute seemed to have on Eli was demonstrable upon the other men too, for as soon as they saw her a couple of them diverted their attention from their partners and started asking her what her price was. Two of them removed their wallets from their coats and were throwing guineas in their empty glasses, daring her to name any sum she wished. Bewildered, the woman had trouble choosing who to pay attention to, however she was relieved of her dilemma as one of the young men, the one with the open shirt that sat closer to the end of the table, stood up and grasped her arm. He leaned in breathing in her ear while his other hand reached under her skirt and appeared to grab her violently there too, for she was lifted briefly an inch upwards on her feet.

Eli watched, sensing he had breached the edge of his sanity. The man placed the woman with her back against the wooden screen, raising complaints from the clients that sat there and were disturbed, and lifted her green skirt removing his own trousers at the same time. She wasn't wearing any undergarment and once his hand was free of his own pants, he brought it down and greedily plunged it into her feminine part.

In three tall strides Eli was up and next to the man. Before he knew it, he had grasped his arm and pulled him backwards, almost knocking him off his feet by the force.

‘This... is mine!’ the other bellowed in his face.

Eli wasn’t looking at him. He seemed unable to utter a single word, as though his mouth had been sewn shut. Shocked, he was searching the woman’s face now standing less than an inch close to her. Her eyes had widened at his sudden movement and she looked scared as she regarded him. Infuriated that he had been interrupted, the other man was now screaming and cursing in Eli’s ear struggling simultaneously to free his hand.

Next, the man bit him on the neck. Without thinking, Eli raised his hand. His fist connected with the man’s jaw, sending him flying on the table where he crashed with a loud noise. Glasses and bottles shot everywhere round, breaking on the floor, their contents spilling on those around.

Almost immediately, two of the fallen man’s friends stepped up and against Eli. One of them managed to hit him in the stomach while the other fell on him with all his weight from the other side. Eli bounced and caught at the latter’s hair before falling, bringing the man down with him. On the floor, he turned and punched him in the face, kicking and struggling to get up while chaos erupted all around.

Back on his feet, he faced the second man while women were trying to get away in the crowded space shouting and the rest of the group were struggling to approach him. The man opposite him landed a second hit on his stomach but this time Eli didn’t fall. He caught the man’s hand as he dragged it back and crushed his forehead against his own. Like a puppet, the young man dropped to the floor, the bone of his nose broken.

In a blur of colours and bodies, Eli directed his fists in every direction while the other men fell against him, shouting and cursing. He was significantly less drunk and in a better physical condition, but the few hits he received in the head made him dizzy although they didn’t stop him from fighting back. Now the gin palaces guards had been alerted to the commotion and they were arriving at the scene too. Picking up a bottle from a table, Eli swung it with force against the first one’s face as he ran closer. Amid the turmoil, he had lost sight of the woman and he couldn’t see where she had gone.

Flooring another opponent of his, he realized he would soon follow him too unless he found a way out of the room. It was unfortunate that he had chosen a table at the end of the row, because he could see more and more guards coming for him and there was no way to escape. At the same time, the fight had expanded to the nearby tables, where innocent third parties had been hit by accident and were now retaliating.

Eli struck with his elbow one of the young men that was attacking him from behind and he felt his assailant's jaw crack. A blur of green somewhere further away distracted him momentarily and he took a blow to the head from someone to his left. He didn't even feel his knees give way as more blows continued to land on his face and the world went entirely black.

*

The world was pitch dark when he came to his senses again. Fumbling around, his fingers touched something familiar. Straw. So he was back at the circus... How? Had they thrown him out of the gin palace? If so, who had picked him up and why had they deposited him in an animal's cage? Had James Caplan rescued him, meeting him by chance? If that was true, he was extraordinarily lucky. He would expect terrible consequences for the fight he had started.

Getting up on his feet, he looked around and realized there were no windows where he was. It couldn't be a circus cage. Moving forward, his foot came against something and he bent down to examine it with his hands. Another man. Sidestepping the body, he took another tentative step. He counted at least two more men lying unconscious on the floor until he reached the wall and found what must be the door.

'What a great time last night, eh?' he grinned at the pot boy that opened the door to him many minutes later and when he felt his hands hurting from knocking.

The boy didn't make a reply and left him after locking the door again. Climbing the stairs to the ground floor he didn't encounter anyone. There was one guard at the entrance, however, who asked him to leave by the rear exit, his expression neutral. Eli obliged and, discovering a back door, came out into the small alley behind the gin palace.

He considered himself lucky in his misfortune that things hadn't been worse. He felt bruised all over and his face felt as though it had been ironed, but otherwise he couldn't detect any lasting physical damage. If he had been asked, spending the night at the drunkards' hole was probably the best option too. After everything, his captors probably hadn't realized he was the initial perpetrator of the fight and had tossed him in the cellar with the rest that were unconscious from either a fist or drinking. This was common practice at the gin palace, keeping patrons locked up until they had regained their wits and could take themselves home.

It was almost dawn already and the streets were starting to get busy under a dim blue sky. Church spires and rooftops told him exactly where he was and he set out to return to the circus. The city's chimneys were smoking and the poor were coming out for another harsh day

in London. The working people were just now waking and would appear on the streets a little later. Right now was the time of the poor and the drunkards.

Making his way fast through the sleeping streets, his head throbbing in pain, Eli's terror grew more and more as he recounted the previous night's events until he felt he couldn't breathe. But his visit had worked towards his purpose, in a way. He had come to the gin palace with a number of problems troubling him and he was leaving with just one.

He was sure it was Frances that he had seen and come face to face with last night.

*

The following weeks, time seemed to pick up speed for Eli. He was almost always occupied with something and never appeared to be left alone with his thoughts. At first, he had tried to find Frances on his own. Convinced as to his sister's profession, he sought her out in all the neighbourhoods and houses that prostitutes lived as well as in the most poverty-stricken districts of London. He even employed street urchins from the watercress mart in Farringdon and promised to pay them for any information on her. This and asking about Frances at the gin palace or other similar haunts didn't produce any results. Her description matched that of many other girls and whoever he asked they just sent him to whichever woman they thought he might pay to sleep with. Eli was also wary of using Frances's name, which at any rate didn't sound familiar to any of the people he approached. If she was using some other name as women of the streets often did, he didn't know it.

Seeing that his own efforts didn't lead him anywhere, Eli had a private conversation with Punch, whose help he asked finally after some hesitation. Initially the leader of the tiger band at the circus, Punch hadn't trained for any role in the show but had remained with a troupe as a general overseer. He still managed the tiger band, patrolling the grounds and the big top during the show, and was also responsible for many of the troupe's give-and-takes with the outside world. He negotiated supplies orders, undertook payments on behalf of circus artists and performers, delivered private communication, transported legal documents and much more. He was naturally knowledgeable of London's streets and even spoke the language of the hawkers and costermongers in the capital. Careful not to reveal too much, Eli asked him to help trace a long-lost relative who shared the same surname as his own. He described Frances to Punch and hinted that she might be found in the poorest parts of the city, as she had seemed to have fallen into hard times.

At the same time, and having justified his bruised appearance as the result of a drunken brawl, he set out working hard on restructuring his act and balancing it between himself and Emerence Toynebee. The female acrobat turned out a great pleasure to work with and had numerous ideas to contribute which added to their piece's character. His team appeared fuelled with more enthusiasm than he ever remembered and he organized a vigorous training schedule. Their new act attracted bigger and bigger audiences and the troupe advertised it as phenomenal among acrobatic achievements. Although he rarely shared a private moment with Emerence Toynebee, he felt all the more warm towards the female acrobat and he had a sense that his feelings were reciprocated but he chose not to act on them yet. At any rate he was very confused about the future, unsure how to court her or whether he even should, since that would complicate matters further with their now joined act, and postponed thinking about it until later.

In the meantime, Auberon had contacted the show's managers and owners in London and had submitted his resignation. He would stay with the troupe until the end of the month but would not follow it, for the first time in five decades, when it set out again in February. The year 1877 would find him setting his home in South Bank, where many artists and performers lived. The area had a bad reputation, being in the outskirts of the city and attracting many shady elements, but he said he felt at home with the artistic community that also inhabited it and was growing there for the last few years. Eli experienced a torrent of emotions at the imminent leave of the ringmaster and sought to spend as much time as possible with him, avoiding however the subject of what he would do in regards to the future.

Auberon had, as it turned out, signed Emerence Toynebee at Drayden's himself, after seeing her perform one night and thinking she would bring new life to the show. He had convinced her that even though Drayden's was much smaller than other shows, she would be a first rate star there and if she played her cards right she would define the show's direction and evolution. According to what was discussed between performers and as Auberon confirmed, the show's owners were not happy with the profits the troupe had been making for them lately. They were thinking of selling their shares to another company, perhaps Astley's or Sanger's. The merge would be the end of the troupe as they knew it, since the contracts most artists had didn't bind them to following another company. Eventually, they would disperse everywhere. Many of the equestrians had already been approached by Hughes Mammoth Equestrian Establishment only a few days ago while other artists had been made offers individually from other shows and venues. It felt that the troupe was about to collapse and only the update of the acrobats' act obscured the waters for a time being, temporarily solidifying the troupe members' trust to the show and preventing them from leaving.

While Eli saw a lot of Auberon those days and they discussed at length, this came in contrast with his meetings with Isa. His oldest friend was more aloof than ever and seemed keen to maintain his isolation as never before. On the couple of occasions that Isa admitted Eli into his carriage, the latter made sure to be brief and not to burden him too much with his presence. He made casual conversation and refrained from sharing his own worries with him about the troupe. Assuming that Isa's past was still haunting him and not wanting to trigger painful memories of his by mentioning Frances and his bereavement about her life, Eli remained silent on this subject too. He wished he had the means to somehow help, however the other man appeared lost in his own predicaments and more often than not failed to answer the door when Eli knocked on it.

While Punch continued inquiring about Frances, using his own subtle methods in the streets, no news about her turned up and Eli became increasingly anxious. If there had been a time in his life that he had been unable and powerless to act, he now just wished for a small margin to allow him to do so. The thought of what Frances had become tormented him more than any other worry and he could not comprehend how her life had turned to that route. He hoped that finding her he might be able to help her and he devised plans to take her with him when the circus left. She could work for the troupe or not even have to do anything at all; he was prepared to support her, which in his mind was equal to saving her.

But Eli was worried that he had lost her once and for all after that night at the gin palace. As Punch too seemed unable to discover anything about Frances, Eli started wondering whether she didn't want to be found and was avoiding coming in touch with him. He was easy to trace; a few inquiries about his name would be enough to know he worked at Drayden's and almost everyone knew that the troupe was in town. Furthermore, Frances could have stayed behind and contacted him the morning after the events at the gin palace. While he had been thrown to the drunkards' hole, she must have escaped. What prevented her from contacting him? Another possibility was that she hadn't been alone, that she was working for someone and was consequently trapped from seeking out Eli. But even then he should have been able to discover her, posing as client. He didn't know what to assume and so he waited, however losing hope the more days that passed without any signs of Frances.

At the end of January, a week before the troupe was scheduled to leave again, Eli gave up looking for his sister entirely. As it turned out, Drayden's had one final breath. They would tour around the country until summer, when they were expected to return to London. Everyone anticipated that this was the show's last journey. The owners seemed to have decided to let the show run for another four months before selling their shares to other companies when the

troupe was in the capital again. This decision was based on the mild hope that Emerence Toynbee's addition to the troupe had inspired and on the slight increase of profits that the acrobatic act's renewal had affected. At the same time, a couple of fires that had broken out in the capital resulting in the deaths of some prominent personalities had diverted the public's attention, while Drayden's owners were hoping for more publicity to increase their profits from selling the show.

Amid these developments and the anxious atmosphere that prevailed in the troupe, Eli felt hopeless to pursue looking for Frances. Until then, he checked once per day with the street urchins and Punch but none of them had anything new to report to him. In a moment of desperation and as he felt increasingly tortured and responsible for Frances, he decided to write to his parents. It was an awkward, dry letter that he addressed them but he hoped they might have some piece of information that would lead him to his sister's whereabouts. He addressed the letter to his father and arranged for it to be delivered within the week. In it, he never explained the reasons as to why he had ran away but summed up the last eight years of his life at the circus. Nevertheless, he stated his hope that both his parents would forgive him for his absence and wished them well, begging them for any piece of information about his sister. He sent the letter and didn't expect a reply.

A week later, the day before the troupe departed London, three separate events took place that entirely altered whatever plans Eli had made. First, Emerence Toynbee walked with him to his carriage after morning training. Eli's conversation was awkward, nevertheless he thought he imparted to her an idea of his feelings and intentions. She, using very few words, responded in kind, proving to him –and to his surprise– that their interpersonal coordination wasn't limited to acrobatic acts under the big top. She was overt about the fact that encountering someone like him at that moment in her life was a wonderful coincidence. Eli realized that to her, her future seemed bright and that she saw him as an equally hopeful part of it. He refrained from telling her of his personal worries and the troubles his family was in, deciding to wait for a better moment for explanations and struggling to envision the same plan as she drew it in her mind. He wished she could follow her in that dream; they could be a couple of successful acrobats, free to sign to any show after four months and pursue an independent career. But she knew neither of Frances nor of Isa and the other ties that held Eli back to Drayden's troupe.

Later the same morning, Punch knocked on his carriage door and entered visibly excited, his face flustered. He hadn't found Frances, as he immediately stated. But he had disregarded Eli's instructions and ventured to inquire about her in higher circles. A woman who was definitely not Eli's relative had arranged to meet him and from what he inferred, she

had heard of his enquiries and at the same time must be a highly paid escort. She had admitted him into her personal coach which was allowed in Rotten Row, from which fact alone he knew that the woman must be the mistress of someone very important or alternatively an extremely expensive prostitute since only the very wealthy were allowed in the King's Road. That was also the reason that a personal coach was the biggest dream for many women of the streets; once they had access to one and if they could hoodwink their entrance into that highway between Kensington Palace and St. James's Palace, they could obtain the wealthiest clients. Punch had been disappointed that their meeting had taken place during the day; he had said it would have been a unique opportunity to see the highway at night. That was because Rotten Row was artificially lit by more than three hundred lamps and presented one of the most beautiful spectacles in London.

Pressing him, Eli realized that Punch had been distracted by the woman and the brief journey and had otherwise not obtained any meaningful information. She had refused to say how she knew that he was looking for Frances Weathers, had at first assumed that Punch was Eli, and finally the woman had extended an invitation to Eli himself to visit her at her apartment in Oxford Street to talk. As Punch explained, she had never expressly promised to tell Eli about Frances's whereabouts or occupation, but her whole behaviour had hinted that she was leading to that.

And finally, before that afternoon's show, a letter had arrived for Eli which he received only moments before entering the big top for his act. Distracted, he gave the boy that brought it a few coins and excused himself from the rest, leaving the training grounds to read it alone. He had to join the team for their number in a few moments, but the address on the letter was his once home address, from Hallow. The letter itself was short and had been dictated hastily to a neighbour, who had also read his correspondence to his parents, by Eli's mother. Harriet said that she knew nothing about Frances's whereabouts. She was glad that her son was alive and had finally contacted them after all those years, mentioning briefly her failed efforts to find him, and she begged him to return to Hallow as promptly as possible. Eli's father was dying.

Chapter Two: Frances

Frances Weathers knew who she was. What she couldn't bear was the shame she experienced standing before someone who knew the person she had once been. Out of her two selves, she preferred the past one. But she couldn't help being the one that lived in the present. Her young life having been spent on the streets and in houses of ill reputation didn't change the morals she had grown up with, although time and the circumstances had taught her how to avoid confronting them.

She was still afraid that a group of fancy-men would knock down her door any moment and drag her back to Swyft's or, worse, leave her and take the girl with them. She knew that the moment Maudslay became aware of her flight, the vast network of bullies employed by her or otherwise connected to her business had been alerted. Even though Frances herself hadn't seen any of them with her own eyes, she had been in the streets long enough to know they were out looking for her. She only hoped that no harm came to her brother because of her.

In that respect, it was a positive note that she had been using the name that Maudslay had given her all these years. No one would make the connection between her brother and her real surname, so Eli should be safe. At the same time, she had been careful to rent the apartment in Oxford Street under Paulina's name. Frances was sure she would have been caught if not for her. Paulina Dawson had proven herself to be a friend she could trust, though little could Frances do to repay her in these final days that were left to her.

Moving with a certain degree of difficulty behind the white curtains, she looked out into the street. The busy anthill that the crowd resembled seemed so cheerful to her. She couldn't see any bullies waiting in corners and doubted that they would ever imagine she had taken up lodgings here of all places. She felt a pang low in her waist and wondered how soon after receiving the message her brother would take to come to her.

She realized she dreaded this meeting and at the same time craved to see him. Her brother had been the only other person, apart from her parents, that knew her as she had once been. To the rest of the world she was a prostitute. But they, those three people that were her direct family, had no knowledge of Frances's present, only her past self lived in their memory. Did that make her feel better? The knowledge that a 'pure' part of her still existed in other people's minds? Perhaps, but chance had also ruined her reputation for her brother.

That was the reason at first she hadn't wanted to contact her brother. Had he happened to meet her in the market, by chance on the street, anywhere but at the gin palace, she would have been overjoyed to greet and talk to him. Perhaps she could have concealed a lot about her current situation and protect him from knowing who she was and what she had been through. Now, he irreversibly knew how she made a living and, what more, he had witnessed that awful scene in person. She had been terrified when out of all people in the world her own brother appeared at the gin palace and stopped the man who had been her client. His face had come close to hers and she had instantly recognized him despite the years and despite the beard covering a great part of his features.

Frances moved from the window to the large table in the middle of the room and picked up the notebook that lay on it. Its covers were tattered and cracked in places. The girl, seeing her move, got up from the chair where she was playing with a doll and approached her. Frances opened the notebook and leafing through it slowly showed her the pictures that were inside.

The girl looked up at the man's face in the photographs. It was a young man, quite handsome, although his face seemed to grow sterner as Frances turned the pages. All of the photographs had been cut out from newspapers. They started out small and they became bigger and bigger as well as better in quality. The man's face in them changed too. When he was younger, he seemed shier in the pictures. In the last ones, his expression had changed to more confident and he sported a wide smile in a number of them. His uniform, too, was different from photograph to photograph, while occasionally other people were photographed next to him. In the last pages the man's face had a thick black beard, although the girl could still tell it was him. He was some sort of athlete, judging by his appearance.

Frances showed her the photographs and smiled at the girl, hoping that she would come to recognize her brother and not feel threatened by him.

'Eli,' she said to her, pointing at the last photograph in the notebook and touching the man's face with her finger.

The girl repeated the name, looking at him. When Frances seemed lost in her thoughts, staring at the photograph, she left her side and went back to her doll. She was only six, she got bored easily.

Frances thought it was almost a blessing that she would be reunited with her brother after all these years. She hoped he would help her despite her life, at least for the girl's sake. She had been surprised to find out, through Paulina, that Eli had been looking for her after that night at the gin palace. Before he had attacked the other man, when he had come face to face with her, he had looked so much like Jon Weathers that Frances had thought she was staring at

her father for a moment. Then, she had tried to forget about the incident and carry on with her plan, until Paulina told her that a certain circus acrobat was asking around for her. That had changed her mind; perhaps he wouldn't condemn her as their parents would. And perhaps Eli would help.

Desperation was the other reason that had driven her to get in touch with her brother. She would have been glad to remain a ghost for him, as she was sure up until now he hadn't known anything about her life. But in her condition and as she was on the run, she doubted she could save the girl on her own.

Another pang from her belly made her want to moan and Frances retreated again to the window. She sat down in the big armchair by it and bit her tongue trying not to shout. The pain was getting worse and she would soon have to resort to the medicine the doctor had prescribed for her and which Paulina had bought for her from the chemist, a mixture of cannabis indica, ethanol, belladonna, morphine and heroin, as well as aromatics. She didn't know what some of the individual substances of the syrup did, but the concoction certainly dulled her pain. It also made her very drowsy and clouded her thoughts however, so she had to postpone taking it until after she had met with her brother.

Watching the street behind the glass for Eli's figure, her face partially concealed behind the curtain, she fought against her conscience one more time. Frances hated that she had to add this burden to Eli's shoulders and could she avoid it she would have undertaken to make the journey herself. As it was, that proved impossible for her. Eli was her only hope in this respect and she wondered whether she would have to convince him to offer his help. Paulina could be trusted, however she wouldn't be able to leave London. The woman had already done too much for Frances just by not telling on her and helping her hide.

