

THE INSTANT SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Rosanna Pike



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I loved it!' Bonnie Garmus,
author of *Lessons in Chemistry*

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Grabs you
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Glorious Exploits



A Little Trickerie

'A bold, funny and
imaginative journey through
Tudor England ... A real treat'
Joanna Quinn, author of
The Whalebone Theatre

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A Little Trickerie

‘Rosanna Pike is a bright and bold new voice in historical fiction and has created a heart-catching character in bad girl trickster, Tibb’ Annie Garthwaite, author of *Cecily*

‘*A Little Trickerie* has a big heart, a subversive wit, and the most lovable protagonist I’ve come across in years. It’s funny, linguistically inventive, and angry about all the right things, dealing deftly with a slew of serious issues – class, homophobia, homelessness, religious faith. I tore through it and enjoyed every page. A thrilling, joyous, intoxicating debut’ Sandra Newman, author of *Julia*

‘Striking, darkly funny and heartfelt, Tibb’s tale of trickery and friendship in a vividly conjured Tudor England grabs you from the first page and doesn’t let go’ Ferdia Lennon, author of *Glorious Exploits*

‘A bold, funny and imaginative journey through Tudor England in the excellent company of a foul-mouthed would-be angel called Tibb. A brilliantly original debut with a brave and insightful heroine, *A Little Trickerie* is a real treat – and Rosanna Pike a real talent’ Joanna Quinn, author of *The Whalebone Theatre*

‘The fresh, irreverent voice of Tibb Ingleby is sheer brilliance. I loved it!’ Bonnie Garmus, author of *Lessons in Chemistry*

‘I absolutely LOVED Rosanna Pike’s *A Little Trickerie*, a wonderful, spirited, really fresh-feeling historical novel . . . Punchy and funny and original and heartbreaking all at once . . . Very unexpected and original’ India Knight

‘It’s nice to come across a voice so singular and characterful’
Imogen Hermes Gowar, *Guardian*

‘A boisterous vagabond with an audacious plan . . . Great fun to read’ i, The Best New Books to Read in August

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'I defy you to resist the raw energy and subversive humour of this Tudor picaresque novel narrated by foul-mouthed, big-hearted Tibb . . . Evokes a Tudor England a far cry from the usual image of courtly banquets' *The Bookseller*, Editor's Choice

'From the very first page, we're plunged into the wild, wonderfully realised life of swearsy, sweet-natured vagabond Tibb Ingleby . . . A tale of cheeky chicanery and heartfelt hopefulness' *Daily Mail*

' "A little trickerie" is what you need to survive in Tudor England . . . Pike brings together a loveable, diverse cast' *Mail on Sunday*

'Rosanna Pike absolutely nails Tibb's voice, and this is a joyful and highly original debut' *The Times*

'Pike takes [a] wonderful historical seed and uses it to grow an appealing work of fiction' *Telegraph*

'It has completely captured my heart and blown me away . . . truly, truly remarkable. It's so moving; it's sad on one page and then it will make you laugh out loud the next and Tibb is one of those characters that you are going to remember for the rest of your life' *Confessions of a Book Collector*

'Blazingly original and disarmingly funny' *Sainsbury's Magazine*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosanna Pike studied English literature at Exeter University. She is a graduate of Curtis Brown Creative and the Faber Academy. She lives in south-west London with her family. Her first novel, *A Little Trickerie*, was an instant *Sunday Times* bestseller.

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A Little Trickerie

Inspired by true events

ROSANNA PIKE



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For Oli and Rex

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A roof in return

Somewhere near Newmarket

May, 1500

Ma had said she would give the cordwainer man a baby – the thing he could not get from his dull-as-ditchwater wife – and we would get a roof in return. That baby-child would be born, and when it was out then the cordwainer would discard the woman called his wife by-hook-or-by-crook, and we would live there in that neat stone house and eat from clay plates like the kings we were. Or so said my ma who was oftentime mistook.

‘Finally, Tibb!’ she did holler with a big hoot-hoot and ‘Fuck knows we have waited for it!’ And we did dance like two lunatics from the madhouse since we had dreamt of a roof for all-of-time. I can’t say how long the cordwainer man would have lived there with us, since my ma was partial to that naughty game of throat-slitting by then, but in any case, that question did not matter one piece.

The problem went like this: there we were these months later outside our soon-to-be house, and the baby still had a purple rope hanging from its belly and my ma was still walking with her legs apart like a duck, and the cordwainer man did look like there were two perfect strangers standing on his own doorstep. He was like a bun on two legs. Perhaps there was a pudding stuffed up that fine wool doublet.

‘It is me!’ said my ma, and she was all pale in her lovely face and sweaty since it was only recently she was saying, ‘O-O-O, Tibb!’ and cursing around like a sick pig while that person called my sister climbed her way out.

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‘O, yes . . .’ he said very slow. And he did examine her with his bead-eyes and say, ‘A girl? I did not order a girl, dear.’

Well that was some sinking feeling and I did wonder if my stomach was tumbling out of my arsehole. And such a waft of leather at the door from his shoe-making business, my nose was wrinkled up like a currant.

‘I shall tell your wife,’ she did hiss, for my ma had some sharp tongue on her, though never for her own Tibb.

He fingered his chin which was covered in fluff. ‘Well I cannot see my face in this child at all. I will deny that thing, and furthermore, I will have you both corrected since don’t you know vagrancy is outlawed?’

I scowled, because he did not mind it so much when he was wriggling around on top of my ma. Did you think of that then, sir?

Bang went the wood door and we did disappear towards that barn where he kept us those last months in secret from his boring wife.

‘I should have known it, Tibb,’ she breathed. ‘And have I not always said to beware the fuckers?’

Ma was leaning on me like she was an old crone and she was getting closer and closer to that trailel-with-blood ground so by the time we were back she was mostly crawling. Perhaps she truly loved the man. I couldn’t be sure, since Ma was always bending to the left and the right with her thoughts and she did fall into love and out of it too quick to keep up.

Now this hay is all red in here and sticky from that birth but she is sitting on it and I am crouching in front of her, and that baby is going suck and suck for its little life.

‘This is some horse-shit, Tibb,’ she croaks. ‘And would you pass me that beer?’

Well she is reaching out for that wood tankard which we pilfered from an inn some time back for the purpose of

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collecting water, but more commonly beer for my ma. In fact there is only goat milk in it now and not much of it left besides.

That tiny baby called my sister rolls off her chest and cries on the ground so I pick her up, and this bleating life is all hot and squashed in my hands and I should hope I'm not breaking it.

‘There is no beer, Ma.’

‘Aaw!’ she says in a long string like she is a cockerel because beer is medicine for my ma. Then, ‘I have never given you a roof, Tibb!’ And she says sorry and sorry, and I am starting to leak from the eyes.

‘Would you find a nice roof, Tibb?’ she whispers. ‘And would you take your sister there too?’

‘Ma?’ I say, because I don't much like how she is talking – like she is going somewhere – and nor do I like that shiny blood which is leaking out of her underneath-part and making the hay turn redder. And then she is all still like she is formed of stone and the baby is squawking like there is a bull in here.

I say, ‘Ma! Ma!’ like this might wake her. She has been threatening that thing called death for so long and wishing away this shit world, and now it is here, but I am not ready for that. And my knees are stuck upon with the blood-hay while I poke her about her lovely face but she does not open one eye and wink at me because this is no joke, Tibb.

Waste-of-money shoes

Here I am on this hay still and I cannot think I will ever move. I have stopped saying, 'Ma,' and I have stopped shaking her because it is clear the fuckers won and she is not speaking back ever again.

That sun is beating down outside this barn like it cannot see what has happened in here. And some birds are doing their morning song like they can't see it either, but this sound is muffled in my ears like it is very far away. And this baby-cry is muffled too. Really I can hear only my own breath which is too shallow owing to the black snake which has wrapped itself around my body and most particularly my heart and my throat. That squeezing pain is something hollow and my mind is hollow besides. I do not see that fat man the cordwainer till he is swaying above me.

'Ah,' he says, 'but childbirth is something truly perilous.'

These words are travelling across the seas to reach me and that grin crawling up his doughy cheeks looks like it would jump upon the clouds. Here is some victorious fucker.

'Well then, would you get gone already, child? And would you take that screeching baby before my wife comes to this tannery and hears it all?'

I don't answer that. Maybe I will not ever speak again.

He returns with a spade and then he is digging a hole out there in the soil and muttering to himself, and I am thinking this is no kind generosity, sir.

'You are a crook and a liar,' I wish to say, and I wish to find a blade and ram it into his throat as I did see my ma do

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oftentime. But I am just sitting here and watching with my eyes wide like two moons and I have wrapped my new sister in my own apron. Perhaps the snake will kill me. Clouds traipse across the sky out there like they are watching too.

Now he is dragging out that lovely woman called my ma by the bare feet so she is bumped into that hole and my heart is aching like it will turn black and stop beating. And I want to tell him to be gentle but those words are stuck inside my throat. He throws soil on top.

‘Well I am going this day to sell my fine shoes and when I come back here you will be gone.’

His mouth is moving at a different time to these bad words he is saying, and his finger is wiggling to some other tune besides.

Gone. Gone without her?

The baby is doing some thrashing with her head like she wants to say, ‘Would you feed me, Tibb?’

‘You will be gone, child,’ he says again, and these words squat in this death-air, and I do not much like the way he is holding that spade out like it is a sword. Then he squints his eyes and he says, ‘And if you are not, then I will turn you in myself and you will be strung up like the vagabond you are.’

Well there is some thumping inside of me as he stomps away and that nowhere-voice is saying, ‘Would you move, Tibb? And here is the first rule of vagrancy: do not stay long in one place else the fuckers will catch on.’ And that should be my ma’s own voice except for the fact she is dead.