How curious, she thought now, that at her hour of worst desperation an even better possibility had come along. She had been almost ready to give up, when she decided to risk everything, and her luck had turned. Her plan had been to go out one last time and acquire enough money to guarantee a safe passage for the girl. Knowing she couldn't make the trip herself, she would have to pay a lot to someone else that she didn't know and now chance had brought to her someone she could trust, perhaps the only person that she could trust, her own brother. Before the encounter with Eli, she had dyed her hair dark and ventured out without telling even Paulina about it. She had chosen one of the most recent gin palaces in the outskirts of the city where she knew few of Maudslay's girls worked. The doorkeeper there owed her a favour and had let her in. Once inside, it had been easy to pretend she was one of the dais girls, since most of them didn't care about each other nor worked together, and it had been even

easier to blend in especially when everybody was drunk. The moment she had found a client and was ready to subject herself to one more martyrdom of a night, her brother had appeared out of nowhere and instigated a fight.

Of course, she had fled almost immediately when chaos started spreading around her. There was bound to be talk about the incident and she had to think of the girl, she couldn't let herself be recognized by anyone. So she had to abandon her brother. She had been relieved to hear over the next days that he had been all right after the fight. Now, however, Frances was once again troubled by his presence there. She couldn't explain her brother's apparition at the gin palace as anything other but divine providence. He was a man, of course, so she was sure he had walked down the streets at night before but she couldn't imagine him as one of the men that regularly inhabited the gin palace. Before recognizing him, she had glanced at his direction and had just noted a solitary man at the corner, a couple tangled on the other side of his table. Perhaps he had been there with them, the couple could have been his friends. Apart from drinking, she hadn't seen her brother with any of the women there and she believed he was above that sort of behaviour. He must be. She dreaded what his opinion of her might be, but any more there was little she could do about that.

Among the crowd of people down in the street, she thought the gait of one of them seemed familiar. Raising her neck slightly, she concentrated and sure enough, her brother's figure stood out as he walked on the opposite side of the road. Standing up, she put on the veil hat she wore as a precaution, rang the bell, opened the door of the apartment, and when a servant appeared she instructed him to let in the man that would very soon call in on her and who would give him the name 'Eli Weathers'. The servant nodded and withdrew.

When Eli walked in, he noticed the girl first. She was sitting on the floor with her doll and looked up at him when he opened the door. He hadn't expected to see a child apparently, for he just stood and stared at her. The girl, he judged, couldn't be older than six or seven but her appearance was nevertheless striking. Her hair was a light shade of brown, almost resembling the colour of honey, she had big green eyes, and all around her nose spread pretty freckles that granted her an expression of innocent mischief. She was dressed in a beautiful white dress with frills. Wondering who the child was, Eli's greeting to her came out awkward.

'Oh... Hello there,' he said, still standing at the threshold.

The girl stared nervously back at him.

Frances almost couldn't speak at the sight of her brother.

‘She doesn’t speak English,’ she finally managed to say and saw Eli turn startled towards her. As she stood unmoving by the window, her dress the same white as the curtains, he hadn’t noticed her at all.

‘Her name is Virginie, it’s French,’ she carried on, ‘but I’m trying to get her used to ‘Virginia’.’

Eli took a step towards her, hesitated, then crossed the room in three big strides and threw his arms around her as she stood up. The girl was staring at them with her eyes wide, uncomprehending why their meeting was so emotional for them. Soon she got bored and resumed playing on her own.

When the siblings broke their embrace, Frances wiped her eyes while Eli stood in front of her still not trusting himself to speak. He had been shocked to see her first of all, as he had been expecting to meet the woman Punch had described, but the embrace had also worried him. Even though it didn’t show, under her dress Frances had felt very frail and thin. Inspecting her closer, he saw the lines on her neck that revealed how bony she had grown and he wondered whether her health was failing.

When she could control her voice, Frances asked him to sit down. Noticing that the second armchair was in the other side of the room, she went and started to drag it closer to the window with effort. Eli was next to her in a moment, picking it up easily himself.

‘Let me do it,’ he offered and noticed the grimace on her face. There was something wrong with her, no doubt.

‘Thank you,’ she just said.

There was something terribly wrong, he realized, for that simple effort seemed to have exhausted her. She was breathing heavily as if she had just stopped running.

Sitting by the window close to each other, Frances asked him whether he would like some tea. Eli refused; he wasn’t keen to be interrupted by serving staff now that he was seeing Frances for the first time in eight years. He began saying something about the other woman whom Punch had met, struggling to find a point to begin their conversation but Frances interrupted him. She told him that she would answer all his questions in due course; it would be better if she began telling him a few things and begged him to just sit and listen to her for a while.

Relieved, Eli sat back into the white armchair and studied her face as she prepared to tell her story. Frances had prepared for this conversation beforehand and had put in order the things she had wanted to tell him. There was just one question she needed to ask him beforehand.

‘Have you been in touch with our parents?’

When Eli nodded affirmatively to her assumption that he hadn’t, she shook her head, confirming that she knew as much, and picked up her story.

‘That day, when our father sent me away from home...’

She started from Hallow, from the day Jon Weathers had taken her with him to Birmingham and left her under the care of the woman whom he thought to be Mrs. Swyft. Without entering into explicit detail, she explained their father’s grave mistake and the deception that had been played onto him.

With mounting horror, Eli listened as Frances told him more about the woman. About the revelation that her name was Maudslay and about what she did. His face contorted in anger and fear when she told him, struggling to find the right words, about the first house where she had been taken.

‘Are you sure of this?’ he asked, his face a canvas of conflicting emotions. ‘Are you sure our father had no knowledge of who this woman was?’

‘I am certain of it,’ Frances replied.

Eli seemed to have his doubts, but waited for her to speak again.

‘It wasn’t punishment that our father sought out to pay me. He merely couldn’t forgive me for what happened, nor could he stand living with me any more. I am certain that neither he nor the persons he consulted to meet Maudslay had any idea of her real identity or business. It was all a tragic mistake.’

Nevertheless, Frances stressed, she never blamed their father. Jon Weathers had made a mistake, but she had never held him responsible for what followed in her life. Eli kept his thoughts private from her, as she had asked, and fought to make his face a mask not betraying his panic at what he heard. He had realized his sister’s profession but he had never imagined or guessed at the depth of how tragic her story had been.

Frances then told him about Swyft’s and how the business operated. In the past eight years that she had been tied to it, the establishment had changed its façade innumerable times. They kidnapped young girls or convinced parents from the countryside to deliver their daughters to them, always under the pretext that they ran an institution meant to place those girls in respectable situations. Most girls either came from extremely poor backgrounds, from families that couldn’t afford to raise them and were hoodwinked into believing that their daughters would have a better chance in life if they attended *Swyft’s House of Society Ladies*. A lot of them either had sexual relations that brought their parents into conflict or had been the victims of rape. All were admitted into Swyft’s where, as their families were promised, they

would be taught useful skills and, when they had reached the appropriate age, found a match for marriage.

‘It is impossible that no one has done something about this!’ he exclaimed at some point. ‘Surely the authorities must be concerned, surely someone else knows about this and has told the police about it.’

‘It is not that simple,’ Frances retorted. ‘These people, they have a lot of powerful connections and there are persons in places of authority that not only make sure to conceal their existence but even support them in what they do.’

He seemed infuriated, and momentarily Frances was reminded of his reaction that night at the gin palace.

‘In the end, if it is something that doesn’t afflict you directly, you may easily overlook it,’ she said. ‘We are the poor and the insignificant of the world; why would you think society would care about us? Why would you think other people would care, when they can forget our misery and not tarnish their own lives with the burden of it?’

This came to him like a blow and silenced any argument he might have posed. The colour faded from Eli’s face when he comprehended the size of the organization and the numbers of girls and boys that were under its control. Frances had just been one of them. And while Swyft’s mostly kidnapped girls, many boys too fell in their hands though the majority of them came from London itself: either orphans or street urchins that had been tricked into joining the establishment. Choosing her words slowly and carefully, Frances explained to him that the children were rented out to clients, while abuse also came from the fancy-men who were employed to shadow and guard them at all times. What Eli experienced was sheer terror when she revealed that a small sum of the money Swyft’s made from the children was forwarded to their families to keep up pretences and maintain the institutions façade. The parents were told this money came from the textiles or clothes their daughters were learning to make and selling. Unknowingly, Jon and Harriet Weathers had been receiving a small sum from Swyft’s every few months for five years which came from their own daughter’s exploitation.

‘This can’t be. It just can’t be,’ he said and buried his head in his hands.

‘It is true,’ she said. ‘Our parents have been paid money that came directly from my abusers,’ Frances said, somewhat harshly. She was keen on conveying to him the seriousness of the situation and although she detested that he would have to suffer this knowledge – the girl, she had to make sure he cared ultimately about the girl.

Eli stood up clasping his hair in distress, momentarily insane by these revelations, but Frances caught his hand with hers and begged him to sit down again. She realized revelations of this scale over a period of years handed down to him in a few sentences was a great burden to hold. He did as she told him, now looking at the girl in the other side of the room who was staring at him, upset at his sudden movement. Now he was curious whether this child too was one of them, what horrors she had witnessed, and he wondered what she was doing with Frances, why was she staying with her? As for what his own sister had been through, hearing it had seemed to open up a chasm in his chest and he felt a tremendous darkness enveloping him at her words.

Seeing her brother's reaction, Frances calibrated her words more carefully. She felt dispassionate relating her life's story any more, but at the same time she didn't want to agitate her brother more than was necessary. She also wanted to impart to him the significance of what she said. It was up to her to convince him to help her.

'I am telling you all this for a reason,' she continued. 'Not just to torment you with images of my own life.'

At that, Eli seemed to regain his composure and concentrate on her features again more determinedly than before.

'I wish I knew earlier,' was all he said and allowed her to continue talking once more.

So she disclosed to him how the organization worked and what sort of persons were involved in it. Seeing a number of emotions reflect on Eli's face ranging from frustration and pain to rage, she told him firmly that she would not reveal to him the identities of any of the people that worked for Swyft's.

'This is the last thing I want to do right now. I am not disclosing to you this information to turn you against them, both because I wish no harm comes to you and because there is a more pressing matter ahead of us.'

Moreover, she explained, the establishment couldn't be brought down by a single person nor was there any chance of confronting its members publicly. They took care for their operations to be secret and of course many in high positions in the government or the aristocracy knew of its existence, simply because they supported it. It would be years and years before society as a whole and the law dealt with this crime, and it would take a lot more than a single individual's efforts to bring down such a multitudinous organization.

Eli made to protest but Frances remind him that she had invited him for a reason. She needed his help for something, something that she could not do herself, and risking his own

safety was not her purpose. Threatening to quit telling him anything further, she convinced him finally to be silent and listen to what she had to say.

The first years away from home had been the most difficult for Frances. Apart from the terror inspired by the daily abuse itself, she was trapped. Bullies shadowed her every movement even when she was judged old and knowledgeable enough to be sent to clients on her own. It was a nightmarish feeling, walking through such a big city full of thousands of people and knowing you were trapped and not a step of yours didn't go unnoticed. Naturally, she had tried to run away and hide almost immediately when she was told to seek clients on her own or was given directions to visit them on foot. She was caught by the fancy-men in no time, and more abusing and beatings took place after every attempt at rebellion she made. Leaving Swyft's was impossible, unless one somehow managed to board a ship. But the girls were at all times watched by their bullies and Swyft's had eyes everywhere. Beggars, prostitutes and street dwellers gave them information. Some of the fancy-men were always posted near the wharfs and would be alerted immediately if a child went missing.

'So there was no one you could turn to,' Eli said darkly.

'No one,' she agreed, 'and perhaps that was for the best. Who knows if I wouldn't have endangered another, too, trying to save myself.'

The initial horror that Frances had experienced at Swyft's changed to disgust and self-aversion. A degree of fear always remained with her, for it had been strongly imparted to her that the consequences of trying to escape were severe. But as any creature of life whose instincts teach it to survive even under the most adverse circumstances, she grew used to the abuse and controlled herself to tolerate it. During all her years at Swyft's she had met a tremendous number of people, abusers and victims. Of the latter, she had made a few friends, the last remaining of which was Paulina, the woman that was currently helping her and had contacted Punch on her behalf. Others either never came as close as her or had disappeared on the way.

While she talked, Eli watched her face, her hands and her gestures. It was difficult and at the same time painful to imagine his own sister in the situations she described. She looked older and changed than the memory of her he had kept from childhood, but he still found it difficult to believe the terrors she had witnessed. A part of him, he realized, just didn't wish to believe all these things about Frances. More careful observation, however, betrayed that her words were horribly true. She bore long-faded marks on her hands, old scars that now were mere discolorations on her skin, but most of all the directness and honesty with which she

described all the terrible acts done to her was testament to the fact she was used to them and had accepted them as part of her life.

By the time Frances was an adult, she continued, there was no other option for her but to carry on with her life at Swyft's as it was. Many of the girls when they got older –if they didn't end up dead before then– married fancy-men or, most often, clients. Rarely did any of the prostitutes get a respectable employment and set up a household. Most of them, if not all, became too acquainted with drinking and continued in the same profession, always under Swyft's eye. The institution never really allowed any of its girls to escape. If they thought one of them might threaten to expose them or talked too much, they made sure to make her disappear. So, when older, most of the women became procurers themselves or joined the rest of the capital's numerous prostitutes. It was, to all means and purposes, a community of its own which Frances had never managed to escape.

'Until when did our parents receive letters and money from these people?' Eli asked. He was still, pointlessly, trying to figure whether Frances could have been saved earlier at some point in time.

'There was never something they could do, once I was away from home,' Frances told him.

At the end of two years since she had joined Swyft's, Maudslay stopped forwarding money to her family. By then, Frances learned a lot of things that happened inside the establishment and had been informed about this. She didn't know whether their father had travelled to London to see her, but Maudslay, under Mrs. Swyft's persona, had told them that Frances was now married and had left their employ. In reality, nothing had changed for Frances. She was as ever sent to clients and was allowed to walk the streets on her own.

This went on for some time. When the girls got older, they had the choice to continue acquiring clients through Swyft's or become independent, although that word was more of a façade as everything else. The bullies always pressed them for money, ostensibly for the protection they offered, and even if a girl found clients by herself, Swyft's was everywhere. She had to pay for picking up men at the streets that were considered their own or give them a commission if she met their clients in one of their houses.

Although Frances faced an inner torment regarding her life, she had taken care to better at least the conditions in which she lived. Since her looks made her very popular, she could after a couple of years choose her own customers. Renting a carriage together with Paulina and bribing the guards, they gained entrance to Hyde Park where many wealthy men were to be

met. Slowly, she had been saving money although this endeavour had proved extremely difficult due to the constant pressure from the bullies and Swyft's.

In the last two years, Frances had been able to afford entire weeks at a time without visiting a client. As ever, it was impossible to escape Maudslay or the bullies, but she earned enough to keep them at bay and not have to be on the street all day long. She wasn't proud, she said, of this. Her life had become a little better but she knew she could never be forgiven.

At that point Frances stopped talking, noticing Eli opposite her. He had buried his face in his hands and was weeping. The girl, Virginie, had heard the man cry too and was regarding them curiously from the other side of the room.

Frances reached out and held Eli's hand, though after a few moments he withdrew it.

'This is my fault,' he said and Frances didn't understand what he meant.

'I could have done something,' he said.

When he had regained his composure, Eli told her about that morning in Hallow. That he had seen her when the man had forced himself on her and that he had done nothing. He didn't try to justify himself; he just said he had been afraid.

'Had I done something just then, perhaps he would have left. Maybe nothing of these would have happened.'

This thought had troubled him for years, ever since he had ran away from Hallow. He believed it was his inaction that had torn apart their family. His guilt was that he hadn't intervened but let things happen before his eyes and take their course, which had proved catastrophic. However, Frances interrupted him once more. She was shocked at his words and had never known that Eli had been present at that field back then.

'What you saw,' she clarified, 'was not an act of violation. I went with that man of my own will.'

Eli stared at her, his eyes red.

'What? Who was he?' he said.

'He was a young man from Hallow. You never knew him; his family lived further out, by the coal mines near Stourbridge. I fancied myself in love with him, at the time,' she blushed and for a moment she looked different, as if innocence had returned to her once more.

'I had met with him a couple of times at Hallow when I was there on errands for our mother. That day... we got carried away, in the field. I never thought our parents would find out.'

This piece of information hit Eli like a fall from the trapeze on solid ground. Frances went on to explain how Harriet had discovered the blood on her dress and told Jon Weathers about it.

‘He was the only man that ever treated me kindly,’ she said. ‘I still think of him sometimes. But I was not raped, nor there was ever anything you could have done to prevent the course of my life.’

Eli was weeping quietly now and he stood up. Frances got on her feet too and embraced him. It was curious, such a tall, strong man crying uncontrollably. She regretted that he had carried this burden with him all this time, thinking he had been the reason that she had been sent away from home. She didn’t guess that Eli had ran away due to this; he would tell her later, when he was calmer. But seeing as he was still shaking and as herself she felt ready to give in to emotion, she tried to divert his attention.

Leaving him, she went by the table and came back with the notebook that she placed in his hands. She opened it, urging him to look at the photographs of him she had collected in the past years.

Eli stared at his own pictures uncomprehending.

‘If anything, you have been a hero for me,’ Frances said, trying to smile.

The first time she had seen a photograph of Eli in the newspaper had been in 1872. The news then had been about the introduction of the secret ballot in the voting system for the first time in the country. The controversy this law had spurred was substantial, to the degree that one of Frances’s new and wealthy clients, also a member of the House of Lords, insisted on discussing the matter even with her. Of course, Frances had no opinion on the subject nor could understand the man’s fierce hatred of the measure. When he had fallen asleep, and as Frances had to wait until he was awake again for him to pay her, she had leafed through the newspaper he had been condemning earlier, looking at the illustrations and the photographs. To her great surprise, there at the page before last, next to an advertisement about Peek Frean biscuits, was a picture of her own brother. He had changed but she had immediately recognized him among a group of children and men next to tall horses.

Frances had begged her client to read the article to her but the man, after glancing at it, had dismissed it as a report about a circus. She had torn the page and with the help of an older girl at Swyft’s who could spell had learned that Eli was working at Drayden’s Travelling Circus.

‘This, to me,’ she said, ‘was fantastic. It felt like receiving news from another life.’

She had been both mystified and proud of him. She did not understand how Jon Weathers had ever allowed his son to pursue such a career, but she kept the photograph and made a point to learn which circuses passed by London. Then, in November of 1872, three months after she had discovered the photograph, she saw him at the show.

Eli was staring at her overcome by emotion, his hands trembling as he held the notebook she had been carrying with her all these years. He remembered those times too, it was one of his very first shows as part of the equestrian squad at Drayden's. At the time, he would have never guessed that his own sister was watching him from somewhere among the crowd under the big top. His eyes watered again.

Skilfully, Frances avoided telling him that she had thought of approaching him just then, looking for him around the grounds after the show. By then, she already felt filthy and ashamed for what she was. And of course, fancy-men were always close by. She wouldn't have been able to contact anyone outside the establishment without them learning about it. Instead, she explained how she made a habit of looking at the newspapers whenever she could afford them, searching for photographs of him.

'For me, you became something of a charm,' she said. 'I was so excited every time I discovered news of you, especially after I hadn't found a photograph for months. I read about you, from time to time. I know you stopped being an equestrian and became an acrobat three years ago, in 1873. There was an article about your number. It came with... with this photograph.'

She showed him. Eli looked at a younger version of himself in the notebook.

'See? I read about you and your news gave me courage. I knew not everything was wrong in the world. One of us had become someone to be proud of and I was very happy for you.'

Frances avoided telling him that she hadn't watched another show of his after that first one. That she was too afraid he might see her in the grounds and recognize her. At the same time, she didn't exaggerate the impact his news had had on her. He had become her only solace in dark hours. At least, even though she could never dictate the course of her own life, her brother could. The more his fame grew, the prouder she was of his achievements and a part of her was happy despite the life she was living.

They sat down again and Eli made to return the notebook to her. Frances pushed it back into his hands.

'I want you to keep it,' she said.