Suddenly this baby-wail sounds louder in my ears, and there is some urgency to it that I didn’t hear before. I do drip the last of that goat milk into those baby-lips from my finger, which is hard because my eyes are leaking. Drip and drip into her little mouth and I am blinking like the world is new. Would you get your sister a roof, Tibb?

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My legs feel like someone else's legs and I am not standing on them like I did before she died, but more like a fawn or a drunk man. And I gather up our things which are the blanket and the tankard and the canvas bag and I stagger out of here with the snake upon my shoulders and my legs apart like it is me who did just birth this person in my arms. Do not look back at that new-on-top soil, Tibb, else you will never leave.

In the distance I can see the cordwainer man, off in his horse-cart all stuffed with his waste-of-money shoes. The crickets are shrieking in these grasses, but there is something else ringing inside of my head. A subject my own ma did think to verse me on called revenge, Tibb. Even at the worst-of-times.

Better milk

Clouds scud across the sky but the sun is too hot for May. Those flames and that stench of smoke are all behind, since I did set alight to that man's dry thatched roof while he was at the market. He did not keep his promise of the roof, so why should he have one himself?

These fields look like they have never once been trod in and these long-like-weeds grasses are scratching at my knees. I can feel it like they are knives sprouting from the ground. Villages stomp past, else the odd mostly-mud hut which is better than no roof at all, Tibb. And some scatterings of peasants in fields, but no cows. I am walking on with my wide-apart eyes and I am thinking of this word *cows* like it is stuck upon my head because if I do not think of cows then I would crouch down and let the snake finish me off. This black feeling is swelling and swelling and making my legs feel heavy and my head is so full that it's just empty.

'Henrietta,' I say, and that voice sounds strange. 'I will find you cows.'

Ma and I were loitering around this place called Newmarket these past months to wait for that baby and the cordwainer's big promise to come true, but I can't remember these near-enough fields because the world has gone a terrible shade and everything has been turned over and stuck back on upside-down. Either that, or the cows did fuck off and die like Ma.

This name Henrietta is after our own King Henry VII, though Ma said he is the person who has declared vagabonds like us to be called *Criminals*. But I cannot think of any better

name since I do not know many people to fill me with ideas and thinking is something hard right now.

She is too small inside the apron-swaddle and I am not sure of the best way to hold her since there is no sturdiness to her body. Now she is looking over my shoulder and I am stroking that soft furry bit at the base of her neck because this is making her be quiet and it is smoothing over that barbed ache inside of me which is gathering up armies. Sometimes she is rooting around for a great pair of tits to suckle on but my chest is flat like a board though it is high-time for tits or so said my dead ma.

‘Henrietta,’ I say. ‘You are growing backwards.’

I think she is even smaller than when she climbed out.

Fingers of light are sticking down and I want my ma back out of that hole. The hem of my dress has unstitched itself and is hanging below my knees. I have worn this thing every day since we pilfered it from that second-hand clothing market at Melksham which is far away from here. I could be the daughter of a nobleman in this costume because it is white with a laced apron, but it is filthy and it stinks like a cheesecloth.

Move, Tibb, before this evening sun is chased away by the black clouds. This canvas bag of mine slaps against my back and I want to wrench it off. I am dipping that tankard in a stream but this water is not making me smile because my ma is not here. Henrietta does not enjoy water either.

‘Henrietta, I will not let you die.’

By the time I spot that shock of black and ivory lounging in a field I am somewhere deep into the land of Norfolk and that is all I know. I squat in a dense hedgerow while the rain hammers on to the mud, making streams like the ones outside the butchers’ tents but those are formed of blood.

I wring my hair out like a rag. White, thin hair which hangs straight like a poker to my waist. Your ma was knocked up by

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the big-man-God himself, Tibb!' she said, because I was surely an angel with my doe eyes and this ghostly complexion. Then she laughed because there is no God. 'The world has been hoodwinked, Tibb!'

Thoughts of my ma are feeding the snake.

The string-bean farmer gathers those cows into their barn and Henrietta looks like a doll there on the peaty soil. I think she is too small for this big world.

'Look,' I tell her, and 'I am going to fetch you better milk.'

Night is the time for all shady business, Tibb, or so said my ma and she was well practised to know it.

I am skittering with the wood tankard like there are flames beneath this mud and this shit-smell is so rank that I could spew. There is something like terror in these fingers of mine while I do pull and pull because this milk is more than one nice supper, Tibb. The other cow-friends watch me like I am here to do murder. Perhaps it is them who placed that iron trough in the shadow so I crash into it.

Well that farmhouse door is thrown open and that bean-man is out here again, and with two dogs this time. He looks like he would thrash me on the whipping post himself.

'I see you, urchin! Thieves must face the pillory!'

Now those dogs are chasing me and snapping their great teeth and my breath is too quick, like it is going to scamper away completely and leave me empty. Fuck this hair and this ghostly skin – I must be like a speck of light darting over these dim fields. The sight of the milk on that black dirt is something truly bad and Henrietta is under the hedgerow and perhaps the dogs will get to her first.

Eventually the farmer whistles and those dogs retreat but the milk is lost already. Henrietta is wailing and that is something urgent and terrifying so I tip her head back and pour in the not-much-left of it but I can't tell she wants more.

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‘Henrietta,’ I say, and I wrap that apron-blanket around her tighter and I am pushing her down the front of my dress so she is warm. Those mewlings are not so urgent as they were before and maybe that is something good or maybe it isn’t. I should find her more milk but my eyes are closing because of the walk and the snake and the cloud which would smother me.

In the morning the cold wakes me; this bulging soil and some bad teeth-chattering of mine. The bundle on my chest called Henrietta is all wrapped up and next to my skin and I clutch her in my cold hands like the cherries did ripen and we pinched the lot and there is some deep swooping inside of my guts.

I stare down at her velvet head. Up there, those birds stop jabbering and the branches stand still and mad thoughts are rattling through my mind and snapping at each other and pulling there. Feelings which are stretching and stretching and these don’t have names until they all mount up to one thing called relief because you still have this person to care for, Tibb Ingleby, and if you didn’t then there would be no point to you.

‘Henrietta,’ I say, and that name is clumsy on my tongue like I did learn to speak just now. ‘You know we still have each other?’

She looks up at me like she knows it too.

Don't beg

I did see that thing called ecstasy pass over my ma oftentime – mostly after she did threaten to leave this shit place by the slitting of her own throat – but I did not feel it myself till now. And such a shame to boot because here is some sweet highness inside of me. I should say it is like one great sunrise in there because of all the things Henrietta and I will do together in this life and I am not thinking of my dead ma in the hole because she wouldn't want that either. Henrietta does gurgle like she thinks the same and like there are things she would say to me besides.

'We should go!' I tell her.

So we do.

I know where we're off to and I could skip with all my big hopes but these wild-flower meadows reach up to my skin-and-bone thighs and 'Ha! Would you slow a good girl down, dears?'

Well I am not looking for mushrooms today, Ma, and I can spot the best too, but I am pulling up some of those fine buttercups because when Henrietta wakes then she will like the colours.

In fact she is sleeping in the soft sling I have made with that apron of mine and she is all nestled on my front like I have got my own baby and not just a sister. I stroke that silk-hair and I hold those dangling-down legs in my palms. This walk could last years and I shouldn't give a fuck since I am full up with all the ecstasy thoughts.

'Would you close your ears, though?' I laugh, and I cup my

palms over her tiny petal-ears because the big-man's bells are louder than ever since the day is Sunday. That noise is making the grasses go limp and the leaves shake.

Of course I am avoiding the churches in these speckled-around villages since those people flooding in and gossiping might see a vagrant called Tibb Ingleby and her small sister and don't you know vagrancy is outlawed? Well I am picturing them all up on their hind legs and saying, 'Sturdy beggars right there!' and pointing and puffing around to send their watching-men after us though my ma did say, 'We don't beg, Tibb. However much we want that nice roof.'

'That's some horse-shit too,' I whisper to Henrietta behind this faraway peeping-tree but she is a baby so she can't understand and she is sleeping besides. 'Why should the big-man-God have so many houses, when we do not have even *one*?'

This is something my ma did ask oftentime though we made our home in a barn for a whole month once, before the farmer there realized he had two naughty lodgers in that warm hay.

In fact my own ma did favour churches when they were left unlocked, and even if they weren't then she had a way with the rectors. I am smiling at that naughty thought and I am remembering how she would say, 'It is the least they can do for us, Tibb, because the big-man-God didn't help me when I asked him because he only cares for money.' And she did say, 'Why pray to something in the sky when the things we need are here, if only you are crafty enough to get them?'

On we go and the sun is chasing us. I wish her dangling-down feet were not so cold in my hands, but why do you think those bad thoughts, Tibb, and ruin such a day?

'Henrietta?' I say, and I hold her up to my ear. 'More milk you say? Well you are one sneak-far-like your sister Tibb!'

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This dairy-farm is riper for pinching since the farmer is at the church-place too and I am opening her lips and trickling in the milk and I think she likes it a lot. Then I am stroking those rosebud lips and this soft little face which must be called perfect.

‘Henrietta, I could look at you longer but we are off and I know where.’

Those fields turn wilder and there is some deep silence. ‘Would you bark a ditty for a baby?’ I do shout to those flapping birds but they don’t answer that. ‘Ah, you’re all good-for-nothing!’

Up these hillocks and finally that sea is winking down there like it would have us dive in. Wink and wink and ‘Would you look, Henrietta? You know this is what we came for?’

Sit up and howl

The dead woman called my ma did love the ocean once. ‘Those naughty waves are so cold,’ she did laugh, ‘they would have the corpses sit up and howl!’ And she would rush in and out and throw her head back, and I would trot in behind to feel that freezing water around my twig-legs and we did laugh some more. But after we left the land of Weymouth she couldn’t look at the ocean again because the sea did remind her of that man called Farmer O.