Then came the worst part of the speech she had prepared for him. Bracing herself, she held his hand in her own as she picked up the last part of her story. The acrobat's hand was rough, but she didn't doubt she was about to inflict to him the worst would so far that nothing could have prepared him for.

First, she stressed to him the many times she had tried to escape Swyft's. By running away, stealing and getting herself imprisoned, all of which had failed and bore horrible consequences. When she thought he was conscious of the danger the establishment represented, she moved on to her illness.

'In October, I started noticing spots on my skin and scabs in my hair. Do not look for the signs,' she said, following her brother's eyes. 'A woman has many ways of changing her appearance and concealing these things. At first, I ignored them. But soon I discovered it was more than just some passing ailment.'

'What are you talking about,' he whispered, dread surging in him one more time.

She had contracted venereal disease, one of the most common causes of death for women of the streets. Once she had confirmed the fact, there was little she could do. Frances had chosen not to wither away slowly in a hospital, which at any rate she could barely afford for long. The doctor she had consulted had explained that he could not help albeit by prescribing her medication or making sure she was admitted to a hospital; in either case, there was no cure. They could only prolong her time at the Lock Hospitals where they treated prostitutes with the disease, however it would be over soon. Wisely, as it turned out, she had chosen not to tell anyone other than Paulina Dawson about the fact she had contracted the disease.

Frances then turned her face to Virginie, pointing her out to Eli.

'At about the same time, Maudslay brought in a bunch of girls from the Continent. This is common. They always bring girls from abroad. From Paris, Italy, the Balkans. Most of them take years to learn the language and they don't speak a word of English when they are brought over. At the end of October, Maudslay brought *her* in too,' Frances said, avoiding to speak the girl's name aloud.

'She assigned her to me, to prepare her for our best clients.'

Frances saw Eli's jaw clench as she carried on. She explained that as one of Swyft's most precious women, Maudslay thought it was time for her to advance her position to a procurer. She wasn't getting younger, too. Three months ago, when the girl had been brought from France, Maudslay had given her to Frances and instructed her to negotiate the highest price for the girl's virginity.

Frances had pretended to do so for a day.

‘I felt sickened talking to men about the girl and praising her beauty to them. But I played my role and I played it convincingly, as any good actress would.’

The following night, she had taken the girl and fled the apartment she stayed in at Swyft’s. It was almost a miracle that they had remained hidden and hadn’t been discovered all this time. This, mostly due to luck and thanks to Paulina’s help. The money Frances had been saving for years were just enough for them to rent an apartment in an inconspicuous area of the city where her captors wouldn’t think to look for her. She had dyed her hair black, rarely left the house, and took great efforts to conceal her face when she did.

But her only friend, Paulina, could only help so much. Frances had sent through her a description of the girl and her name to some authorities that were in Paris, after much trouble and almost insurmountable problems. But nothing had come of it.

‘She is only six,’ Frances said. ‘We found out her parents’ names in French but she doesn’t know where she used to live, nor her own surname. We don’t know where she was taken from, whether it was a city or a village. She just says she lived at home.’

As her money was running out and she was dying, Frances had decided last week to venture out one last time. She would make enough money in a night to buy a ticket to France and take the girl there, even though she knew she might not survive the journey. Fate, she said, had sent her brother in her path that night.

‘So I decided to talk to you about it,’ she concluded.

She told Eli that if not for the girl, she would have never got in touch with him. Spared him the burden and horror of knowing all that she had just divulged to him.

‘I am ashamed to look you in the eye,’ she admitted, ‘and I know how wicked my life has been. I never wished you to know all I have been through. And I always knew since my first year at Swyft’s that I will never be free. But I can die free, which is some consolation.’

Eli was looking at her, lost for words. Once more realizing his part in the greater story of things was pre-dictated by others, and that there was only a few things he could choose to do.

‘I wish to entrust you with the girl. I am asking you to return her home. Saving her, saving even one life, is important.’

By the time Frances had finished talking, Eli was again crying silently next to her. He didn’t know which of all the events he had heard was the most tragic. In the space of an hour he had found again his sister and learned that he would lose her once more forever. All the torment that she had been through had never been his fault but he had also never imagined to

what it amounted. And with him, on the other side of the room, was now a girl who was sought after by every fancy-man in London along with his dying sister.

*

Eli left the apartment in Oxford Street late that night. He returned an hour later in a carriage that Punch was driving, which would take him and the girl back to the circus. Frances had taken her medication and was dizzy when they parted. Right before he left, she was almost delirious. He put her in bed and held her hand, promising that he would find the girl's family for her. This seemed to give her courage and a faint smile appeared on her face. She had forgotten to ask him, so she did now: had he kept in touch with their parents? Did he know how they were?

Eli told her that he had had news from Harriet a few days ago and that they were doing well. Frances made him promise to lie to them when he saw them again and to never let them know what their daughter had become. Then she took her medicine and he helped her get into bed to rest. She was still whispering his name, he thought, when he went out the door.

Holding the girl's hand, small as a starling inside his palm, he looked into the street and stepped out in the dark.

Chapter Three: Isa

Isa Malton had never seen the acrobat so upset in the past. He had always seemed to him to take problems in his stride and be ready to overcome any difficulty he was facing. At first, Isa had thought of not answering the door but Eli had persisted knocking and Isa finally felt obliged to let him in. Something was wrong. It had to be brief, however, for there was something Isa needed to do soon.

When a few minutes later Eli had finished relating to him his story briefly, Isa understood why the acrobat was in that state. Even in the dark of his carriage, where Isa never turned on the lights unless he was alone, he could read the agony on his friend's face. Moreover, he guessed that Eli hadn't told him the entire story or had perhaps chosen not to stress some details, careful not to place Isa himself in a painful position. After all, the acrobat was one of the two people who knew Isa's past.

'What are you going to do now?' he asked when Eli stopped talking.

'I will travel to Hallow overnight,' he said. 'I must.'

Isa didn't show any signs of protesting, but Eli continued:

'There is no transport at this hour and even if someone offers to take me on for part of the journey, I am afraid I won't make it in time. I will take Arundel and ride there.'

Isa nodded. From what he understood, Eli had taken the girl that his sister had entrusted to him to Auberon. She would stay with him, since the old ringmaster wouldn't be following the circus, until Eli returned to London. The old man had tried to change Eli's opinion on quitting the show, although he couldn't see how to avoid this either. In the end, he had accepted Eli's resignation and had taken it upon himself to inform the managers and sign on his behalf the necessary documentation.

'This is a letter for Emerence Toynbee,' Eli said now, placing on Isa's table a small envelope. 'I'm asking you to make sure it's delivered to her once the troupe has left the city in two days. Not before then. Auberon has promised to keep the reasons for my disappearance secret. He will claim I quit due to family reasons. But if anyone makes the connection between me and my sister, I too as will be in danger as well as the girl who already is.'

Isa nodded to show that he understood. In Eli's presence he almost felt as if his appearance was that of any other man's, since the acrobat had spent so much time with him all

these years. Still, he was often surprised at Eli's lack of a reaction when looking at him. People gaped, stared horrified or, rarely, seemed amused.

'I also wish to leave you responsible for my carriage,' Eli said.

Isa nodded again.

'I will travel to Hallow and return to London as soon as I can,' he repeated his plan for perhaps the fourth time, as though repetition made it safer or more possible. 'I will take the girl and travel to France in search of her family. When I have returned her to her parents, I will seek out the troupe again.'

At that point he stopped, as he had done before. Isa felt a nagging sense of worry at the idea that Eli would be away from the show. He might not be re-employed when he returned; they both knew as much, although neither said it.

'Keep in touch with Auberon and expect news from me. If all goes well, by the time the show comes back to London in four months I will have returned and we will meet again,' Eli said and getting up he left the keys to his carriage on the table.

Isa rose from his seat too. He offered the acrobat his hand.

'We will,' he said and didn't flinch at the other's touch. 'Take care of your family and, when you return, the girl. We will see if they sign you again in the show once you're back. For the time being, it's no use worrying about that.'

Isa knew that Eli's worries didn't end at whether he would be employed again by Drayden's. After all, the acrobat would be offered a contract by most shows if word was spread that he was looking for work again. Isa sensed that his friend's uncertainty had to do with the woman, Emerence Toynbee. Even he, from his isolation and as he watched the world of the circus behind his windows, had seen something growing between them. And of course, Eli was also worried about him. Isa felt touched that he was so significant for the other man. His friend thought he would face greater difficulties now that neither he nor the ringmaster would be around, and he would. But there was a lot about Isa that neither of them knew. He would cope.

'Do not worry about me either,' he said as a final remark and Eli looked up. He hadn't realized Isa was reading his thoughts.

'Concentrate on yourself, the girl and your family,' he repeated.

Eli gave him a last look, nodded and stepped out his door. Behind his window, Isa watched him heading for the troupe's stables. A few minutes later, the sound of hooves announced him and he passed before Isa's carriage mounted on Arundel, a small travelling sack packed on the horse's back.

Isa Malton waited for another hour until midnight and then he started preparing for the task he had ahead. He didn't find it difficult dressing in the dark of his carriage; he normally kept his lights turned off. The set of clothes he put on now had never been used before. In fact, they were brand new and he had sent a circus boy to buy them for him a couple of months earlier, when the troupe had been in Manchester. There was nothing particular about them. They were plain clothes, the only function they served being that no one had ever seen them wearing them before. The same was true for the pair of shoes he wore. These he had stolen one night a few weeks past from the doorstep of a house. He was certain that no one in the troupe knew that the Skeleton Man enjoyed walking about at night in the villages from where they passed. Lastly, the hat that he retrieved under his bed he had ordered by post some time ago through Eli. He had claimed he would use it at the show, though he never had.

When he had finished dressing, he examined his reflection in the mirror. The lights outside his carriage weren't strong enough for him to see details, but other than his face he appeared a normal man. His hands were covered, as always, in thin black gloves.

Isa brought the mirror and rested it on the table, sitting across it. The small box of cosmetics had been surprisingly the easiest to obtain, considering he was someone that almost never had contact with other people other than Eli Weathers and the ringmaster. But the ladies of the troupe, as everybody, carelessly left their windows of their carriages open at hot nights and he was sure none of them would miss these items of small value. Opening the box, he realized its contents were likely just enough for tonight's disguise. It was fitting, he thought.

Dipping his fingers into the compartment that held the white substance, he applied paste all over his face. Slowly, carefully, his fingers covered his skin with the colour as though building himself a new face. He resembled a ghost in the mirror. Then, picking up the black pencil he drew eyebrows over his eyes and left a softer trace of dark directly over his eyelids, since he had no eyelashes. In the end, with the red pencil he drew the shape of a mouth around his almost non-existent lips.

It had taken him a tremendous amount of time and effort to learn how to create a face for himself in the past years, but looking at his reflection now Isa was more than satisfied with the result. Only someone staring at him face to face, unmoving, and from a close distance could tell he was wearing make-up. As a side thought, he considered he enjoyed the word, which he had heard people say outside his window a few years ago. It was a new term and perfectly described what the substances did for him. Make-up; they made up a face for the man that had none to show for.

As on every other occasion he had ventured out with the same purpose, Isa watched closely outside his carriage for a long time to ensure that no one was lurking about in the vicinity. Most performers and workers had either turned in for the night or were out, in the city. When he felt assured that nobody was close by, he climbed out of the window on the back side of his carriage. Landing effortlessly and without a sound on the ground, he entered the adjacent empty field and walked across it, his figure vanishing in the dark.

He had to walk a wide half circle before he entered the city from further away in order not to give the impression that he was coming from the circus. Once he left the fields and entered a neighbourhood, he was certain his disguise was working. People didn't as much as glance at him. Isa walked fast, conscious that if he kept in constant motion, as any pedestrian in a hurry, his features were less likely to be noticed. He was a blur against the canvas of the city.

An hour later he had crossed the Thames and was walking at the centre of London. The city was a marvel, at least to him who rarely ventured out in crowded spaces. During the show, people stared at him and all eyes were turned on the disfigured skin of his body. Here he was just another passer-by, hurrying to get home or meet his friends for a drink after a late night at work. He remembered the streets from his childhood. Much had changed and much hadn't. More streets were illuminated with lamps and the people seemed more than he remembered when he had been a child. Still, at night London was joyous. People were coming out of theatres, the opera, restaurants, and the pubs were open, the heart of the night where everyone's ways converged. Beer houses attracted the most customers, although in other areas there were cafés, opium dens and various other venues. The streets were alive and full of life; standing out among the passers-by he saw the usual signs of poorer inhabitants of the capital, the poor, the beggars, street urchins, but those were only one small element in the overall picture. Occasionally, Isa noticed police officers too, who also stood out due to their uniforms.

He realized he felt almost exhilarated walking among others, which was odd considering what he was about to do. Furthermore, the troubles that Eli had related to him had cast their share of pain on him too through their friendship, but perversely at the moment what he experienced was joy. He would worry about his friend later tonight and he would mourn with him when he returned. For the time being, this outing marked the last of a series he had undertaken with the same purpose.

In total, Isa Malton had been responsible for seventeen fires that had broken out in London in the past four years. Tonight he would be starting his last one, which also marked the same amount of years he was becoming. What made this last fire different from the rest,

however, was not only that it would be the final act but also the particular target it would consume was not the same as that of the previous ones.

Slowing down his step, he remembered that first fire he had started four years ago, in 1872. He had been in the troupe as part of the freak show already. Back then, he still used to watch the show sometimes together with Eli, who waited for him after participating in his own act with the equestrians. Among the crowd, Isa had seen none other than one of Klyber's friends and clients. There, before his own eyes, the man was sitting together with his family and children, enjoying the show. It had been that image that had instigated all the rage within him, as until then Isa had never considered seeking out revenge for what he had suffered.

Stopping only for a moment to orientate himself, the stark contrast of his purpose with the purpose of the crowds around him struck him as odd. But of course, he never expected any of them to understand. His life had been imbalanced and it wasn't after all that his own process of thought had become imbalanced too. When others were going out seeking companionship, pleasure or entertainment, he was there with the motive of murder.

This was one of the things Eli Weathers would never find out about. Isa was certain that his friend was a good man, but Eli could never understand what *he* had been through. Therefore, he also didn't seek to make him understand. It was entirely his own decision to avenge the people that had made him what he was. From a different perspective, he felt justified for his actions thinking that their death meant they were prevented from practising the same acts to other children.

Isa also found it fitting that his victims were consumed by fire when himself he had survived it. He had been led to it, that fateful day when he was running away from Klyber's chaperone and had been forced to jump into the burning building. He had managed to get through it to the other side, but not before he had caught fire himself and lost every inch of the skin that covered his bones. When he thought about it, it was a marvel that he had survived the burns his body had sustained. It was an even greater marvel that he had ended up hiding at the troupe where he had later been nursed back to health by the ringmaster. Sometimes, he considered it divine providence both that he had made his way through the burning building and that he had survived afterwards.

According to his plan, however, he made sure his victims had no means of escaping the building after he set fire to it. He was always extraordinary careful with his plan. Of those former tormentors of his he had traced down the years, he studied carefully their homes or offices. He only proceeded to set a fire when it was late and the offices that belonged to them were empty, so that they would sustain financial destruction but no one else would be hurt. Or

when he targeted them in their homes, he made sure that by the time they realized the building was on fire there was no escape and that only they and their direct family were threatened, no third parties.

This was another reason that Isa could not and never would speak of his plans of revenge with Eli. His friend would have been appalled to find out his actions had threatened the lives not only of Isa's former abusers but of their spouses and children too. Eli would instinctively consider them innocent. Isa, on the other hand, was of a different opinion. The concept of the family didn't number high in the list of statutes he respected. Regarding his rapists' spouses, he felt they should know who they were married to, even though he knew this wasn't always possible. As for the children themselves... He wondered whether the children of such men would ever grow up to be kind and harmless. He didn't assume they would turn into the monsters that their fathers were but, as persons, would they grow up with different values than those the monsters that their parents were ingrained them with? Isa doubted it. And in his own paroxysms of anxiety, he also felt he had to deprive his former abusers of their offspring. They had made sure he never led a normal life nor could ever experience the joy of a family. Why should they?

Thus Isa Malton believed he was protecting Eli by not making him an accomplice to his actions and shielding him from knowledge of them. He was grateful for the kindness that had been shown to him by his friend and the troupe which he considered his home, but he didn't delude himself. Deep down, he considered himself to be nothing but the monster others had made of him. After tonight, once he had been rid of the insanity of revenge, he would strive to live a harmless life, seeking his own peace of mind and contributing to the troupe as any other member of it. And this night, his target was the culprits whom he held responsible with the utmost blame. His own parents.

Isa Malton hadn't seen his parents in eight years, not since he had been trapped at Klyber's manor house, escaped the burning building and become the Skeleton Man at Drayden's. Until lately, he considered them lost or dead. His victims had been those few of his past exploiters that weren't protected by forces that would be impossible for him to overpower. Klyber himself had fled abroad a couple of years earlier, undoubtedly continuing his operations in another country. Of those abusers of his he had traced down, some he had burned alive and others he had ruined their property. The skills he had acquired at the circus through training and observation, as well as his own careful planning and deliberation, has made for his triumph of escaping undetected. No one suspected him remotely and no one had made a connection with Drayden's, since fires of a small scale such as these were a common occurrence in many

parts of London. But until last month, when Drayden's had returned to the capital, Isa hadn't either planned or expected to meet his parents.

It was by coincidence that he had recognized his mother on one of his peaceful wanderings at night in the city. Until then, he thought he had completed his task and experienced a certain peace with himself, leaving his past be and considering the degree of revenge he had claimed to be enough. The sight of Margery Malton, however, drinking with another woman at the window of a rakish pub as he went by filled him with an unprecedented rage. It had been exceptionally easy to follow her where she lived, to a hut a few neighbourhoods away. It was a common wooden shack, of those the poor used to inhabit in unoccupied fields just where the houses ended on the east side of the city. Isa had lurked nearby and sure enough, his father's voice had echoed when she had stepped in. After eight years he recognized it immediately.

Since that unexpected meeting, Isa had watched the Maltons as closely as he could. Of his sisters he didn't know what had happened. They weren't living with his parents any more, therefore he assumed they had moved somewhere on their own or had married. Remembering his childhood and the knowledge of the streets he used to have, he had spent several nights following either of his parents or watching their home. They didn't have visitors and they certainly lived there alone. The few beggars that resided in the vicinity he could easily avoid by turning into side streets so they would never see him and remember his appearance later.

He just hoped that his parents were home that night.

*

They weren't in when Isa arrived at the Maltons' household and he was forced to wait for several hours until they appeared. Without surprise he noted that they were both inebriated and shouting at each other, fact to which their uncoordinated movements betrayed even from a distance.

He waited until they had entered and the light inside the hut had gone out. Almost half an hour later, when he judged they must be asleep, Isa left his place in the other side of the field where he had been sitting among a fence of bushes. The dampness of the night had left him shivering, however the sky was clear of clouds and he didn't pay attention to the discomfort of his body.

Crossing the field and approaching the small building, he dragged behind him the heavy stone he had found which he would place outside the door. The shack had no windows and had

likely been a stable for sheep that had fallen into disuse. Its walls were made of stone and the wooden planks that comprised the roof had big holes in them but at the same time were too high up to be reached as an escape route.

Isa opened the shack's door slowly, careful not to make the slightest of noises. Nothing could be heard from the inside. Standing on the threshold, he spotted the pile of rags and clothes he had seen before in the corner of the room by the door. Retrieving the scarf which he had doused in ethanol from his coat's pocket, he felt that the material was dry but it would catch fire easily nevertheless.

He struck a match and the scarf lit up with a blue flame. Holding his breath, he listened but there came no sound from the shack's interior. Leaning in, he dropped it on the pile of clothes by the door, waiting until he had seen them light up in flames too. Then he stepped backwards, closed the door, and placed the heavy stone against it at the bottom.

He waited. Nothing happened inside and he could see the light of the fire through one or two cracks on the wall's bricks. His heart beating fast, he wondered whether the Maltons hadn't been there, whether he had imagined them returning. Maybe they had gone up to the house and then continued behind it. But his logic stated that was impossible. There were only fields behind the shack and he had seen the couple entering the hut with his own eyes.