‘Would you smell the salt, Henrietta?’ I say, because I am not thinking of Farmer O now – in the same way I am not thinking of my dead ma – and she is wriggling like she can’t wait either.

Now these tracks are all sandy under my feet and here are some marshes and little riverways with ducks hiding there. Has the ocean been tucked away to play a trick on wanderers? All these narrow walkways and sand-hills and this sea-bracken is sharp under my heels but who gives two shits?

When I finally reach that bay it is like this place is cut off from all the rest of the world behind the dunes and it is flat like it is going on forever. The colour of this sand is white and it is warm from the sun. Perhaps this is what the Spice Islands look like or else that nice place named Constantinople that I am hearing of.

‘Henrietta,’ I say and I am peeling her from the sling, ‘would you look at that?’

I am wading into this shallow sea with my dress on and I dip her tiny feet in this great ocean and, ‘Henrietta?’ I say. ‘Don’t you like that?’

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Well those waves roll around my ankles and turn white but I am finding the ecstasy feeling is slipping away and now I am turning black and the snake is winding itself around my body again.

‘O, but I did think you would enjoy it better,’ I whisper.

My sister is not giggling like I hoped she would and she is just still.

There is a thudding inside of me and this water is making my toes go numb and I think all the joy will never return and why would you take a baby into cold water, Tibb?

‘Ah, what was I thinking?’ I laugh. ‘You must be too cold now!’ and I kiss her head. ‘I think you shall like it better when you’re older and you might run away to boot!’ Then I am pulling up that sling higher because of this wind and tucking her in once more and I do laugh like ho-ho-ho despite my small battle with a snake.

By the evening I have walked up a short length of the wet beach which is being slowly covered in a low-lying mist and my feet are carrying on like they will never stop. I am talking and talking because Henrietta likes that and these words are tumbling out like: ‘I shall teach you to skip when you are old enough for it, and that is some little joy in the world’ and ‘We won’t loiter near towns since that would spell some trouble.’ And: ‘You shall need more milk soon, my dear.’

When I don’t talk there is just the wind and the waves breaking out there and that is when the black fog creeps in and the snake does play its squeezing game some more. That grey cloud up there is wispy like a beard. It is shaped like a beard too. Like the beard of that man called Farmer O but you are still not thinking of him, Tibb Ingleby.

In crawls this tide and my feet are making imprints on this sludge-sand and the beach is getting smaller because of the

coming-in sea and I don't like these dark thoughts or this pain inside my chest.

'At least I have you, Henrietta,' I say, or perhaps I just think that, and I wrap my arms around this sling because here is something good to live for so why doesn't the snake fuck off now?

Soon the bay cleaves inwards and turns rocky where before it was all soft, and the sea-water is trickling into this inlet so here is a kind of sludge-lake.

I stop. Bang and bang says my heart like it has been saying since we arrived at this place but here is some new reason for it. A man. Sitting up on those rocks above this almost-lake.

Men will eat you up and spit you out, Tibb, but I don't know if this is really a man. He looks like he has started the process of growing up and is somewhere around half-way through or a little further. There is some nearly-invisible wire which he is sliding between his fingers and he pulls up a crab with all its red legs wiggling. I have not seen many alive-crabs in all the skulking-round-towns-in-search-of-the-fuckers which Ma and I did often do. Mostly they were dead on the benches or other times they were not there at all.

Would you put your arms around this sleeping sister and fuck off, Tibb? But I don't do that thing because this man-boy doesn't have the stern look of churchly men or the hungry look that my ma warned against but also liked a lot. And that gaping blackness which is threatening to bury me whole is not so large when I am gazing at him because he seems peaceful sitting there, a slight curve to his posture, and he is looking at me and there is something gentle in those blue eyes of his, and this open face. He shuffles along on his rock, as though to let me sit beside him. So I do that.

'Ivo,' he says in a deep-but-soft voice which is not a boy's voice, and he holds out a hand to me. I notice he has muscly

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forearms and they are covered in pale wiry hairs like a man's arms already.

'What's your name?' he asks me when I don't take that hand.

I say, 'Tibb,' and he looks at me like I said a lot more than just my name.

There is something different about this person. His edges are hazy like mine, and 'What's in the sling?' he asks.

I shake my head and I hold it closer because she is sleeping in there.

For a long time he looks at me, then he says gently, 'Do you eat crab, Tibb?'

Some good nourishment

The sun is all packed up and Ivo has made a fire within those big dunes. We are nestled in, amongst sea-grasses and sheltered from the winds off the ocean. I have not done one thing to help but just stood here with my arms around the sling and there is something good about being near this person which makes no sense. But my nice thoughts about Henrietta and the fact she needs me are blurring and there is a spiked feeling which is digging in.

Ivo's face is angular and soft in all the right places and there is a kindness to it which is making me sure that he is not one of the fuckers. He has pulled his braces down and they hang there by his sides, flapping against his trousered legs, and I wonder why he wears them since he clearly doesn't need them.

'Would you sit, Tibb?' he asks and he pats that sand beside him. Then he says, 'How long have you been on your own?'

'Since my ma is dead some days back.'

This hoarse voice doesn't sound much like mine.

He looks sad, like it is *his* ma who is in the hole somewhere outside Newmarket. He pushes back his blonde hair. At the front his shirt gapes open and I can see there are some blonde hairs poking out of his chest muscles too. I am thinking of the person in the sling and there's a dragging feeling inside of me.

He pulls the legs from the dead crab, though keeping all the shell on it, and he throws the body and the legs on to the fire which makes a crackling sound and the flames climb up

higher. After a while he pulls all those things back off again on to the sand with two sticks.

I have a feeling Ivo has been living here some time. A few weeks at least judging by that sun-licked skin and burnt-a-bit nose. And he knows what he is doing with the crab and already there was a fire laid at this exact point on the beach. Some of his belongings are stacked up by the fire too, like a blanket and some leather shoes which do not look like they were knocked up by the same cordwainer who dragged my ma into a hole.

‘Crab is some good nourishment, Tibb,’ he says, and he smiles.

I am not moving my head much. I am not really moving any part of me.

Now he pokes at it with his own hands, breathing on it like he wants to make it cool down. There is some white ooze seeping out the edges of that shell-body and some smell I do not find pleasant but there is an emptiness inside of my belly that is growling because when did you last eat, Tibb?

He pulls bits of shell off and scrapes them away, and then cups some white flakes in his palm which he holds out to me.

I take a few and poke them in my mouth and that soft pulpiness on my tongue is disgusting. I eat some more and watch this smiling person named Ivo until his nice face turns all wobbly in those flames and there is some urge to speak a little more.

‘But I had someone else for company, Ivo.’

He looks interested and my heart is banging around in there.

‘A sister,’ I say. ‘Henrietta. I will need to find her milk soon but she is just sleeping now.’

Ivo shuffles nearer to me and then he wipes my cheek with a finger because maybe I am crying.

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My fingers open the sling just enough for a peep, though I don't look inside myself. His body freezes a bit but he doesn't jump back and declare me a lunatic-person or someone who has never attended that place-called-church.

'She is very pretty,' he whispers.

'Yes. But I should have got more milk.'

Now my throat is stinging and I am gulping the air.

His hand is wriggling into mine and he says, 'I think you were a good sister.'

Why does he say that?

He puts his arm around my shoulders and it feels heavy and strange but I like it there, then slowly he edges this sling and the person inside of it from my grasp and he takes it into his hands and I let him do that.

'I'm tired.'

'Then you should sleep, Tibb.'

And my head is being guided down on to something soft and I can feel there is something soft on top of me too, like a blanket, and Ivo is there because I can hear him breathing.

Leominster, Herefordshire

Five years later

The man has been dumped into this cellar with all the ceremony of a shit in the woods, and he is sitting on the wet hay like a new donkey would, with his legs bent beneath him. It is a manor house in the town where they have brought him. The cellar is rented out to hold prisoners awaiting their sentencing, and that is what he is now. A prisoner.

His head feels heavy in his hands, fingers rifling through his fair hair, and those grooved lines across his forehead seem to burrow deep into his flesh so he looks older than he is. The smell of damp and piss is so strong, he wonders if he might pass out from it.

The Justice of the Peace squints in the dim light of the lantern, banging his cane on the stone floor, making the rats scatter. Disturbing the puddles of stagnant water. 'You won't be long in this place,' he sneers. 'Once the King has been fetched then you'll be on a pyre out in that town square. You'll find kindling a good deal more comfortable than hay, I hope.'

The prisoner doesn't answer that because if he opens his mouth he will hurl. It seems a cruel joke that this man has the word 'peace' nestled in his name.

'Do not give the man bread for a day,' he says to the young warden beside him. 'And when you do give it, be sparing with the portion.'

The warden nods, wide-eyed.

'You see, we shouldn't want to kill him before the horses have returned from London with the King on the saddle. Burning is worse than starvation.'

Burning. His skin puckers; like the flames are licking him already.

The Justice seethes. 'You know you are not the first. Others have

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angered God with their fraudulence and their dishonesty, but they only faced the block. Nothing but the flame can meet the evil you have done, and time is slipping away . . . sir.'

He smirks at that word: sir. The cruelty buried within its letters. The prisoner glances round at his final home. At the water dripping down these mouldy walls. The grime beneath him.

Images – snippets of memories – race through his mind. Sandy feet. A bowl of money, placed by a door. He sees the back of a boy's head, wispy hairs at the base of a neck. Two little girls, their heels pummelling his chest as he carries them on his shoulders through the woods. And his mother's soft body, sleeping behind a broken curtain. The shiny surface of her eyes – open just for a second. Or did he imagine it?

The Justice turns to his colleague. 'In fact, make it two days, Marcus, before you bring refreshment.'