At last, a scream of his mother alerted him as to the situation inside. Peering through another crack on the wall, he made sure that the wardrobe next to the pile of clothes, a rickety old piece of furniture someone had undoubtedly donated to the Maltons, was now burning too. Soon, his mother's shrieks were joined in by his father's shouts too. Isa remained behind the door a few moments longer, until he felt a body from inside dropping on it with all its force. It didn't budge. Although poor, shepherds took the safety of their herds, no matter how small, seriously. The door, despite rusted, was a tall piece of metal with equally strong hinges. The stone against its base was as good if the door had been locked.

For good measure, Isa ran away to the other side of the field even though he was certain no one was passing by at the moment. The shack was situated on the back side of the field adjacent to the road and even if someone looked over from the last houses on the street, he doubted they would see him. The smoke, as well, that was starting to rise over the roof also couldn't be visible from a distance yet. When he was back at the fence of bushes, Isa noted that he could barely hear his parents' screams. The brick walls muffled them and he couldn't tell what their last words were.

When he had judged enough time had passed and thought he couldn't hear their voices any more, he ran again to the shack. Opening the door marginally and careful for the flames

not to jump out at him, he peered inside and saw the bodies of Margery and Isambard Malton lying on the floor. Most likely they had passed out by the smoke, which was now coming out in large clouds. They would soon suffocate and their bodies would be consumed by the flames.

Isa removed the stone from the threshold and carried it further away with him until he tossed it in a ditch. He remained at the edge of the field for some time, watching the shack burn. No one came and no one went out from it. When the roof itself had caught on fire too, he turned around and took a wide route around the neighbourhood back into the city and, eventually, the circus grounds.

Chapter Four: Hallow

The horse wasn't young any more but it had been used day after day to dragging a coach, so with only Eli on its back it sped through the night like a bullet. Arundel would tire out sooner or later and they would have to slow their pace, but for the time being their course was a gallop on the highway north of London.

Eli clutched the reins with such force that he thought his bones might break, while his legs held tight on either side of the horse's belly. He was terribly in the clasp of fear once more, only this time he felt as though he was running against it, not from it. As if it was a race, he sensed he was acting his best to overpower that invisible force ruling his life. He didn't know whether he would make it in time to see his father alive. He had also left Frances behind, alone and in pain, although that was her wish. He had quit the only place he called home for the past eight years, abandoning his closest friend and the community that had nursed him to the success he had achieved. He must be mad. He also didn't forget Emerence Toynbee and the unique feeling the female acrobat had inspired in him. He wondered what she would think of him when Isa delivered her his letter and whether he would see her again. Eli was uncertain if he was making the right choices. And behind him, in the city that he was now leaving, there was another soul that depended on him, the girl Virginia whom he had promised to protect and return to her parents.

He had travelled the highway too many times in the past to be intimidated by it, even at night. Thieves and bandits were always a possibility and he was riding alone. But since he had been eleven he had passed by these routes on horse, with other boys of the troupe, riding before the show to announce it to the next town. He knew, even in the dark, which places to avoid, which less known routes to take to shorten his journey, where the ground was most likely to collapse under the horse's hooves if heavy rain had preceded him. If he kept a steady rhythm in the small hours of the night he would cross Oxford and if Arundel made it, by dawn he should be arriving at Stratford-upon-Avon and Worcester. All these years, the troupe had never again travelled to Hallow and when it had stopped in Worcester, Eli hadn't ventured closer to his old village. But he trusted that his memory wouldn't fail him once he was there and that he would remember the way from the small city to the place where he was born.

Pressing his spurs against Arundel's belly, he urged him on, speaking encouraging words in his ear. The horse neighed in affirmation, dashing forth through the dark as if it had been training for this race all its life.

*

Harriet was sitting on the curved trunk of the yard's fir tree. When Eli came out of the house, he saw her and he remembered playing there with Frances when they had been small. The tree had grown sideways as a result of Jon Weathers resting an old plough of his on it and when in later years it had been removed, the trunk had acquired the shape of a seat before growing upwards again. The space was just enough for one person, and Eli and Frances used to take turns sitting there and swinging their feet under the trunk.

He made sure his eyes were dry and then approached his mother. Her face seemed to light up when she saw him and when Eli went to her she didn't move from the tree. She just rested her head against his chest as he stood next to her. He wouldn't tell her that Jon Weathers had just passed away, quietly in his sleep, a few moments earlier. Not yet. It made no difference, but at the moment he felt a vast emptiness originating from inside him and spreading everywhere around and he sought to be with her for a bit longer, before having to tell her and witnessing her pain.

On the other hand, Harriet had been a strong woman. When Eli had arrived at dawn the previous day, she had cried but it had been tears of joy that escaped her, for seeing him for the first time in years. Even so, she had composed herself again quickly. Eli understood. Her life had been rough and she had learned to handle it in the same way it did her. Demonstrations of emotion had little place in it.

His father had been diagnosed with bronchitis a week ago. When the first signs of the illness had appeared, months before Eli's letter, Jon Weathers had dismissed them as a common cold. Later and when they had turned more severe, they hadn't known what it was and done all they could to battle the illness but it was already late. As there was no doctor in Hallow, when one had finally arrived from Worcester, only the week before, he had confirmed what they already knew. By that time, the symptoms had affected the worst. Jon Weathers had great difficulty breathing, was paralysed from the waist down, and had gone blind in his right eye.

Nevertheless, he had cried at his son's appearance and had insisted that he spent every moment he was awake with him. This hadn't been enough for either of them, Eli thought, as

his father now slept most part of the day due to his medication. Furthermore, he was exhausted after every attack of the disease, which left him shivering and coughing blood on the bed.

The conversation Eli had had with his father had been more difficult but also more brief than the one with Frances. Jon Weathers had asked him why he had ran away, although they already suspected it was because of Frances's absence. This, Jon Weathers called his worst mistake and he told his son that he regretted ever sending Frances away from home. He had thought he was doing the best for her while in fact he had condemned both his children. Eli chose in his last hours not to make his torture greater. He told both him and Harriet that he had found Frances who was now happily married in London. Jon Weathers had, in fact, two years after sending her away and when communication from Swyft's had ceased, travelled to the capital but had been unable to discover her address. Of Frances's story, Eli told nothing to his parents and he concealed the true identity of the establishment from them.

As for himself, they had feared he was dead until that letter of his arrived unexpectedly. As the circus never again passed by Hallow after that one-time accidental detour, they hadn't heard of him or realized what his profession was until he told them. Jon Weathers wasn't particularly overjoyed to learn that his son had become an acrobat and he remained sceptical when Eli described to them the crowds that came to see his act. On the other hand, his father had been impressed by the transformation Eli had gone through in the past eight years. He had grown into a powerful man which was obviously the result of hard work, and Jon Weathers commended that. Eli gave Frances's notebook to Harriet, telling her that she had given it to him when they had reunited at last a few days ago. Harriet's eyes had watered again when she leafed through it and watched her son growing in the photographs.

And now it was all over. Eli had been by his father's side when the latter fell asleep in the middle of a conversation they were having. He had remained next to the bed, but suddenly the man had gasped and stopped breathing. Eli had shaken his father, calling his name, but Jon Weathers had passed.

Now he extended his arm and embraced his mother as she leaned against him on the tree. When she looked up at him, he realized there was nothing left that he had to tell her. She knew the moment Eli had stepped out of the house that her husband was gone, and without words she pressed her hand inside her son's and wept quietly.

Eli would stay at Hallow one more day and attend his father's funeral. After it, he would ask Harriet whether she wanted to join him at the circus or live with him in London. He offered to start a different career if it meant living with her, but Harriet turned down both proposals. She could never get used to the ways of a travelling troupe and she had never been to London.

The big city held nothing for her. Hallow was the place where she had grown up, married, and lived all of her life. Eli then said that he would stay, which to his surprise again she objected to. She told him that this would always be his home but urged him to continue his career in the circus. As for herself, she could manage the household on her own. Their neighbours were good people too, they would help if she needed anything.

Although it pained him to leave her behind, Eli understood Hallow wasn't the place where he wanted to be. Not yet, at least. He promised that he would send her money to support her and visit every time that he was in the area, keeping in touch with letters. And to ease her pain at the hour of separation, he told her that he might have found someone to join his life with. This had brought a faint smile on his mother's face and it was all that mattered.

For himself Eli wasn't certain about anything in the near future. He just wished he saw his sister again and then returned the girl to her parents before chasing after the troupe, Isa and Emerence Toynbee. He would see Frances one last time in London two days later, although it would be the last. When he returned from Paris, his sister would have already passed.

Epilogue

A blue-bottle buzzed outside the window of Emerence Toynbee's carriage. The fly was such a bright colour and gleaming that it reminded Eli of some of the beads that Auberon used to weave in his beard when he had been the ringmaster.

Eli had visited the old man a couple of days ago, but he hadn't managed to convince him to return to the troupe. The old ringmaster had said he was growing tired and a quiet life watching the boats going up and down the Thames suited him better these days. He had become a doorkeeper at a small theatre on the South Bank, which Eli thought didn't fit him but the man seemed content with.

On his way to Emerence's carriage, Eli had stopped a circus boy and asked him to see if Mr Malton was available at the moment. The boy had returned almost immediately, perhaps a bit shaken by the meeting with the Skeleton Man, saying that Mr Malton indeed was available, so Eli had made a detour to see Isa. While he still avoided meeting people outside the show, Isa's duties were now such that Eli couldn't represent him or make decision on his behalf for all of them. And that, because in essence half of the troupe's assets belonged to him.

When Eli had returned from France, a few weeks before the end of April, Drayden's was still in Newcastle. However, even while he had been away he had maintained correspondence with Isa and Emerence, learning news of the show, through Auberon, seeing as he didn't have a stable address in France. It had proved impossible to trace the girl's parents in Paris, even with help by the local authorities. Eli had a choice to leave her in an orphanage or persist in his search, and so he had sought the girl's family in other cities as well. He wrote to Auberon every so often, letting him know which was his current address and until when he could receive letters there, and he in turn forwarded his correspondence, when it arrived in London, to Drayden's. It was with the old ringmaster that Eli stayed when he came back from the Continent, to wait for the troupe to return to the capital.

As Auberon had predicted the year before, the show's managers sold their shares of the troupe's property to other companies. However, Drayden's didn't disperse in terms of its workforce and human resources. The key elements of the show, as well as many peripheral artists and performers didn't sign new contracts with other circuses, as Eli had anticipated. It had been a strangely emotional moment when Isa had offered him his seven years' worth of

wages to re-establish the troupe under a new name. Equally moving had been the trust most of Drayden's artists had shown to him, accepting him as their new manager.

On the other hand, the *Eli Weathers and Isambard Malton Travelling Circus* was technically not yet travelling. It could afford to pay its performers and workers for the next six months, period in which they hoped their profits would be enough to acquire more carriages and necessary equipment. If all went well, at the end of the year they could be a travelling troupe again. Both Eli and Isa believed and calculated that this was possible. The announcement that the acrobat was back, as well as his signature move, the two-part triple somersault with Emerence Toynbee, had sparked enough enthusiasm and had been publicized in the papers as one of the season's most exciting spectacles.

So Isa had met Eli, who wanted to pass on to him news from Auberon as well as hand him a new contract he had signed with a promising aerialist to be included in his number. Their meeting had been brief although cordial as always, and after stopping at his own carriage Eli continued on his way to Emerence's.

Standing outside it, he had been distracted by the blue-bottle at the window but if he was also honest with himself, he was nervous. He had seen Emerence plenty of times since the troupe had returned to the capital, both in private and during the show where they hovered together in their act under the big top. And although they had talked in length about his decision and she supported it despite a degree of danger that it entailed, the fact remained that she had never met the girl before since until then she had been living with him at Auberon's house.

He knocked on the door and when Emerence opened, smiling at them, he gently motioned the girl inside before him. He followed, still holding her hand, and caught Emerence's hand as well.

'Meet my daughter,' he said, 'Virginia Frances Weathers.'

Anxieties of the Historical Novelist
Reconstructing the Past in Fiction

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Nonexistence of Historical Fiction

Herein lies a delicious paradox: historical fiction, I will argue, is neither strictly historical nor entirely fiction. At the same time this also underlines its magic as a genre, in that it somehow most often succeeds in appearing convincingly to be both when it is neither.

When Einstein rejected Newton's concept of absolute time in favour of a relative perception of the time continuum,¹ he was echoing the words of British philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart on the unreality of time:

Positions in time, as time appears to us *prima facie*, are distinguished in two ways. Each position is Earlier than some, and Later than some, of the other positions. And each position is either Past, Present, or Future. The distinctions of the former class are permanent, while those of the latter are not. If M is even earlier than N, it is always earlier. But an event, which is now present, was future and will be past.²

While the study of the quantum universe has concluded that time possesses only a relative value and exists solely based on our individual perspective, the same argumentation can be used to reason that history, too, is an abstraction established only in relation to an arbitrary point of reference. History, we could say, does not exist – or it does not exist outside us. In the same manner that time is a human invention to place a number of events in certain order for the sake of reference, the fabric of history is also an invented construct subject to and defined by human perception. There is no one historical moment that can be experienced objectively or shared between people in the exact same manner; instead, there exist only moments in time which are perceived subjectively by different individuals, who furthermore impose on them their own thoughts, interpreting, translating and valuing them differently. We may conclude then that history is non-existent (at least in a holistic, objective point of view).

¹ Albert Einstein, *The Meaning of Relativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

² John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart, 'I.-The Unreality of Time', *Mind*, XVII (1908), 457-74.

By extension, the earlier statement also holds true for historical fiction: I see it not as a solid object which can be passed on unaltered from one person to another. Instead, I think of it rather as a subjective interpretation of an object which differs from one human mind to another. Given that no moment in history can be perceived simultaneously through all the perspectives available to the researcher as sources, it cannot be described in an objective fashion and therefore, I argue, holds no comprehensive factual value. In this sense, historical fiction cannot essentially be historical in a strict factual manner but as a genre lies entirely within the realm of the imaginary. This can be observed in the four levels of perception traversing the historical genre:

1. A real event takes place at some moment in time.
2. An eyewitness experiences this historical event directly.
3. A historical novelist uses the eyewitness's first-hand experience as source material to create a fiction in which he produces his own, second-hand interpretation of the historical event.
4. A reader of a historical novel perceives the author's second-hand interpretation of the historical event, forming in her mind her own, third-hand experience of the original event.

As becomes obvious, the initial historical event can be approached in at least three different ways which vary in degrees of relation to the original occurrence. An eyewitness, a historical novelist, and a reader all form different perceptions of the original event. Additionally, the novelist forms his own perception of the eyewitness's testimony, while the reader forms her own perception of the novelist's work. At the same time, two different historical novelists using the same source material will produce two different fictional interpretations of it. One hundred readers of the same one historical novel will form in their minds one hundred different interpretations of the fiction and of the events the fiction draws from. And of course any historical moment in time can be described and interpreted by as many direct observers as it is experienced by.

This strange occurrence can be observed and its elements more clearly demonstrated within the context of a literary work.

1.1.1 History as a Character

Published in 1945, Ivo Andrić's most known work, *The Bridge on the Drina*, is not a conventionally structured historical novel.³ Nevertheless, it classifies as one since its plot is decidedly informed and shaped by actual accounts and recorded events. Spanning a time period of approximately four hundred years, the narrative revolves around the stone bridge located at Višegrad, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the everyday life of the Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim populations inhabiting the town and its surrounding area. Within the novel's time frame we observe the turbulent situation, occasional peaceful breaks, and ultimately the modernization taking place in the region, through numerous generations of characters which succeed one another.

As the human material in the story is recyclable and we continually witness each generation being replaced by the next, the single focal point of the novel and its thematic foundation is the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge, the Bridge over the river Drina. Despite the feature of human protagonists and because of their temporality, the main character's role and narrational duty falls on the bridge. As the novel progresses and history evolves in the area, we see the bridge changing in terms of character, atmosphere, and even physically through damage and restoration. The passing of time and the changes manifesting in the region, on a personal and societal level, influence and define each time our perception of the bridge, as it in turns becomes the motive, the enabler, the succourer or the deterrent factor for tragic or festive events to occur. History transforms the bridge in a catalytic manner every time.

In the same way that the bridge in Andrić's novel becomes a character, history turns into of the main characters in historical fiction. Like the bridge, history exists as a reality of events but the moment it enters fiction it becomes a representation of them. It is easier to observe this subtle spectre of a protagonist in the aforementioned novel due to the physical existence of the bridge. In a simple and splendid allegory we notice that the central and most significant character in the novel is after all neither the bridge nor the peoples around it but history itself. It is what the bridge signifies that becomes the final and most important character in the story. The choice of 'discarding' the human material each time at the end of a generation and carrying on with the narrative hints at the author's interest in a vastly greater point of view.

³ Ivo Andrić and Lovett F. Edwards, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Beograd: Dereta, 2006).

Andrić determines to observe and depict not just people but humanity, not historical eras but history in a wider scope.

Viewed from this perspective, the novel gains an encapsulating quality; through Andrić's telescopic authorial lens we are to understand that even though he is by narrational restrictions (or publishing conventions) limited to a specific time span, his ultimate intention is to breach time and offer the reader contemplations that are not confined to strict temporal boundaries. He does so by electing a spatial point of focus, the bridge, which once fictionalized defies the onset of both 'real' and narrational time.

Although not every historical novelist necessarily or consciously intends to make history itself his central character, the same manifestation of it as a protagonist can be attributed to and observed in every historical novel in varying degrees. Even in cases when it is explicitly not the writer's intention to wholly reconstruct an era of the past, the temporal location of a work will affect the plot and the characters in ways that communicate a sense of the era the work is set in. This 'spectre of history', prevalent to all works within the genre of historical fiction, I will argue, is ultimately a fictional construct yet not marginally less important because of that.

Assuming that a historical novelist's sources are honest, unmotivated, truthful and detailed personal accounts that have successfully passed the stage of authentication, there still remains the inherent problem of subjectivity on the author's part. Even a historical novelist who closely examines and puts to the test his own political affiliations, social status, class identity, cultural identity, education, intellectual capacity, personal beliefs or religion, sexual orientation, simple fondness or detest for historical persons and/or situations is eventually incapable, I believe, of producing a fictional account that is not the product of his own imagination. This is readily proven by the already existing conflicting and dissimilar accounts found in source material relating to the same events. Correspondingly and even outside a historical context, the most trivial and straightforward act, such as that of a person walking across a room, will potentially yield one hundred different points of view if described by an equal number of available spectators. Eyewitnesses will describe the act in varying degrees of dissimilar language, attribute a number of distinct emotions to the person, and report their manner of walking in confusingly conflicting terms, despite the fact they all watched the same one movement.

From this we may surmise that no one of any given number of bystanders holds the whole truth about the act, not even the walker, but that everyone involved is entitled to their own share of individual perception. Were it possible, however, to gather all these accounts,

compare, authenticate, question and examine them in order to provide an overall, exhaustive and as objective as possible retelling of the event, we would find that our reconstruction of the sources is, again, dictated by an arbitrary point of reference.

Based on this notion, and in alignment with Saul Kripke's theory of truth arguing that a natural language may in fact be truthful without offering contradiction,⁴ we are to come to the conclusion that the individuals involved in our hypothetical experiment all speak a distinctly different language. This, in terms of a personal linguistic idiom fathomable only in regards to their creation of a narrative and not in any manner hindering their communication with each other on any other level. If we accept that this principle is valid, it is any more overt that we cannot trust anyone to provide us with an objective and therefore conclusive account about any given historical event. By extension, neither can we trust anyone to do the same in the context of fiction. Adding to this recipe of disaster Barthes' famous *Death of the Author* essay,⁵ where a work's meaning varies depending on the reader's impression, we reach an even more emancipatory perspective: a historical novel's impressions will be as many as its readers and none of them correspond to the novelist's impression of his own work.

One of the first lessons I learned as a newspaper reporter long ago was that there will be at least as many descriptions of any simple incident as there are witnesses. Add more versions as time passes and as the eyewitnesses rethink their memories. Apply that lesson to deliberate or motivated events like crimes, battles, love affairs, and public hearings, and you come to understand that history might be, as Thomas Carlyle put it, 'a distillation of rumor', or, as Napoleon said, 'a set of lies generally agreed upon.'⁶

In the previous paragraph, Thom recognizes the problem at hand with clarity. It is the same problem that we are faced with when dealing with any one historical event witnessed by more than one person. There is a multitude of perspectives. Since none of these perspectives can be considered 'a true one', given that they are different, often contradictory or lacking in some aspect of them, the concept of history is flawed in terms of factual evidence. Any historical event is simultaneously:

⁴ Saul A. Kripke, 'Outline of a Theory of Truth', *Journal of Philosophy*, 72 (1975), 690-716.

⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *Aspen*, (1967), no. 5-6.

⁶ James Alexander Thom, *The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2010), pp. 12-13.

1. The sum of all the first-hand accounts by those who witnessed it.
2. The sum of all the second-hand accounts as incorporated in historical fiction.
3. The sum of all the third-hand accounts as perceived by the act of reading, which involves the novel as a medium.

Unless it becomes possible to access, quantify and communicate one and the same meaning derived from the total of all three sums to at least two individuals, it is perhaps an obsolete endeavour to consider history as finite material. The degree of subjectivity involved in both historical and creative writing procedures dictates therefore that history as a definitive act either cannot exist at all or, alternatively, is dispersed in different pieces contained within the number of individuals approaching and perceiving it. This, I will argue, in a strictly factual sense and given the multiple purposes that the historical element serves in fiction, entails that we do not learn or understand or perhaps even approach history at all but that we rather *believe* in history. This paradox perhaps being an exaggeration, it nevertheless conveys that we all indiscriminately structure our own version of a historical event in our perception, which may or may not coincide with that in another's mind. History and historical fiction with it are inaccessible in objective terms, as is the bridge in Andrić's novel, as is the actual, physical bridge: no matter whether two individuals stand on it simultaneously, the existence of independent thought in each of them makes it a different entity and experience for both. De Groot observes in *The Historical Novel*:

It seems that the type of novel which gestures towards 'historical' authenticity, but which consciously deploys fictional tropes to attain that quality, in some ways must demonstrate the gap between written text and truth.⁷

1.1.2 The Importance of the Historical Fiction Construct

Having arrived at a conjecture and impasse which presumes historical fiction to be not far from a fantastical rendering of past events, this observation I believe doesn't diminish its importance. Even though the final literary product can be claimed to be the author's perception, an object of creativity born out of his research, or the reader's impression of a fictional account, we seem to not be unsettled by this unapproachable non-entity; on the contrary, we seek it and are

⁷ Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge 2010), p. 111.

transfixed by it. Arguably perhaps not different to religious beliefs or any type of personal conviction, we essentially seem to trust that our perception of events is ultimately a more or less accurate description of actuality or we do not ascribe enough importance to the artificiality of the fictional construct to prevent us from approaching it. (Of course, we are driven by necessity, since we do not possess non human-influenced perceptions of reality.) Historicity and historical authenticity are often questioned and examined, however the overall unapproachability of a conclusive historical element does not become a disincentive to us either as readers or writers. In short, accepting that history does not exist and that historical fiction is subjective does not pose a problem or prevent us from engaging with them.

The aforementioned hypothesis applies to a greater level of witnessing historical events, outside the (necessarily) micro-world of a novel. A historical event's subjectivity is also one of the factors allowing for political parties or national entities to interpret recorded accounts differently based on their motives and perception, for example granting them enough latitude on certain occasions to choose not to officially recognize historical actions as genocide. Different linguistic references to a historical event betray different ways of perceiving history. On a closer level of inspection there can be fewer disputes as to the authenticity of fact although, again, not necessarily. In terms of historical fiction, my main argument is that our proven to be arbitrary cognizance does not discourage us from trusting the historical fiction construct. Either because our individual perception is the only means we have in our disposal or due to the supposed honest intent of the historical to accurately reconstruct the past, the general fantasy of the endeavour seems to not take away from the plausibility of the narrational edifice. The plausibility of historical elements in a narrative (when successfully handled) is not threatened by the notion that they are only a version of the truth, reaching us as reconstructed by the historical novelist and as perceived by him through the accounts of others.

Despite our knowledge that time does not exist, we still use it and think in terms of it because it would otherwise be impossible to define ourselves and our actions. Similarly, I would argue, historical fiction is founded upon the wilful lie that one of the ways in which the human condition can be approached is by assimilating a past existence, complete with the details of the time and the society where it manifested. Where in reality we only come in contact with a fictional, fake, imaginary construct, the product of another person's second-hand perception of the past, we approach and believe that we approach the actual human condition with as much or almost as much credibility as if it were fact. As illustrated by Nield:

The spirit of a period is like the selfhood of a human being – something that cannot be handed on; try as we may, it is impossible for us to breathe the atmosphere of a bygone time, since all those thousand-and-one details which went to the building up of both individual and general experience can never be reproduced. [...] in the case of a Historical Romance we allow ourselves to be hoodwinked, for, under the influence of a pseudo-historic security, we seem to watch the real sequence of events in so far as these affect the characters in whom we are interested.⁸

And as J. A. Thom notes:

[...] *Historical Fiction*. The phrase is redundant. Most history is more fiction than we like to admit.⁹

This paradox notwithstanding, historical fiction is distinct as a genre and owes its value to its close relation with fact. Paradoxically, however, the opposite is true. Lucia Robson observes that:

One of the wonderful ironies of writing about history is that making up stuff doesn't mean it's not true. And obversely, declaring something to be true doesn't guarantee that it is.¹⁰

I believe that we are aware that the historical is a fictional product, nevertheless we consider it important because it is derived from recorded, non-fictitious events. Any historical novel could be described as falling under the fantastical genre since it metabolizes the sum of unilateral truths into a personal account thoroughly built on a personal interpretation of sources. Nevertheless, since its conception the historical novel has been a robust genre that does not fail to excite and inspire despite its controversial relationship with history. As readers, we recognize it is not history but we read it because of the history it contains. In the meantime, we differentiate it from other genres such as fantasy or science fiction and consider it closer to fact and reality than them, however we still read it as fiction. Within this realm of its double identity I will argue lies the historical novel's charm: in our wilful deception and wish to read both

⁸ Jonathan Nield, *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), pp. 10-11.

⁹ Thom, p. 12.

¹⁰ Thom, p. 15.

history and fiction on the same page, trusting the combination of their forces to help us approach the human condition.

It is up to dispute whether a deep element of humanity is rooted in historical fiction due to its persistence to strive for the real when it cannot, but our desperate need for its plausibility and accuracy, I believe, betrays our existential anxiety even when we are aware there are no universally true answers. Talking about writing in broad terms, Hanif Kureishi observes in *Dreaming and Scheming*:

Writing seems to be a problem of some kind. It isn't as if most people can just sit down and start to write brilliantly, get up from the desk, do something else all day, and then, next morning start again without any conflict or anxiety. To begin to write [...] is to ask many other questions, not only about the craft itself, but of oneself, and of life. The blank empty page is a representation of this helplessness.¹¹

Specifically for the genre we are examining, this conflict is relevant to the element of history. Our need for history, our connection with the past, and the act of defining ourselves in relation to it I consider to be the first anxiety that traverses the historical fiction spectrum, however I examined it separately in the introduction as it concerns not only the historical novelist but also the reader and the critic of historical fiction.

1.1.3 Thesis Objectives

Exactly the aforementioned almost immaterial —and simultaneously perfectly tangible and very human— blend of the real and the perceived is what fascinates me in the genre and drives me to explore it in the context of this thesis. More specifically, from this point onwards I am interested in the process taking place on the third level of historical perception, that which manifests between a novelist and his second-hand relationship with history. It is during this affair that historical novels are born, at least are created at a first stage as printed material. I aim to investigate the historical novelist's relationship with his primary source, history itself, and monitor how this relationship is translated into a fictional product.

¹¹ Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 10.

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as our perceptiveness and knowledge.¹²

The ambiguity of history is based on the ambiguity of reality, Rushdie claims. And inevitably, as we observed, each historical novelist produces their own version of history in the form of a fictional narrative. However, due to their perceived (as well as demanded and judged by readers) duty to truth and fact, a certain number of anxieties arise that are particular only to historical fiction authors. These specific issues which are inherent to the genre and which the historical novelist faces aside from other creative writing anxieties are the subject of the following pages.

Of course, there are plenty of historical writers who not only do not consider they have a duty to depict history as close to their sources as possible but on the contrary demonstrate fierce creativity by consciously altering historical events or making up instances that never took place in the real world. For the purposes of the current thesis, such examples do not interest us since I chose to examine the more ‘classical’ type of historical writing, in which the author feels a duty to history. My model of the historical author in this work is the writer who feels an obligation to be as close to the facts as possible, who believes he has a duty towards his source material, and from whom readers have similar expectations. While I detect no difference in quality between authors that choose to do so and others that don’t – I believe it is strictly a matter of preference – I identify with the first category and hence I am examining similar examples. J. A. Thom defines the historical writer’s duty as follows:

A good historical novelist has the same obligation as a good historian: to convey a truthful history, not perpetuate pretty myths.¹³

On the other hand, novelists such as E. L. Doctorow, for example, felt that consciously altering historical facts improves the story. I recognize no quality difference between the two standpoints, but given that my engagement with the fiction in this thesis was based on historical fact and rather followed the first perspective given by Thom, it is this type of historical novelist that concerns me here and his particular anxieties with his work.

¹² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), p. 25.

¹³ Thom, p. 15.

Since the aforementioned issues and anxieties originate in the writer's relationship with his material, I classify and study them in three categories based on their correlation to the creative writing work. I observe that history affects the novelist threefold prior to and during the writing process, namely as an anxiety of:

1. Discovering sources
2. Authenticating sources
3. Incorporating source material into a fictional narrative

For the purposes of the critical component of my thesis, I will briefly study the craft's elements related to the aforementioned anxieties within a purely creative writing context (as opposed to a critical viewpoint or philology), hoping that the following work could be expanded and used as a creative writing manual particularly for historical fiction, suggesting questions for consideration to the historical novelist. My aim is to provide a guide on all the areas in which the historical novelist's material interacts with his writing. Finally, I will discuss my own engagement with the fiction and review my personal relationship with the historical element in regard to the creative component of my dissertation.

1.2 Definition of the Historical Novel

Before proceeding to examine the historical novelist's anxieties, a definition is needed of the historical novel in the context of this work. This presents a certain difficulty since the genre accommodates various modes of writing and a wide range of literary locales. Throughout history, too, the definition of historical fiction changes. At its conception, the historical was pejoratively described as romance while today historical thrillers are published and considered one of the dominant genres in the publishing world: virtually, there is little in common between these two examples and yet their shared reconstruction of the past classifies them under the same genre. The historical fiction label describes works ranging from detective, mystery, gothic and horror novels to fantasy, epics and westerns. We have examples of literary and popular historical novels, counterfactual and postmodern historical novels.

At the same time, the purpose, devices and themes of all the manifestations of a historical novel can differ widely. As an inherently hybrid genre, a description of the historical novel presents complexities. As De Groot illustrates:

Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics. A historical novel might consider the articulation of nationhood via the past, highlight the subjectivism of narratives of History, underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention. The form manages to hold within itself conservatism, dissidence, complication and simplicity; it attracts multiple, complex, dynamic audiences [...]¹⁴

It seems that the historical novel as Lukács wrote about it is only one facet of the genre it developed into in recent years. While many historical novels aim to reconstruct the socioeconomic, political and historical situations of an era, the same is not true for other works that are still included in the genre. For Lukács, the historical novel owed a large part of its initial conception, popularity and establishment as a genre to the European wars and the massive scale in which they affected those nations involved in them. He argues that the genre stems from the historical anxiety developed by socioeconomic changes and warfare on a previously unprecedented scale:

[...] the enormous quantitative expansion of war plays a qualitative new role, bringing with it an extraordinary broadening of horizons. [...] What previously was experienced only by isolated and mostly adventurous-minded individuals, namely an acquaintance with Europe or at least certain parts of it, becomes in this period the mass experience of hundreds of thousands, of millions. Hence the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them.¹⁵

The purpose to inform is also noted as one of the historical novel's aims:

¹⁴ De Groot, p. 2.

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Peregrine Books, 1969), pp. 21-22.

Historical fiction is not history, but it is often better than history. A fine historical painting, a pageant, or a play, may easily teach more and carry a deeper impression than whole chapters of description and analysis.¹⁶

And while these are purposes lying at the core of historical fiction and constitute the predominant reason behind the birth of a plethora of historical novels, it is also true that many other historicals are driven by these only as secondary or tertiary aims. Especially works that intend to reconstruct an era for its unique colour and atmosphere rather than for reasons crucial to the novel's themes distance themselves from this definition. On the other hand, historical novels characterized by a more 'microscopic' (as opposed to macroscopic) perception or approach, which seek to concentrate on very specific aspects of life in the past often using characters in the margins of society, do not seem to satisfy the needs of a readership as that described by the aforementioned definition. On the contrary, it appears that nowadays a large number of readers prefer historical novels precisely because their thematic does not affect their daily life and does not, at least directly, concern them on a personal level. Their curiosity and interest stems from viewing the past as a medium of escapism from modern life, while their attraction to it is exactly based on its unfamiliarity and foreignness. Thom believes that:

Most regular readers of historical fiction are reading to learn, and they gain historical knowledge from story to story. They take pride in having some knowledge they can keep and believe.¹⁷

While this may not be true for all readers, it is probably safe to assume that it is true for at least many of them. Within this category of historical fiction where the duty to fact and sources is considered important, we see both the writer and the readers demanding that close affinity between fiction and historical fact.

A novelist could, of course, write a whole novel about any subject or any time without doing any research at all. She could just write from imagination, the facts be damned. The resulting novel could be fast-paced, exciting, colorful, intriguing, sexy, and even convey the feeling of a time past.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ernest A. Baker, *A Guide to Historical Fiction* (New York: Argosy Antiquarian, 1968), p. viii.

¹⁷ Thom, p. 29.

¹⁸ Thom, p. 28.

So we see that Thom, for example, does not negate the possibility of writing about the past without research. I am of the same opinion, and would not claim any work such as the one described to be of lesser value because of this. If anything, it would present interesting questions relevant to stretching the boundaries of historical fiction even further than what is considered normal. However, in the scope of this study I am interested in works that claim and aim to do exactly the opposite. In these cases, historical research, sources and fact are highly demanded to be correct for the fiction to ‘work’ and be plausible. Again, Thom illustrates the point very well:

The Flashman series by George MacDonald Fraser were rollicking masterpieces done that way [without research], with notorious gunslingers showing up at the campfires of famous Indian chiefs they actually never met, and so on, just to make fascinating scenes and plot twists. But if they were on any subject that I’d ever studied at all, I could tell those stories were made up, and I wouldn’t give them any credibility. Such an author wasn’t even pretending to be historically accurate.

If I were a history teacher, I wouldn’t assign such yarns as supplemental reading in my classes, because I would want my students to get accurate history, even though they were reading fiction. Another reason why I wouldn’t just make up a whole novel is that many regular readers of historical novels are discriminating –if not downright picky– and would dismiss me if they caught me trifling with the historical truth.¹⁹

This discrimination seems to be an important factor for many historical readers. While a certain part of the audience/market is not interested in learning about fact or accumulating historical knowledge through historical fiction, it appears that an equally large number of readers demand exactly that. The extent to which one group is larger than the other may be argued, but the existence of both we think is safe to take as a fact.

[...] in my many years in this business, I’ve come to respect my readers. Most regular readers of historical fiction are reading to learn, and they gain historical knowledge from story to story. They take pride in having some knowledge they can keep and believe. And so they become more discriminating. They begin to care about the

¹⁹ Thom, p. 29.

substance of a story, as well as its style. If they see a historian's blurb recommending a historical novel, they might make a mental note and watch for the novelist's next book. I know this is so, because the readers tell me.

I have no idea how many such serious readers of historical fiction there are, but my publisher used to estimate their number in hundreds of thousands.²⁰

Finally, and before offering a definition of the historical novel for the purposes of this thesis, I would like to draw attention to the following paragraph by De Groot, who discusses the perception of a book's concept on a meta-level, including even more factors that the writer and the reader:

The meaning of a text is produced not simply by those directly involved in authoring it but in the ways that it works within society. The book has both a meaning and a cultural value, it works both as a text with content and as something that has an effect within society. It is created by critics, marketing executives, by book clubs and agents. [...] blogs, reading groups, review sites, user-generated critical content and online forums impact upon the ways in which a text is situated and engaged with [...]. This non-author-centric model might change the way we approach or understand a book. From the point of view of historical fiction, then, it is key that we conceptualise each novel as a work that has multiple valencies and is 'produced' in numerous ways. We need to think about the ways it might be produced, consumed, read and used in order to understand the complex entity that is the historical novel.²¹

For these reasons mentioned and with the intention of providing a vague outline for the works concerned within the limited scope of the present thesis only, I suggest therefore the definition of the historical novel as: a work of fiction which consciously intends to reconstruct at least partially an era of the past. As a working definition, this encompasses a variety of dissimilar between them narratives. However, since we are concerned here with the historical novelist's relationship with his material, the purpose of reconstructing an epoch becomes the primary point of interest in the creative writing process. Whether the work discussed fulfils other

²⁰ Thom, p. 32.

²¹ De Groot, p. 64.

purposes which may also be shared by different genres is irrelevant, as long as it intends to represent accurately with its story a period of time set in the past.

Chapter 2

Sources

2.1 Research

The amount of time devoted to research and discovering sources varies from writer to writer, although it is generally agreed upon that the more source material one has examined the better their understanding of the era will be. On the subject, Thom writes:

To get a balanced view of what really happened, use this trick of creative research: Find every account you can find. Compare them. Try to understand all the witnesses well enough as human beings that you can see why they would be motivated to relate the event in the ways they did.²²

Clearly, Thom believes that the maximum amount of research done is the best route to follow. Whether more research also translates to a more accurate representation of the epoch comes under dispute however, depending on the scope of the novel, the writer's ability to handle the historical material skilfully, as well as the length of the time period the work covers.

If your book relies heavily on character rather than historical era and ambiance, that [a minimum of research] may be enough. But if you're writing something that could only have taken place in your chosen milieu, chances are you'll need to put in more than just a couple of hours of research. [...] On the other extreme, there are those who spend years on a project, delving into all sorts of details and sources [...]. But beware – too often the feeling that you need to do just a little more research becomes a handy excuse to keep from writing the book itself.²³

Therefore we must conclude that the amount of research one devotes himself to prior to writing depends entirely on the specific circumstances of the author, the novel and its subject. At the same time, the amount of historical data found in a fictional work varies in different cultures across the world. Accordingly, the author's relationship to research may be influenced by the

²² Thom, p. 65.

²³ Persia Woolley, *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1997), p. 29.

cultural identity in which they find themselves. Language in terms of accessing sources might be a problem in itself too.

At any rate, even the most extensive and exhaustive research will provide the author with those details that will dress the fictional construct but will not describe the reality of an era as it was experienced by any of its inhabitants. On a further level, the reader's thoughts regarding a historical novelist's understanding of the era are often misled. Within the microcosmos of the plot and the usually short scope of a work, it might appear to the reader that the author is well informed on every aspect of life in the chosen past he describes. We hold this to not be true, since the author can always only be informed on matters that concern his characters, which by necessity will be limited to a certain number. Even a vast array of protagonists originating in different locations and from various social classes will inevitably produce just an estimation of how life might have been in the era described. Heavy research, however, I believe, helps create the illusion that the novelist has indeed inhabited the world of the characters he has produced.

The purpose of research being to arm the novelist with the knowledge he needs to reconstruct a past world immediately dictates the need to study a plethora of sources. In order to reproduce on paper the human condition as it used to be, the writer is forced to study as many facets of it as possible given its complexity and multidimensional identity.

I research any way I can think of.

[...]

To begin, you should know that you'll depend on the work and experience of many, many other people. The word research obviously means 'to search again'. You'll be searching for facts, knowledge, and understandings already gained and held by persons before you. Historians and historical novelists alike stand on the shoulders of their predecessors. You will sort through, select, and recycle what they have already learned.²⁴

Regardless of the desired degree of accuracy in the final product, any description of a scene taking place in the past demands at least some research to compel basic plausibility. Furthermore, the discovery of an obvious mistake, inaccuracy or omission on the writer's part will discourage the reader and threaten the narrative irreversibly (as we earlier saw Thom

²⁴ Thom, pp. 54-55.

arguing; other types of readership do not concern us in this case, other than the fact-demanding reader). And while most readers are assumed not to share the wealth of information that a historian possesses or a historical novelist acquires through research, it is obvious in recent years that this is changing. As readerships become more and more knowledgeable in historical matters, partly due to the advent of technology and the increased accessibility and availability of information, demand for historical accuracy in fiction is greater than ever. For example, a scene in a novel set in the 6th century BC in Ancient Greece featuring a member of the Athenian aristocracy mentioning that the Earth is flat would most likely be criticized for inaccuracy. Most of us are aware that the Greeks knew the Earth was round. At the same time, the same claim made by an uneducated member of the public in Ancient Greece might be acceptable, since we do not know how widely common this piece of information was among different classes of citizens. On the other hand, if a historical novel set in the nineteenth century in rural Britain included a scene where a character changes clothes before going to sleep, this mention might pass unobserved by the reader. It is most likely not well known that people slept with their day clothes on, especially in the countryside or poor areas in cities; alternatively, this might be considered a personal whim of the character.

Considering how complex human nature, appearance and behaviour is, in order to craft a plausible reproduction of any character in the past the novelist is forced to consult multiple sources. The information obtained can range from specific information such as language conventions of the time, daily habits and dress code to more general concepts such as the ethics, morals and beliefs of an era. These are interconnected within a character's consistency, however they are usually not encountered together in source material.

Not all the knowledge you'll use is written knowledge. Though archives are a main source, there are other sources, such as oral histories and old pictures, artifacts in museums, and your own memory of historical facts that you've been taught.²⁵

For this reason, I consider it useful to mention and predict all the possible sources wherefrom an author may draw information. As a similar list has not to my knowledge been compiled in creative writing manuals or studies before, I believe it would be helpful in both demonstrating the complex nature of a historical writer's material as well as in offering areas for study to the aspiring historical novelist. My suggestions are by no means exhaustive, given that new sources

²⁵ Thom, p. 55.

and methods of deducing information about the past are constantly discovered, however I aim to cover as much ground as possible regarding what material could act as a source.

2.2 Sources

Classification of sources for the historical novelist in the context of the present thesis is drawn based on the degree of engagement they demand on the author's part. As primary sources we consider those which readily provide information via written word, without at a first stage requiring the writer to make further deductions. As secondary sources we count the material from which information may be obtained but mainly through the writer's methods of assumption, reasoning and deduction.

Primary source material most often constitutes the greatest part of a writer's research. History textbooks and treatises, documents, newspapers, magazines, journals, all provide us with historical evidence. However, it is important to note the diversity of primary sources in which material may be discovered. For this reason, we provide a brief list of themes to which primary resources may refer. At the same time, wherever under the same theme secondary source material provide information to the researcher, we make note of it as well.

2.2.1 Language and Vocabulary

Since on a primary level a novel's reproduction of a past era relies on the language the author uses and the language the characters speak, the vocabulary employed in the work is important. Information about language as it was used in the past can be found in sources specifically concentrating on the subject. However, a great array of other material is also helpful. Recordings, if available, provide not only an insight into the vocabulary and expressions used in the past but also into inflection, voice and pronunciation elements. The same information can be obtained surprisingly to an almost equal degree from written works of the era, scientific, fictional or non-fictional. Often, the fictional works of past authors will convey an impression of the speech of that time, however caution is necessary since they may reflect only the author's manner of speech and his particular education, social class, linguistic preferences, etc. Inscriptions, carvings or any type of ascribed label on objects provide the researcher with information on the era's conventions regarding written word.

[...] do you attempt to use the language of the time? If you're writing about Elizabethan England, do you use Shakespeare as your guide? And if so, how do you keep it from

sounding corny and fake? Do you employ *forsooth* and *oft*, *verily* and *doth*? And how careful do you have to be about not slipping in twentieth-century words?²⁶

Woolley's questions above provide a general context of the questions the historical novelist may ask himself, although every writer will answer in their own way. Nevertheless, considering these problems and the potential implications they may have in the story and their effect in the reader's perception is important.

To that purpose, dictionaries, thesauruses and linguistic texts of the time, if available, are invaluable as to the colour and flavour of speech in the past. Proverbs, sayings, idioms, puns, word games, apophthegms, folk tales and anecdotes of the time convey a wealth of information not only about the lexical structures of the time but also about the humour and beliefs of a particular culture. Songs, poems, lullabies, children's rhymes are a part of everyday life and define the people of an era, their way of thinking, their psychology, their mentality, their rhythms in life, the way they love, the way they hurt, the way they celebrate.

2.2.2 Food and Drink, Dress and Anatomy

The dietary habits of the people in a past era are telling of a number of facts: their health, social class, the availability of products, their cultural preferences. The same is observed in their dress of choice. The social protocol in regard to eating habits, for example seating arrangements or priority between genders, are useful for us to learn about the relationships between members of a family, acquaintances or strangers. How people ate their food is significant, betraying the sophistication of a social event. Cooking, serving food and the use of cutlery or absence of it are all sources which the novelist can utilize to depict daily life in an era. Drinking habits, the abuse of alcohol or other substances, as well as legislations on the brewing, production and distribution of certain drinks also provide a wealth of information that may be employed in describing daily life situations.

As objects, remnants of the past give us information about the shape of the bodies that used them. From clothes we may tell the height and weight of the wearer, as well as imagine the items frequency of use depending on the condition it is preserved in. From the number of pockets or the tightness of a dress, the historical novelist may deduce information about the items his subject carried every day or draw conclusions as to the sexualisation of the human anatomy. For example, in Victorian Britain the revealing uniforms of acrobats were only

²⁶ Woolley, p. 108.

acceptable within the context of a show and otherwise constituted a taboo, while in the wider public sphere the body was mostly covered. By the cothornus shoes worn by actors in Roman drama we can tell how a play would look in the theatre from the audience's perspective.

2.2.3 Burial Habits

Tombs, cemeteries and burial habits provide ample information on the appearance and wealth of individuals but also project the beliefs, superstitions and prejudices of the time in regard to death. The spirit of a peoples can be understood by the manner in which they treat death. For example, Ottomans used to carve the stones covering their tombs, shaping them into a curved hole. Rainwater gathered there and it was their intention that birds gathered in cemeteries to drink; the use of an otherwise morbid location to support natural life speaks of their beliefs.

From studies regarding the number of individuals found in burial sites or from records that contain statistical data on deceased individuals, we may draw conclusions about life expectancy and the tightness of family relationships. Child mortality in a society is relevant too; human life is valued differently today compared to a past era in which the loss of an infant was a much more common occurrence.

2.2.4 Health and Disease

Illness, disease and the manner in which people dealt with it are telling of a society's health level. Personal hygiene, pharmacies, hospitals, the availability of doctors, traditional medicine and makeshift potions, diagnosis methods, the existence of quack or empiric doctors and midwives, the public health system, substances used to alleviate pain or cure symptoms provide the novelist with information on how a character would deal with a health issue. In Byzantine times, pharmacies hosted live venomous snakes so that their poison could be extracted and used to brew specific medications when the need arose; this piece of information may lead the novelist to create a scene or can be used in a description of a pharmacy's interior.

2.2.5 Architecture

Apart from information about the climate, the structure of houses and public buildings gives the researcher information on the use of space by an era's inhabitants. The purpose of certain rooms, distance between rooms, division of rooms by gender can be helpful in constructing a scene or deriving information about the relations between individuals. The size, complexity and decoration of buildings together with information on the materials they were made of tell

us a lot about the aesthetics of a culture as well as inform us on the means it had in its disposal for construction. Houses, public buildings, hotels, inns, banks, stores, restaurants, pubs, bars, coffee shops, storage facilities, bridges, open air markets, brothels, educational institutions, prisons, asylums determine a greater area's character or the look of a specific neighbourhood or district, rural or urban. Moreover, the urban planning of streets, their lighting and traffic arrangements speak of a locale's character. Furniture and household devices contain information on their owners' characters as well as habits. Monuments and memorials testify as to significant historical occasions and bespeak a nation's wealth or moral values. Engineering, technology and inventions of the time have an impact not only on individuals but also in their private and public spaces. Sources that provide relevant information hint to the objects a character might own in her home or place of work.

2.2.6 Agriculture and Natural Life

Sources that provide information on a nation's agricultural habits or the fauna in it are useful in comprehending the larger picture of an era's life in the countryside and in cities. Apart from the animals and the trees off which a nation feeds and the indigenous or imported flora and fauna, on a more personal level the flowers that people grew in their gardens or the pets they kept provide meaningful information as to how a character might spend their free time or as to their aesthetics and opinion on internal and external space decoration.

2.2.7 Law and Politics

The laws of a state are crucial to understanding the function of its public life while they also communicate the balance between classes, genders and races within a country. Political conflicts, parliamentary procedures, the introduction of new acts and legislations, crime and crime rates are all components that define a society's character. A particular individual in a historical novel might not be aware of or interested in the political developments of the time they live in, however the author must be informed to avoid discrepancies. A war or invasion that might have dominated the news at the time would be disruptive to an individual's plans regardless of their involvement with politics.

Furthermore, crime and particularly the definition of it defines a society. Sources on policing and security, the measures people took for their safety and even famous criminals of the day could be invaluable to a historical novel's storyline. Prostitution, child prostitution,

slums, beggars and thieves; the outcasts of a society can provide characters useful to depict its negative or victimized face.

2.2.8 Climate and Natural Conditions

Aside from the natural landscape the characters inhabit, the climate and natural conditions prevalent at a time can assist the plot or provide information about a specific moment in history. The geographical environment, natural landscape and weather conditions during a novel's scene increase plausibility and often affect a positive surprise in the reader, therefore sources providing such information though hard to discover are highly sought after. Natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, for example, would immediately affect a character's life and an omission on the author's part to include them in the narrative when their occurrence has been proven could threaten the novel's plausibility.

2.2.9 Sexual Relationships and the Body

The habits and beliefs of a people are almost unique in any set era of the past. Sources that provide information on the individual's relationship to his or her body, the frequency of sexual relationships, the morals regarding premarital sex and the choice of partners, methods of contraception, and even birth giving procedures provide the novelist with insights that will define his protagonists' personalities.

2.2.10 Transportation, Travelling and Trade

Methods of transport are crucial to a historical novel's plot. The distance between locations, the speed in which it could be covered, intermittent stations, inns and points of rest, as well as the condition of roads and streets define a character's limits of action. News, for example, in the past took longer to spread from one locale to another, hence alternative methods of communication were often devised apart from written word. As another example within the category of transportation, the advent of the railway had an unprecedented social and economic impact in Europe that cannot be ignored by a researcher. Tolls, the safety of the roads at night or in sparsely populated areas, ports, ships and the availability or not of longer sea journeys should also be considered as potential source material that will bring character to a novel. Travel guides, ticket prices and on-board regulations further enrich a novel's canvas with real life elements that people in the past interacted with daily. Products bought and sold, imports,

exports and trade are useful; the economy of a country can provide a relatively safe mirror of the professions of its population.

2.2.11 Money and Currency

Apart from its societal value and the historical importance, money and currency must be studied by the researcher if he wants to understand an era's prices, wages and value of goods. The conditions in which the poor or the affluent live in can be dictated by sources that provide us with the relevant information. As objects, coins and their shape or depictions of monarchs are also interesting elements because they often offer insights in a nation's political empathies or a ruler's propaganda.

2.2.12 Art and Entertainment, Science and Education

Studying the everyday life of the people in an era of the past will inevitably include their habits regarding relaxation and their pastimes. The different types of entertainment and art available in an epoch, theatre, plays of the time, dance, pantomime, the opera, ballet, newspapers, journals and magazines, literature, books and how they were bound, typography, calligraphy, folklore, music and songs, games and toys are all definitive characteristics of an era and heavily influence the behaviour of any character residing in it. At the same time, the scientific progress and education level of a society is important as both infiltrate a character's upbringing and form his or her opinions. Scientific discoveries of the time, educational landmarks in the people's understanding of the universe, journals, conferences, scientific publications of the day and even the people's predictions, hopes and expectation of what scientific advancement would impact in the future are crucial in developing a whole character, therefore relevant source material must be sought by the researcher.

Lastly, attention should also be paid to certain beliefs and the mentality of an era. For example:

Much as you the historical novelist might hate to do it, you might have to portray your dashing Victorian protagonist as a male white supremacist, because many such men of the past were. They were brought up that way. Many believed blacks and Indians were inferior, less intelligent races that didn't have souls, an easy excuse to mistreat or kill them with impunity. Between Thanksgiving dinners, those quaint Pilgrims with their white collars and buckled shoes occasionally massacred villages full of Indian women

and children, decapitated their chiefs, and displayed their heads on tall poles. Racism was even less subtle then than it is now. Most early American white men thought women should be seen but not heard. As a historical novelist, you might wish to make your hero 'politically correct' by today's standards, but if you do that, you'll be lying to your readers.²⁷

2.2.3 Further Sources

While the categories I enumerated and briefly described up to here are not exhaustive, I believe they cover at least enough of a starting ground for anyone interested in researching for a historical novel. In essence, the discovery of sources is an infinite quest and the material appears to be almost infinite, if one has the time and the means to study all the relevant aspects of the era which he is writing about. But apart from the material at hand, there are plenty of complex concepts to be researched that sources may not provide directly. Women's rights and the position of woman in society, for example, are indicative of the particular society's belief system, though deriving such information may take place through secondary sources and combining data from several accounts may be necessary. At the same time, research can extend to the impartiality and tolerance of a society, the manner in which it treats particular members of it, for example belonging to different race or persons with disabilities.

If historians can borrow from each other, and historical novelists can borrow from historians, can historical novelists borrow from other novelists?²⁸

This is the question that many historical writers ask themselves, here posed by J. A. Thom too. Certainly, historical novels themselves can play the role of reliable sources, especially when the writer also used to be an eyewitness of the events he describes. On another note, however, material shared between historical novels dealing with the same subject might create issues of copyright.

Another example of a more complex issue for research is the distance from incidents and events, the speed in which information was transmitted the manner in which a piece of information was passed on. The extent of rumours in the past, for instance, was much smaller due to geographical limitations and the fact that the world was not interconnected in a vast

²⁷ Thom, p. 17.

²⁸ Thom, p. 61.

system of information exchange. The relationship that people had with time is also worth examining. Today we are used to events happening in rapid succession; was perception different at a time when instant communication with every corner of the planet was impossible? What used to be the relationship between time and what a person saw? We are used to absorbing hundreds or thousands of images every day and have developed a certain immunity to the fast pace of imagery changing before our eyes every second. This does not impress us, consequently. But was that different in the past and how? Did specific sights and spectacles make a greater impression on people? Were they more easily excited by acrobatic acts? And how did the spectacles and the images they witnessed carved into their memories? We may expect that memory did not operate in the same way as today in an era when it was rare to see something unusual. Did people remember differently?

As a last example of more complicated themes that require a combination of sources and deduction, we believe it is worth researching and forming an opinion on what the intellectual capacity of the people in an era was. Their education, social environment and belief system differ so much to our own that their thinking processes might alienate us if we knew them. How much was an individual in a position to react against authority and were they in a position to think they had to react? And did the circumstances and their means of living allow them to react? Research and the close study of sources can provide answers to similar questions and more importantly teach the researcher to judge an era and its people not by the standards of the time he lives in but by those which used to exist and should also dictate the course of his fictional characters.

Chapter 3

Authentication

While the discovery of sources is important in the research for writing a historical novel, authenticating the source material is crucial to the shape the information obtained by the researcher will acquire in the final work. This is a process which affects the historical novelist's character directly, in that it makes him question his beliefs, reconsider his knowledge and judge his standpoint on a plethora of opinions and arguments.

Every era is governed by its own rules, people's habits and stereotypes which the author is called to realize and learn. He has to find out whether they differ from place to place, from the city to the village, from one social class to another, or between genders. Additional to that comes the difficulty of uncovering facts about people's everyday life, since history is often concerned with the 'great' events of an era, its focus monopolized by the lives of rulers and royalty, personalities which are considered important and distinguished. This dictates that in our minds an era often acquires the colour and the atmosphere originating from its most features and prominent characters. In reality, the life of the 'ordinary' person in the past may vastly differ to a misconception we have created about his life based on a few samples of the era. American historical novelist Lucia Robson states on the subject:

[...] I research differently from most historians. I'm looking for details of daily life of the period that might not be important to someone tightly focused on certain events and individuals.²⁹

Moreover, the factor that history is mostly written by those who possess the luxury or the means to devote themselves to writing it translates into another difficulty in itself. Many authors of the past who wrote history naturally were defined by their own motives, political affiliations, personal beliefs and the wish that their name survived in time. At the time, they may or may not have been conscious of the fact they were shaping future generations' opinions with their writings; that could have been or perhaps was not their aim. Regardless, it is something that the researcher must take into consideration and examine. The need to understand and recognize as much is demanded of the researcher, although this task again can be argued to be almost

²⁹ Thom, p. 20.

impossible unless the novelist could entirely extract their character while researching. Again as Thom expresses it:

Most historical research is like what police detectives call a ‘cold case’, where many if not all the eyewitnesses are gone and most of the evidence has vanished.³⁰

Therefore we consider that an amount of personal influence originating from the author himself and not from the historical material always finds its way into the fictional product. Of course, ethics and the moral duty to the past and the perceived truth of events are characteristics generally accepted by most authors of historical fiction.

Here then we encounter the historical novelist’s anxiety to investigate the credibility and authenticity of his sources. Strong evidence of a source’s validity reinforces its inclusion in the fictional narrative. Whether the author is dealing with a factual report the content of which he transfuses into his writing, or with an incident from which he is inspired to create a fictional equivalent, in every case it is his task to examine the trustworthiness of his source material and decide whether and to what extent he can rely on them. Thom says regarding the authentication stage during the historical writing process:

Most historical accounts were written by fallible scholars, using incomplete or biased source materials; written through the scholars’ own conscious or unconscious predilections; published by textbook or printing companies that have a stake in maintaining a certain set of beliefs; subtly influenced by entities of government and society –national administrations, state education departments, local school boards, etcetera– that also wish to maintain certain sets of beliefs. To be blunt about it, much of the history of many countries and states is based on delusion, propaganda, misinformation, and omission.³¹

While this is the subject of many works across various scientific fields, in historical fiction there cannot be a definitive guide as to how, why, when or how much the novelist decides to trust his sources. The historical fiction writer therefore turns again to history and relies on historians’ opinions on whether a source is to be trusted or not and to what degree. Again, this

³⁰ Thom, p. 25.

³¹ Thom, p. 12.

assumption is relatively flawed unless we accept that all historians know the truth about their sources. In reality, and in relation to the paradox we discussed in the introduction, we can never be entirely convinced about any historical event since their interpretation is a matter of perception. As a result, the general route undertaken by historical novelists is to consult history textbooks, historians and rely on their own judgement of the source material's credibility.

Despite the fact that the historical novelist is still a fiction writer, the era and the environment he reconstructs demand to be depicted with accuracy, clarity and cogency or at least be presented in a plausible and convincing manner which hints at the greater picture of things, otherwise his entire endeavour is undermined. (This does not affect counterfactual works, which serve this purpose consciously.) For this reason, is it suitable to note at this point that the quantity of historical material incorporated in the novel might be of less importance compared with the quality in which it is presented. If the reader is convinced that the world she is reading about is real, if she is immersed in it without questioning the writer's reliability, then the material has been invested in a functional manner in the plot. Some authors choose to grant their text a greater amount of detail while others allow less detail to show, leaving the rest to be inferred by the reader. In either case, if the latter discovers that the author is misinformed or has not conducted sufficient research, the invisible contract of trust between them is broken. Therefore the anxiety of the source's credibility is inevitable tied with an anxiety of choosing source material which will reflect the author's choices in a positive and definitely in a nonthreatening manner. The writer worries about the verisimilitude his sources will grant to his narrative and at the same time about the effect his selection and authentication of sources will have on the reader.

Among this framework, the historical novelist as a researcher is forced to compare and contrast between sources. This procedure effectively provides him with different and often conflicting viewpoints about the same events or subject; in this case, the more research conducted, the better an opinion he will form. Questioning a source however can take place even when it is the only one discussing the matter at hand. Judging whether a source represents reality or whether other feasibilities and incentives have found their way into it becomes a personal matter. Since the thoughts patterns, logic and personal antipathies and likings of a person differ widely, there cannot be a conclusive way to tell whether a novelist should trust a source or not. Factual evidence that a source is lying may be disputed. However, this is an extreme assumption. In most cases of dispute, there seems to be a general consensus among historians or relevant scholars to guide the novelist in his decision.