When they have left so has the light, but the prisoner can hear the rats scratching too close. He draws his arms around his body. Muscular shoulders which have held up the weight of the world. He grimaces, terror etched across his chiselled face. He is formed in strong, sharp lines.

He takes gulps of rancid air and stares into blackness. Evil. Perhaps his father was right all along. Perhaps evil is truly what he is.

Some slice of evil

When I wake my thoughts are sluggish like they were dipped in honey. I have slept extraordinarily deeply on this soft sand and the sea is so far out that I can barely snatch a peek of it. But those bad memories are catching up and sinking their claws in and there is some taste of bile in my mouth which wants to come out and splatter the sand.

‘Henrietta?’ I choke, and Ivo is beside me so quick, it is like he was waiting. He holds my hands and looks into my morning-eyes.

‘She is peaceful now, Tibb.’

Those tears are falling and this bad feeling is so strong I wonder if it will eclipse my whole body. There is a sense that I am floating and this is vivid like a memory though I have never floated once before so that is confusing. ‘I had a thought that the waves would make her sit up and howl but my ma did tell some bad lies there to boot.’

He nods like this makes a lot of sense.

‘It was a deep hole, Ivo?’

He nods a lot and says, ‘It was very deep and calm and she was sleeping.’

The cold wind is whistling across my face and I look into it for a time. Then, ‘Ivo,’ I whisper. ‘Do not tell me where that hole is.’

‘As you like it, Tibb.’

And still he is there beside me when I am closing my eyes again. And there begins some half-life of mine, because if sleep is all you do, are you even living?

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If I wake in the day then I am finding that Ivo has draped his shirt over my face to stop that bad sun turning me to ashes, and if it is night when I stir, then I am finding I have a blanket all tucked around me. And always Ivo is nearby with something like a crab for me to eat and some fresh water there for me to drink because Ivo is not one of the fuckers.

My dreams are broken up into shards except the face of Farmer O which is round and hairy and clear and that is unsurprising since he has not fucked off yet after all these years. I am hearing those words he said when he did climb into the mattress, like: 'You are a bad girl, Tibb Ingleby. And you are some slice of evil.' Well you had it right, Farmer O, because I did let my sister die just like I drove my own ma to ruin and I must be the worst person who did ever walk in this kingdom called England because who buries two corpses in quick succession and calls the thing chance?

I don't know how much time has slid past but those bells are ringing through this land from the place-called-church as though the big-man-God is saying, 'Would you wake up, Tibb Ingleby, you lazy fuck?'

The sun is low, like it did stay put just for me, and Ivo is there because he is always there.

'Ivo, how many days have I been sleeping?' I ask, and he passes me some water.

'Five, Tibb. I think you were very tired.'

'I think I was.'

It seems that the snake around me has loosened from all the sleep but mostly I am pleased Ivo is still here. I sit up.

'I have found us eggs, Tibb,' he says with a smile. 'When you cannot catch a crab then there will always be eggs if you know where to look.'

In fact he has cooked those eggs on the almost-gone fire, so now they are hot and I watch as he peels them and he

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gives me one. This springiness is something pleasant to eat. We did snatch things often, my ma and I, but not really eggs. I am eating it slowly, like my teeth and my tongue forgot how to do it.

‘Do you feel better?’ he asks me.

I nod, but I want my ma. And I want to tell her sorry for what happened to Henrietta. Ivo puts his big warm arm around my shoulders and there is nothing strange about this even though he is almost a stranger. Really he is something quite beautiful with his blonde hair and those blue eyes and I wonder if this person is formed of golden stuff.

Soon that sky is turning black and he is lying next to me, very close.

I say, ‘Thank you,’ and he says, ‘No thanking, Tibb.’

I am listening to his breath.

‘You won’t go anywhere, Ivo?’ I whisper.

‘No, Tibb. I won’t go anywhere.’

There are some birds singing their long-enough notes behind this beach.

‘I miss my ma,’ I whisper, and there is a hard ball in my throat which is swelling up.

‘I know, Tibb. Would you tell me about her?’

I shrug. ‘It is strange to talk like she is not here.’

He nods like he understands. That sharp-edged jawline is some perfect thing.

‘My ma was either up or she was down and there was not much in between. And sometimes she made us dance in the rain and other times she cried and said she wished to die in a ditch like a dog.’

He says, ‘That must have been hard.’

‘Not really. And she did go to such lengths to find us our roof, since we have not ever had one. She would go from man-to-man for this end and sometimes it worked for a while.

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Farmers mostly who would hide us in their barns or their chicken yards and come and do that naughty thing with my ma which was never very quiet. Or else she would find some merchant who would give a little money for a lodging room till his wife did find out, and when that did not work she would just do some fucking for money.'

His kind blue eyes are all glassy in this moonlight and they are looking straight at me.

'And afterwards she would hold it in her fist and say, "Well I am saving it all up for our nice big roof, Tibb," and she meant every word. But then she did require a great deal of mead with that money or else some nutmeg to soothe all those worries, and I would stand and wait till she was better again. This was not her own fault though, Ivo, but that of the fuckers.'