The motives behind either conscious or unconscious fraud on the part of the source material vary. Memoirs and biographies, for example, while offering a wealth of information can nevertheless be misleading in many ways.

We remember what we choose to remember, whether we're a family, a town, an ethnic group, a religious sect, a military unit, or a nation.³²

Often the biographer and more often the self-biographer aims at posterity, suppresses the significance of or entirely excludes events that would paint him in a negative colour, exaggerates his own positive contributions, degrades his enemies, praises his allies, exalts himself. This is frequently done in surprisingly subtle and ingenious ways so that a source's motives are generally considered hard to discern at work. Ideally, the historical novelist has to assume a critical stance against his material at all times and approach it with as much objectivity, detachment and suspicion as possible, questioning continually the source's motivation behind the words. There lies the anxiety that the novelist's point of view is in danger of being unconsciously distorted by the source's machinations. Otherwise, there is the fear the writer's point of view is genuinely in accord with the source's but for the wrong reasons, ranging from coinciding political beliefs to simple personal admiration. In perfect circumstances, the author is required to set aside his own armoury of ideas while researching and start from an assumed blank point of view. In order to form an original and new opinion of the events he studies, he has to doubt his sources but they are the ones who inform and define him simultaneously. The balance between these conflicting but necessary steps is once more a personal decision in the end.

Questions to employ during the authentication stage include the following. Does the source one studies represent a specific set of values? Does the source writer belong to a certain social class? Does he seem preoccupied against his subject, illustrate signs of political or religious fanaticism, or write in order to be likeable? Another reason to question a source's validity is whether it was intended for publication. Ironically, the sources intended for publication do not contain more motives than personal writings which were discovered and published by third parties; but because they are intended to be read, we approach them with more suspicion. A personal account that was recorded for personal reasons but not intended for publication will still contain its author's motives and viewpoint. But since it is essentially a

³² Thom, p. 35.

dialogue between the author and his self we might expect it to be clearer whether he is influenced, since most likely he does not aim to deceive.

Another aspect to consider is whether a source's subject concerns contemporary individuals. Therein lies the motive of a source author who does not wish to harm or threaten certain contemporaries. Does he face punishment in case he chooses not to prettify situations? Does he present his version of events to his own benefit or that of others? Finally, in extreme cases a source author might simply be delusional.

As for the question whether fictional works of the past may constitute valid and reliable basis for obtaining information, again the decision relies on the researcher. The same motives that apply to non-fictional sources traverse literature too, with the added complexity of the fictional construct obscuring the writer's intentions.

However, even in cases where a source is trusted and has passed every 'test' the researcher has subjected it to, new evidence may prove it false or question its authenticity. In rare cases, even the original eyewitnesses or primary sources may change the accounts they had given, further obscuring the historical researcher's task. James Alexander Thom provides an interesting example of that happening:

In October of 1813, a warrior named Shawano gave his eyewitness description of Chief Tecumseh's death in the Battle of the Thames. Interviewed again as an old man decades later, he had changed his story completely. Shawano had learned to read, and his new version of the tragedy was the one he had read in books and papers, not the one he had seen with his own eyes. Even eyewitnesses can get their facts wrong.³³

³³ Thom, p. 64.

Chapter 4

Incorporation

The third aspect of a historical novelist's relationship with his material is the manner in which he incorporates them into the fictional product. Perhaps the most controversial stage of the research, this coincides with the creative process. Therefore the handling of material is an entirely individual subject which however makes for a third anxiety unavoidable in the process of writing any historical novel. As Woolley writes about the problem:

Often, if you're writing about a society that is very different from that of your audience, you have to educate your readers without digressing into a sociology lesson. [...] The moment the author's voice begins to lecture about something, you've broken the spell, forfeited the contract and let go of the thread. [...] Even two paragraphs of that kind of exposition can bring the story to a screeching halt. The best way to avoid this and still get the information across is through the characters themselves. [...] Or it can be an interior monologue [...]³⁴

The point of incorporation is for the author to place the findings of his research in a functional manner into his work. The definition of this practice varies and there are as many interpretations of it as there are historical novelists in the world. We observe differences between cultures too, although the difference between methods can be noted among authors belonging to the same culture all the same, depending on what cultural or personal readerships are used to reading. Some historical novelists favour a subtler incorporation of historical fact into the narrative while others do not hesitate to state historical events in narration, the quality of either option judged by readers and critics and subsisting as a matter of personal preference.

Within the same framework exists the anxiety of how plausible the fiction's language is. This reflects on the narration as well as in the way the characters express themselves, both elements which should strive to immerse the reader in the work. However, a balance is sought between the language of the reader and the language of the era as it used to be spoken: the result is the language of the novel, which strives to bridge the two. On one hand as a medium

³⁴ Woolley, p. 103.

its language should be understood and approachable by the reader as well as enticing. On the other hand, the work must in some way convey the speech of the time it describes, which comes in conflict with the previous aim since most languages of the past, even on single words level, can be alienating to the modern reader.

Another inherent issue of incorporating source material into the novel is the anxiety relevant to the reader's knowledge and plausibility limit. Real events that happened in the past might sound entirely made up within a fictional context and lead the reader to assume that the writer is imagining them. Similarly, a novelist's imaginary additions to the plot might come across as historical fact due to the nature of the work in which they feature. It is therefore up to the skill of the writer to avoid these occurrences, although nothing guards him from the reader who will interpret his choices based on her own knowledge of history and her own plausibility limit. As De Groot observes:

Novels are exercises in reconsideration that work as imagination reorderings and, as such, challenge the standard assumptions of the popular historical imagination.³⁵

Yet another anxiety at the third stage of research, parallel to the creative procedure, is that the work should in general have a feel of the past. The characters in it must think and act and behave in a way that communicates as much. However, they might not be representative of the era they belong in. The novelist may have elected to use characters in the margins of society, entirely isolated from the world they live, or otherwise oblivious to the current events of their time. Again this relies on the reader's discretion to perceive and simultaneously at the novelist's skill to make this overt.

Then there is the anxiety that the historical material in the fiction should not be noticeable as such to the reader. Although not every author of historical fiction ascribes to this rule, it is common to strive to keep the historical elements under a certain control, in the sense that they should not stand out as fact against the fiction because this would be disruptive of the reading experience. The best marriage of historical material and fictional narrative comes when the first inspires the latter. When the source material an author approaches give him an idea for a specific scene, most often it reads natural within the novel's plot. Although not referring strictly to a historical context, Kureishi's thoughts are relevant:

³⁵ De Groot, p. 173.

There is a sense [...] in which most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing. You suspect there might be something you can use. But you don't know what it is. You have to find out by beginning. And what you discover probably will not be what you originally imagined or hoped for. Some surprises can be discomfoting. But this useful ignorance, or tension with the unknown, can be fruitful, if not a little unreliable at times.³⁶

Although it is in conflict with the fictional work, the factual material can act in its favour if it becomes the elements that inspires them or dictates their course. On the contrary, when a plot has already been decided and the author forces historical information in between, the result can seem trite and not natural. Once again as a matter of individual perception, the decision whether one or the other takes place is left with the reader and the critic.

Perhaps a concern not shared by every historical novelist but certainly one which constitutes an anxiety in the genre is to develop the novel's storyline in a way that the great events of the time do not weigh heavily inside the work compared to the rest in terms of scale and intensity. Unless these form the core which the story follows, the lives of the novel's protagonists are of course affected by the local, national or international events of the time but, in contrast with history, interest and concentration remains with the characters and their micro-world. Therefore care should be taken for their actions not to be overshadowed by the scope of great events that would not immediately affect the people living at the time in that particular locale. In a sense, where history's look focuses at the general face of humanity, the historical novel attempts to do the same but through the individual lives of the characters populating it, which most often forbids a larger scope. Ivo Andrić's novel that we discussed in the introduction is unconventional in this respect. The earlier point is illustrated by Lukács as follows:

This indirect contact between individual lives and historical events is the most decisive thing of all. For the people experience history directly. History is their own upsurge and decline, the chain of their joys and sorrows. If the historical novelist can succeed in creating characters and destinies in which the important social-human contents, problems, movements, etc., of an epoch appear directly, then he can present history 'from below', from the standpoint of popular life. And the function of the historical

³⁶ Kureishi, p. 7.

figures in the classics is this: when problems and movements such as these have been rendered concrete for us so that we may experience them directly, the historical figure steps in to raise them on to a higher level of historical typicality by concentrating and generalizing them.³⁷

On a related topic, the historical novel as a genre possesses an inherent solipsism. Reality is the reality we see, and for the historical novel, reality is the reality of its heroes. They are the only means through which we as readers can perceive the novel and the era, and since their number is inevitably limited, these heroes represent only a part of the world they inhabit, the one they move in and interact with. So another anxiety of the historical novelist is which aspects of the world he will represent in the narrative by the choice of characters he makes and by the space he allows for each of them in the story. The more varied the characters and their backgrounds or the areas in which they move, geographically, professionally or in regard to time, the more complex the view of the world for the reader and perhaps the more ‘real’ the reading experience.

The writer’s characters are also his means of expressing opinions about the world they inhabit, and by extension about the contemporary world. If indeed the novelist intends to present his reader with all sides of a debate of the time and not deprive her of judging and drawing her own conclusions, then he is confronted with the anxiety to depict all existing views on a subject, for example the politics of a time, even when this means that he will have to put words in his characters’ mouths with which he is in disagreement. Again for the sake of objectivity he will have to simulate on paper the course he followed during research, so that the reader encounters all standpoints as he did.

Connected to this is the anxiety of the historical novelist to approach and place judgement to the era he reconstructs not as a modern individual and with the knowledge he possesses but rather as one of the contemporaries about whom he writes.

The experience of writing, reading and understanding historical fiction is markedly different from that of a novel set in the contemporary world. Knowingly or not, the three participants of the historical novel, writers, readers, students, bring a set of reading skills and premeditated ideas to the experience.³⁸

³⁷ Lukács, p. 344.

³⁸ De Groot, p. 4.

The novelist has to transcend his own self in a way and be ready to view his subjects as if he were one of them, judging them accordingly based on the socio-political scene and the ethics of their time. The writer is faced constantly with this sort of anxiety when he chooses to set his work in an era of the past. And when he intends his work to contain a message for current times, it is inevitable not to compare past and present. He is therefore forced to weigh such subtle notions as the change in human perception through time. Also, to pinpoint where his own attitude as an individual meets with or deviates from the prevalent set of beliefs, if such we accept exists, and then to juxtapose his findings with the equivalent outlook of another person and a different face of mankind in history. If we wanted to picture his process of thought, we would witness the author in a sort of crossroads of time. On one side of him stand his subjects, the people of the era he chooses to describe, which he has to communicate with as much possible clarity and cogency to a very different to them receptor of the living experience, standing irreconcilably on the other side, his modern reader. The words of Manzoni echo those critics who note the genre's conflicted identity:

[...] in the final analysis, it is the historical novel itself that is completely at fault. [...] the historical novel is a work in which the necessary turns out to be impossible, and in which two essential conditions cannot be reconciled, or even one fulfilled. It inevitably calls for a combination that is contrary to its subject matter and a division contrary to its form. [...] In short, it is a work impossible to achieve satisfactorily, because its premises are inherently contradictory.³⁹

So far the historical novelist's anxieties are many although the ones we made of here are certainly not exhausting the matter. We may however imagine that individual anxieties in regard to the past arise in each researcher and concede to the idea that every historical novel is and expresses nothing more than its author's impression of the era with which it deals. The fact remains that for the author to take a stand simultaneously on his own time and the past is unavoidable; he will come face to face with the toils of making decisions about something he can approach by no means but the accounts of others. And through a fictional medium he will

³⁹ Alessandro Manzoni and Sandra Bermann, *On the Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 72.

have to translate whatever insights he gained into a seemingly real artifice, aiming to transport the reader into his fantasy.

Chapter 5

My Engagement with the Fiction

In this final part of my thesis I aim to connect the creative and the critical components of my work and discuss how I engaged with research and handled working on a piece of historical fictional narrative.

In choosing to write a historical novel reflected my hope that I could reconstruct an era of the past in a specific time and place that hadn't to my knowledge been explored before. While the settings of the circus and rural England feature often in historical fiction, in the specific years I chose to write about few examples exist. At the same time, the circus as a dynamic setting makes for a plethora of different stories and viewpoints and I aimed to describe one that had not been previously featured in a historical novel. My choice of the circus, a small village in the countryside and the world of child prostitution in the capital was a conscious attempt to describe characters in the margins of society that I hope do not fall into a common or stereotypical frame. I approached the actual historical material on the subject with the intention of creating imaginary characters haunted by the same fears and receiving the same abuse as real people had been. In that I elected to explore fear as a concept as well as employ victimized characters who live in the outskirts of their world, my aim was to inform, hopefully draw parallels with the modern world, and attempt to communicate the similarities between the past and the present. I believe that many of the fears becoming obstacles against life for people in the past are still valid and dictate current choices that we make. At the same time, human pain and suffering, abuse and victimization has changed in most parts of the modern world since the nineteenth century but not to a great extent; it is mainly the façade and the methods used that are different.

Coming from a different culture to the one I was writing about, I aimed to approach it with as much objectivity as possible, although inevitably my own interpretation of my sources has found its way into the narrative. I did not purposefully set out to describe either a positive or a negative picture of Victorian England, although I was attracted to what I consider one of the most exciting eras in human history. My subject matter dictated an overallly dark novel, while the themes I explored were inherently depressing. I aimed to depict both human kindness and cruelty in equal measure wherever the story allowed it and to show as much as possible the imbalance between the dark world of the protagonists and the normality of the rest of

society. The tragic events that take place in the fiction are dictated by the characters' own actions (or those of their families) and the particular environments they find themselves in. Wherever these are criminal, of course they do not reflect the entirety of the society but the marginalized part of it which they describe.

The setting of a small village in rural England fascinated me because I believe it is an environment that has not been fully explored yet in fiction and holds many possibilities for the building of narratives. For example, information about turf cutting which was quite common at the time (though more in northern areas of Britain than the Midlands) I have not encountered in any fictional account before nor think is a widely known element. The herds of Welsh cattle heading south towards London fairs as well as the practice of shoeing them during the journey also constitutes an example of imagery that I believe we have not associated with Victorian England. In thinking about nineteenth century Britain, I consider we most likely summon images of crinolines, Jack the Ripper, social balls and horse-drawn carriages, while I was interested in depicting a side of it which I think is unknown and which fascinated me. At the same time, life in remote rural areas was harsh and the morals of the people living in them were behind those of people in the cities. They made for decisions like that of Jon Weathers to send their children away, often with devastating consequences.

Which brings me to the second 'setting' of my creative component, the world of child prostitution based in the capital, which however also extends to the countryside. Encountering during my research real accounts and personal records of the establishment fictionalized and described in the novel as 'Swyft's' shocked me and compelled me to write about them. In this respect, I was conflicted: I had to be true to my sources and project the reality of their situations on my fictional canvas but at the same time I hoped not to horrify the reader or depress them without a reason. I aimed to include details and descriptions in such a way that the result would be informative and shocking, as the testimonies of the victims in my sources were, but not to an extent that would alienate the reader and drive her to question their stories or their authenticity. The result made for a dark novel although I hope its value rests in its historical basis.

The third setting of my novel, the circus, was a choice again dictated by my sources. Although circus-related literature exists about many other eras and countries, the years between 1868 and 1876 have not been explored exhaustively in regard to it and I aimed my work to add something to our knowledge of them. The circus, too, is a marginal world of Victorian Britain, a spectacle that even its contemporaries viewed with a suspicious eyes. It was my intention to partially reconstruct that world and bring it in contrast with my other two settings, although I

did not wish for it to stand out and overshadow their significance. The circus, although viewed as a form of entertainment mostly, for its artists, performers and workers was an environment that was associated with hard work and I chose to offer a picture of it from the inside rather than from the outside for this reason. At the same time, I did not feel that I needed to juxtapose it with the other two settings too much, as this might influence the reader's feelings for the characters as to the unfairness of the environments they live in. I aimed to present it as a haven for Eli Weathers and much less for Isa Malton, however I did not want their life there to appear in stark contrast with their past or with France's life at the same time.

In reconstructing these settings and not offering a view of the wider society around them, I was aware that the result might be bizarre. The novel aimed to explore these worlds as they stood alone, without a greater context. The reason for this was my belief that the characters would only have access to their respective worlds and not possess a larger view of the wider picture. Of course, they would be informed of many things outside their daily lives but they would not know of settings their marginalized existence didn't allow them to be present in. There would be an obvious jealousy perhaps of the far more fortunate lives of others, but I concentrated my efforts on reconstructing mainly the micro-universe in which they spent most of their time.

In terms of research, my sources inspired many of the novel's scenes while for others imagination should be held accountable. I strived, wherever possible, to assume how the characters would act according to their instincts that would be attuned with the details of their time. Aware that plenty of times their decisions are extreme, I only made the same decisions for them when I had indication from historical material that similar stories had taken place. In terms of language, too, I employed expressions that I encountered in the written records of people that lived at the time. Specifically in Frances Weathers' vocabulary or the narration enveloping her scenes I included expressions by real people who had described their abduction and abuse as children. I avoided plagiarism by selecting fragments of their sentences but nevertheless echoed their words in the text as a tribute to their stories. Lending plausibility to the narrative was an additional reason I kept as close as possible to the original accounts, although I realize the extent of the tragic events in the story might sometimes appear forced.

A first theme, fear, was crucial in my work. The actions of the heroes are often defined by it and the consequences that follow are more often than not devastating. My aim was to explore the feeling under the specific circumstances mentioned in the novel and present it before the reader at work. The helplessness derived from obeying the decisions of others was another theme linked to fear. In the context of this work, it led my characters to victimization

since that was the real result in actual circumstances too. For the real people from which my fictional characters draw elements, life was dictated by others that preceded them or came over and claimed control of their bodies. In Frances's death and Isa's imbalanced existence thereafter I chose to remain true to what the original sources dictated: that there was no happy ending when fear and other people dictated one's life and no room was left for free will and individual choices.

Another theme of my creative component was related to happiness. It struck me during research that many of my subjects in their accounts spoke of happiness and contentment as an absolute luxury which –in their difficult lives– was only the result of hard work, most commonly of a years-long and physical kind. Entertainment at the same time seemed to be a privilege and not just a right for these people, and this suited the context of my novel. During the progress of the story, I do not think we can say that Eli's character achieves happiness. At the end, he suffers a great deal of loss, both in himself and in terms of the people in his life from whom he is separated by non-communication or by their death. On the other hand, through his devotion and dedication to the show and his profession, I believe he manages to affect a sort of balance against the otherwise tragic events in his personal and family life.

Family as an institution and as the particular house of Weathers was another world the dynamics of which I wanted to explore. In the novel and in the specific circumstances it appears as a broken concept, which I think is what happens when extreme poverty, strict sexual morals or perversion infiltrate its existence. Humanity and kindness pose in the novel mostly outside familial relationships and within the community of the circus, which aims to underline that singleness of mind can be achieved regardless of origin, culture and identity.

Death is another concept in my creative component which I think is prominent. In the story, human life is presented as less valued than it is today, more fragile, vulnerable and susceptible to disease. In this I tried to be accurate to my source material which offered me a view of the world other than it is today.

The importance of coincidence and chance that frequently dictate human endeavours was one more element I wanted to investigate. To tie it together with acting according to one's will, in some cases I demonstrated that man has a say to shaping the course of his future while other times regardless of his determination little can be done to deviate from a path already taken.

As the novel progresses, the characters change essentially and fundamentally in time. For the purposes of the creative component of a thesis, the length of which does not allow for a longer narrative in which an entire decade could be covered step by step, I chose to set my

story mainly in the years 1868 and 1876, working with mentions of the future and flashbacks whenever I deemed necessary to bridge the gap of the story in between. In essence, presenting my characters first as children and then as adults I was hoping for a starker contrast between the two conditions. I felt the need to explore the causes of their demise and the aftermath of their stories, presenting the actual workings of the procedure in between only briefly. This way I hoped to monitor the differences in their early and later personalities immediately and not via gradual change and adaptation. While all the characters undergo major changes in their living conditions, their loss of innocence and the in view of the tragic events inflicted upon them, I shielded to a certain degree Eli's character. In his case, I strived to maintain him closer to his young self and keep him outside of immediate disaster as much as possible. This was a decision based on my belief that a work overloaded with tragic events would entirely alienate the reader and make the experience of reading impossible. Frances's character, however, is essentially the one who borrows the most details from actual persons of that time. Isa's character too is heavily based on material I encountered during my research and his life path coincides with that of the subjects in many of my sources. In this respect, Eli is probably the character that works as a bridge between the modern reader and the source material dictating the course of the novel. He stands neither entirely here nor there.

Not having worked on a historical novel before, the endeavour posed several difficulties that I faced for the first time, many of which were related with research. The first was deciding which sources to include and actually how much research should be conducted. I aimed to read as widely and as varied sources as possible hoping to cover a wide ground from which I could form a general picture of the time before concentrating on the particular worlds I wanted to describe. Meanwhile, I did not want my historical data to overshadow the storyline or the characters. I felt that their stories had a value outside the context of the time they lived in and for that reason I strived to shape them as symbolically and humanly accessible as the plot allowed me. This, while taking care to present how their stories would have taken place in the context of their specific time and space. Incorporation of the historical material into the work did not trouble me as much. This was because my story was mainly and for the most part dictated by it. During the research, scenes were formed in my imagination directly from encountering historical elements that caught my attention. Naturally, I selected to present those details of the time that fascinated me the most, however I hope they will have an appeal to the reader as well.

In regard to the plot, and due to the heavy atmosphere of the novel, I had to find a solution to not make the reading experience particularly depressing or impossible. I tried

wherever I could to interpose scenes in a slower rhythm with scenes that take place faster. Simultaneously, whenever tragic events were described, I attempted to follow them with more peaceful descriptions so that the effect would not be a series of devastating occurrences which would threaten the narrative and force the reader to stop reading.

As far as physical landscapes are concerned, my choices were dictated by necessity. Drayden's troupe is a fictional one because I needed to be able to dictate its course and have it appear in the characters' lives at will. On the other hand, it borrows its character from real travelling shows of the time which operated on a similar basis as described in the story. Hallow as a location is real, although the house of the Weathers is fictional and in 1868 families did not live in that distance from the village. Similarly, the gin palace, Klyber's manor house and the house off Gray's Inn Lane are fictional settings based close to the areas where real counterparts of them existed in the nineteenth century.

Most of my research was based on textual evidence of the landmarks and the events described in the story. However, I also deduced information about the time from photographs, paintings and other secondary source material that I had access to. Very often these helped for me to form a better idea of the time in my mind and understand or imagine how the world would have looked then. Often, these secondary sources did not translate into tangible facts that could be with certainty traced within my work so I included only a sample of them in the bibliography section.

Further themes that I chose to explore in my work, although in a lesser degree, were poverty, fame, and success. In particular, I was interested in witnessing the extreme consequences that material but also spiritual poverty can affect on a character's decision and how they translate for others too. On the opposite side of the spectrum lay Eli's fame and success within the circus. Again, these I tried to keep to a moderate degree in order to avoid a stark contrast with the other two characters' lives but also out of necessity. Within eight years working in a travelling troupe, a child could plausibly acquire a promising career and start building a name for themselves but at the same time unless they already came from a circus family or had previous relevant training they would not have dominated the circus scene in London regardless how talented they were. I also did not want extreme success or fame to change Eli's character to a great degree. In the story, we observe his transition from a helpless child to a fairly confident but not entirely mature adult, however I think that if the gap between his initial condition and the state in which we leave him at the end of the novel was greater it would be implausible due to the shortness of the narrative time in between.

Personal gain, personal motives and cruelty also feature as themes in the work. These mainly appear to drive the forces aside of the protagonists. The choice was conscious in that I had decided to assume the viewpoint of the victims in the story and to describe the situations from their perspective. At the end of the narrative though, Isa's character is driven by vengeance and demonstrates cruelty for personal reasons. I feel that he is different to the other two protagonists because of that. Eli Weathers, since he was a child but also as an adult, blames himself for the events that take place before his eyes and for the course that his life takes. His sister, on the other hand, stands somewhere in between his perspective and Isa's. Frances blames herself, appears vaguely to consider her father responsible for sending her away from home although she does not dare to ascribe a definite liability to his actions, and seems to have notion of a divine providence being at work in her life though as a mostly negative manifestation. Isa, finally, considers himself entirely innocent and he is until the very end when we learn of the part of his identity which he does not reveal to Eli. In shaping him as an indeed innocent man who turns into a murderer I was hoping to show, as is a common theme in many novels, the effect that abuse can have on a person and the perpetual nature of it that is observable. The reader of course may draw his or her own conclusions and judge the characters according to his or her instinct and beliefs. On my part, and in regard to the characters' fates, action and inaction, kindness and abuse, I tried to present three different models. Eli stands in the middle this time, being the character on whom life is inflicted as it will but who reacts and inflicts himself on life with a degree of success. Frances is the character who is influenced by what time and events do to her, but she does not manage to escape them despite her attempts. Isa represents the man who becomes entirely who life and the tragic circumstances he is involved in make him. I consider that even his final acts, of murdering his parents and sacrificing seven years' worth of wages for Eli to acquire ownership of the troupe, are shaped by the circumstances that define him as a character. He has learned to respond to kindness with kindness and to cruelty with cruelty, seeing no alternative response for the latter pair. This, I believe, is also a natural psychological reaction so, personally, I do not consider Isa's personality to be shallow because it cannot forgive or forget.

On a different note, working on a fictional narrative driven by history for the first time was an experience that I felt burdened me with more responsibility than working on any other fictional genre. While in other fictional works of mine I felt justified to develop a character as a unique experiment with different elements, I realized that within the context of the historical I could not do so even though the option was available to me. In other words, regarding the protagonists mainly, I felt that I had to shape them according not to what could have happened

but according to what would have happened. This was partly dictated by the subject of abuse too, which I felt did not leave me room for dramatic and implausible resolutions. But more importantly it was the relationship I developed with my sources that I consider the determining factor for this. After a certain point in my research, I nursed the idea that I had been entrusted with facts that I had a moral obligation not to alter or stretch further from the context of the situations they had occurred. If I did that, I considered it would be a disservice to both the authors that acted as my source material but also to the reader. Although I am aware of the artificiality of my story, which at any rate could appear entirely implausible to a reader, I could not help but ascribe myself a duty of sorts to the real persons whose accounts I had used as primary material as to the ghosts of them I produced with my imagination, namely the characters of the story as they appear. I believe this relationship is a natural result of the researcher's friction with his or her material. Due to the time invested in research, the historical novelist acquires, I would argue, a moral compass with attunes itself to the better interests of the subjects he is dealing with. During the incorporation stage and simultaneously the creative writing process, the same thing happens. Although the writer is aware that the characters he has created are artificial, he cannot avoid developing a certain degree of feelings towards them. In the case of other genres of fiction, this happens due to the length of time the novelist spends with his characters. This is exponentially longer than the amount of time a reader will spend with them, no matter how many times they reread the work, because the author during the writing process simply spends exponentially more time creating them. A scene which can be read in under two minutes might have taken entire weeks to form, both via writing and rewriting but also through imagining the characters during the day, time which is not consciously recorded but counts towards developing a relationship with them. In the case of historical fiction in particular, I sensed that this effect was strengthened. The amount of time I spent envisioning and creating the characters, together with the additional burden and anxiety of historical duty, made for a more intense writer-character relationship in my limited experience.

In regard to the creative component's voice and style, I attempted to create a narrative that could be approached by any modern reader with hopefully relative ease. Taking in consideration the increasingly faster rhythm that written word acquires across many genres, I shaped the plot in a way that I believe would be simple to follow and captivating to read. In certain parts of the narrative I consciously held away from creating mystery because I felt that would constitute as playing with the reader in a very negative sense. An example of that is Frances' story. It is explained that she enters a child prostitution establishment early on in her narrative and already in Part One of the novel we know of her later course and suffering. To

do otherwise, to conceal her fate from the reader and attempt to create mystery around it (while the same applies to Isa's story), I thought would be perverse and cruel. On the other hand, in Eli's plotline I hinted at his future career in the circus but chose to leave the reader wondering as to what direction he might take, thinking it would be more appropriate to allow room for speculation there.

Concerning the initial incident that sets the story of Eli and Frances in motion, I was in a dilemma for a very long while whether it should be an actual act of abuse or a misinterpreted scene through Eli's eyes. I chose the latter for several reasons. One of them was out of kindness to Frances's character. She does not experience love or the affection of a partner throughout her short life and I wanted to alleviate even to a minimal degree the notion that such a possibility does not exist. She is therefore left with one good memory of that kind which she idealises in her mind, although she neither manages to speak of it too openly to her brother, nor does the novel stray its attention to that longer than a passing mention.

Another reason for the aforementioned choice had to do with Eli himself. As he is very young and innocent when the scene with Frances and the stranger takes place, it is easy for him to misinterpret it. Whether he had or not, and whether he had acted or not, things would evolve in the same way. Harriet would discover her daughter's bloody dress, Jon Weathers would send his daughter away, Frances would end up at Swyft's, Eli would be tormented by her absence. With a crucial difference however. *His* own story would have been different had he acted or known how to act in that circumstance. Perhaps he would not have run away from home or ever joined the circus. In a sense, it is Eli's guilt and fear that dictate his whole life up until the point he is mature enough to react to them. As an element, I needed this guilt to exist in order to push Eli's story into existence and for this reason I chose to present the scene in the field through his eyes.

The reason the novel is sparsely populated by characters instead of portraying a wider variety of people is due to my intention to grant it a rather claustrophobic effect. While a few secondary characters other than the main three appear now and then or are mentioned just the one time, the greatest part of the narrative revolves uncomfortably close to the three protagonists. I believed that would grant the story a more intense personal element, keep the reader concentrated on the psychological procedures taking place within Eli, Frances and Isa, and would not distract the course of the plot from the immediate problems that the characters face. When other characters make an appearance, they act as necessary tools of the plot although the aim was to do so without betraying as much. They offer a brief break from what happens inside the protagonists' minds and present a glimpse of the outside world.

The relationship of my protagonists with their outside world is one of conflict. Apart from that being a fictional convention serving the progress of the narrative, it was furthermore dictated by my engagement with research. The lives of people I studied in the nineteenth century and the stories of daily life that attracted my attention were such that featured elements of struggle and conflict. These I utilized to reconstruct the effect the original material produced in me.

On another level, the story of the creative component, although aiming to describe human conditions regardless of the specific time and place it happens in, I believe could not have happened elsewhere or at a different time period. The messages behind the plot and the observations one can make about the character's psychology are, I consider, deeply human and may be encountered across the world in any culture. The specific timeframe of the creative component, however, gave me the chance to observe how such a story could manifest in it in a unique way. The combination of the settings of the circus, rural life and the world of child prostitution in the capital would be hard to encounter in any other period of time. Apart from the wonderful canvas for fiction that nineteenth century England provides, the years between 1868 and 1876 are also a relatively peaceful period that has not been explored exhaustively. It is still relatively close to our time to approach and understand without tremendous difficulty. At the same time, it is adequately foreign –or aspects of it are still foreign enough to us– that a novel could be developed on it without traversing already treaded paths. Meanwhile, its foreignness to us is of a mild level, which I consider an advantage. It is a time period that does not alienate the reader too much, although admittedly it does not contain as much mystery as perhaps other eras of human history hold.

The experience of working with historical material affected the way I thought about prose and simultaneously influenced my creative writing process. First of all, I consider it an invaluable gain to learn how to perform research on such a great scale. Classifying source material and prioritizing the product of my research was also a skill that I had to develop. Friction with sources, apart from the knowledge they imparted to me, also translated into a different method of producing ideas, from the outside. Before this thesis, my experience was limited to constructing scenes based on a supposedly infinite amount of elements. Since now external parameters existed, limitations as to the timeframe, space and historical accuracy that had to be employed, I was forced to invent based on what I thought of at first as more limited material. Soon I realized that the restrictions the framework of history imposed not only were not such but also made the creative writing process smoother in the sense that the story followed a more or less logical progression given the initial number of factors we had included in the

equation. While in another genre, a story could have developed in multiple various ways, while working on the creative component the plot presented me naturally and instinctively with fewer alternatives which though made immediate sense. In a way, the history of the piece or at least the amount of it that I chose to take into consideration, highlighted to me certain routes that the characters could follow and no more. This was a blessing in disguise and it manifested during the third stage of the work, while actually writing and incorporating the product of the research in the narrative. Prior to that, the research itself appeared to extend to infinite possibilities and the routes the story could have taken before starting to write it seemed terrifyingly many. The result was numbing and threatening with inaction. Once the writing process began however, the historical pieces fell almost by themselves in place into the narrative.

Relevant to that last point, I would like to develop one more argument that has to do with the writer's picture of the world he describes. I will claim here that the writing process (when the genre is historical fiction) is the one which finally gives the novelist a whole picture of the era he sets his work in and not the research itself. Perhaps this was my own perception of it, but at the first stage of research I felt that I had accumulated a vast number of historical information about the time which however did not grant me a wholesome, complete picture of it. I could describe a lot in the world I was writing about but I could not visualise it in my mind. Enter the creative process, everything changed. During and after the writing, I felt that I could finally see in person all the elements I had read about and gathered as source material. I realized it was the combination of them and the act of combining them on paper, in a scene, within a description, that formed complete images. Prior to writing an acrobatic scene, for example, I knew what the uniforms of the acrobats looked like, I could describe the big top and the ring, I had a working notion of an acrobat's routine and act, I could imagine the crowds reactions. Trying to visualize the scene prior to writing, even though I held all the necessary components, would not work. In the instance of the writing itself, the characters took over and the plot brought to life all these elements through combination; at the very end, when the scene was written and put into words, I could visualize the whole product, which is also what the reader immediately derives from the text although for the writer the image comes last.

Naturally, these thoughts are my own perception of the creative process and the research as I experienced it. Discussions with my supervisor were an invaluable contribution to my own work. They shaped the course of the creative process and provided it with direction, while they also put my thinking into perspective in regard to both the historical and the fictional elements of the work. Whether the final product of the thesis achieves its aims is left to the reader to decide. On my own part, the journey through historical sources and the attempt to

incorporate them in a fictional work transported me to two distinct worlds: that which I met in my source material and the imaginary one I ended up producing. I consider the experience unique and extraordinary.

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Peter, *The Great Fire of London* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1993)
- Ackroyd, Peter, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus, 1991)
- Adams, Charlotte, *The Stolen Child; or, Laura's Adventures with the Travelling Showman and His Family* (London: J. W. Parker, 1838)
- Andrić, Ivo and Lovett F. Edwards, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Beograd: Dereta, 2006)
- Assael, Brenda, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2005)
- Astley, Philip, *Astley's System of Equestrian Education* (Dublin: Thomas Burnside, 1802)
- Baker, Ernest A., *A Guide to Historical Fiction* (New York: Argosy Antiquarian, 1968)
- Baker, Henry Barton, *The London Stage: Its History and Traditions from 1576-1888* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1904)
- Barthes, Roland, 'Death of the Author', *Aspen*, (1967), no. 5-6
- Black, Jeremy and Donald M. MacRaild, *Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)
- Bostock, E. H., *Menageries, Circuses, and Theatres* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1927)
- Briggs, Asa, *Victorian Cities: Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Middlesbrough, Melbourne, London* (London: Penguin, 1990)
- Brontë, Anne, *Agnes Grey* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004)
- Brontë, Anne, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Shirley* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004)
- Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003)
- Caine, Jeffrey, *Heathcliff* (Fawcett, 1979)
- Clive, Kitty, *Nada, the Circus Girl* (London: Sunday School Union, 1906)
- Cody, William, *The Life of Buffalo Bill* (London: Senate, 1994)
- Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman in White* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)
- Conklin, George, *The Ways of the Circus* (New York: Harper Bros., 1921)
- De Groot, Jerome, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge 2010)

- Denier, Tony, *How to Join the Circus and Gymnasium* (New York: A Happy Hours Co., 1877)
- Dickens, Charles, *Hard Times* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008)
- Dickens, Charles, *Little Dorrit* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)
- Dickens, Charles, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008)
- Dickens, Charles, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Einstein, Albert, *The Meaning of Relativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)
- Eliot, George, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004)
- Eliot, George, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)
- Frost, Thomas, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1875)
- Frost, Thomas, *The Old Showmen and the Old London Fairs* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1874)
- Golby, J. M., *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890: A Source Book of Contemporary Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- Goodman, Irene, 'Why Anne Boleyn Is the Poster Girl of Historical Fiction', *Solander: The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society*, 9:2 (2005), 15
- Graf, Ferdinand, *Hints to Gymnasts: Being Sound Advice and Hints to Leaders and Teachers in Gymnasiums and Schools* (London: Dunn Collins, 1898)
- Haire-Sargeant, Lin, *Heathcliff: The Return to Wuthering Heights* (Pocket Books, 1993)
- Hamilton, A. H., *The Summer Guide to the Amusements of London; and Provincial Excursionist for 1848* (London: Kent & Richards, 1848)
- Harris, Jose, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994)
- Howard, Diana, *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850-1950* (London: Library Association, 1970)
- Kant, Immanuel, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960)
- Keith, Charlie, *Circus Life and Amusements* (Derby: Bewley & Roe, 1879)
- Kilmer, A. J., *The Circus and Other Essays* (New York: Laurence J. Cromme, 1916)
- Kripke, Saul A., 'Outline of a Theory of Truth', *Journal of Philosophy*, 72 (1975), 690-716
- Kureishi, Hanif, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)
- L' Estrange, Anna, *Return to Wuthering Heights* (Pinnacle Books, 1977)
- Le Roux, H. and Jules Garnier, *Acrobats and Mountebanks* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1890)

Leotard, *Dean's New Movable Book of Leotard, Blondin as Ape, Blondin, Etc.* (London: Dean & Sons, 1862)

Lloyd, James, *My Circus Life* (London: Noel Douglas, 1925)

Lukács, Georg, *The Historical Novel* (London: Peregrine Books, 1969)

Manzoni, Alessandro and Sandra Bermann, *On the Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)

Maugham, W. Somerset, *Liza of Lambeth* (Vintage Classics, 2010)

Mayhew, Augustus, *Paved with Gold; or, The Romance and Reality of the London Streets, an Unfashionable Novel* (London: Ward, Lock, 1857)

Mayhew, Henry, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Griffin, Bohn, 1861)

McEwan, Ian, 'An inspiration, yes', *The Guardian*, (2006)
 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3>> [accessed 2 January 2014].

McTaggart, John McTaggart Ellis, 'I.-The Unreality of Time', *Mind*, XVII (1908), 457-74

Montague, Charles W., *Recollections of an Equestrian Manager* (London: W. and R. Chambers, 1881)

Morley, Henry, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (Glasgow: George Routledge & Sons, 1892)

Mundella, A. J., *Secular and Religious Education* (London: Sunday School Union, 1884)

Nadkarni, Rao B. G. N., *Journal of a Visit to Europe in 1896* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala & Sons, 1903)

Nield, Jonathan, *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013)

Planché, James Robinson, *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872)

Purvis, June, *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: Routledge, 1997)

Reade, Amye, *Ruby: or, How Girls Are Trained for Circus Life. Founded on Fact* (London: Trischler, 1890)

Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 2000)

Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991)

Sanger, George, *Seventy Years a Showman* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966)

Saxon, A. H., ed., *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983)

Smith, Albert, ed., *Gavarni in London: Sketches of London Life and Character* (London: Dean & Son, 1859)

Smith, Elmer Boyd, *The Circus and All about It* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1909)

Smith, Thomas, *Recollections of the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom* (London, 1860)

Thackeray, William, *Vanity Fair* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)

Thom, James Alexander, *The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2010)

Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2002)

Thompson, F. M. L., *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain* (London: Fontana Press, 2008)

Unknown, *Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!!! The Life and Extraordinary Career of Blondin, the Ascentionist* (London: C. Elliott)

Van Hare, G. *Fifty Years of a Showman's Life; or, The Life and Travels of Van Hare* (London: W. H. Allen, 1888)

Waters, Sarah, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 2003)

Waters, Sarah, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1999)

Watkins, H. L., *Four Years in Europe: The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth in the Old World, 1897-1901* (Paris: privately printed, 1901)

Wilde, Oscar, *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011)

Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007)

Wilson, A. N., *The Victorians* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 2003)

Wilson, James, *The Dark Clue* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

Woolley, Persia, *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books: 1997)

Wright, Thomas, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867)