He nods like he knows those fuckers too.

'And what about your father, Tibb?'

I smile a bit which feels odd because this is something I have not done much of recently. 'My ma did joke that she was knocked up by the big-man-God himself.'

He nods and smiles and watches me. And then he says, 'You know, Tibb, your ma is not really gone.'

'She isn't?' I say, and I am looking around like she did jump back to life. Like that man called Jesus who I am hearing of.

Ivo smiles and points up to the big sky. 'I like to think that those stars are in fact angels, just hovering.'

Well I had not noticed them up there till now because of the snake and the sleeping-all-the-time problem, but this dark sky is spotted all over with stars and they are shining up there like they have gathered to dance a jig.

'Angels? I have not ever seen one of *them*.'

'No?'

'No. That stuff is just lies, I think. My ma did tell me, "Tibb – you cannot see the big man floating around in the sky as much

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as you cannot see the grand place called Heaven with all the dead people sitting there.”’

He nods a bit, like he is thinking things and I should ask him, ‘Do you see the marsh-birds assembling in the grasses there to discuss the price of butter too?’

Eventually he says, ‘Perhaps. But I think of it a little differently. I can’t imagine angels are fully formed in their white robes, but rather, they are like a soul.’

Now here is a word my ma did not think to verse me on.

He is reading my no-ideas face and he explains: ‘Like the thinking parts of a person, not the bodily parts. And that’s the bit that lives on once someone has died.’

It seems unlikely that thoughts can exist when they don’t have a person’s head to hold them in, but I am listening to Ivo because he is kind and he has listened to me a lot.

‘I can imagine the souls all bright and calm up there, flickering as though to tell us they are not really dead at all.’

‘Can you?’ I say. Now I am squinting up into that dark sky besides.

‘I can, Tibb. I can see my grandfather . . . just there.’

His finger is dancing in this clear air as he points upwards.

I say, ‘Ivo, they just look like stars.’

That nice face of his has disappointment scratched all across it. The waves are slurring in the distance and the birds are calling in those behind-the-beach grasses like they would sing a lullaby.

‘I really believe it, you know,’ he says. ‘That your ma and that sweet sister of yours are up there, and they are watching you from their great height and they are thinking of you all the time. And one day, a long time from now, you’ll join them too.’

Will I? I am considering it when a thought smacks me round the face. ‘But . . . is it not only *good* people who become angels, Ivo?’

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Of course I am thinking of that man called Farmer O and the fact I am a whore-bitch. I am thinking of those rough fingers and all that blood and my black magic.

‘You are a good person, Tibb.’

‘I could have saved my sister, and I am bad besides. I have given it a lot of my thoughts.’

Now he is quiet.

I say, ‘Anyway, how can you know for sure that the angels are up there? And how did they get so high?’

He smiles again. ‘It is just a nice thought, Tibb.’

Is it?

Flood the world

Ivo is sleeping and I am listening to those far-off waves which did not wake up the corpses. Then I am climbing up that sand-hill behind us to be closer to the skies myself, because if my ma is really up there like an angel-person – her thinking parts at least – then I need to see her and I need to tell her, ‘Would you come back now?’

There is some lonely feeling with this night-cold sand beneath my feet and those sharp grasses poking up. They did not seem so sharp when I was trekking to this beach with a dead baby on my front and the ecstasy feeling inside of my head.

I stand at the top of this mound like I am the only one left and my white hair is blowing in the breeze and this dress is looser than it used to be. I cannot think the snake will ever leave, or this heavy emptiness inside my chest.

‘Ma?’ I say in a nearly-whisper, because it seems wrong to ruin this not-a-sound night. Up there the stars are still bright like a thousand yellow buttons but I cannot think which one is my ma. How did Ivo notice his grandfather in that great swarm?

No answer.

‘Ma,’ I say again, but a little bit louder, and ‘I want you to come back.’

Still nothing. I had hoped she would flicker brighter or dash across the sky to show me she was listening. A big stone is rolling into my throat again and making my eyes drown. ‘Ma? Would you answer me?’

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Here is a black space. It is inside my skull and this is loud and quiet and it is making me feel like I will never be happy again. And here is a great banging in my chest and I am rubbing at my face because of all these hot tears, and this breeze is too cold. Henrietta and Ma and the cordwainer man and the dairy-farmer and those wolf-dogs; they are all piling up and up inside of my body and I don't want them there at all.

'I'm sorry!' I say, but that ragged voice is not travelling into the skies. 'It is all my bad fault, Ma. Just like he said!'

I cannot know if these mad tears will ever stop.

'And I am sorry I did not keep Henrietta alive! I did try but I was chased with those big dogs and the milk spilt and then I was asleep and maybe she cried but I didn't wake up!'

Ma isn't answering because she isn't there.

Well I am crumpled on this dune because there is no angel after all. And then I can hear Ivo is coming at a run and his sandy hair is poking in all directions and there is such a lot of worry sprawled across his kind face.

'She isn't up there, Ivo!' I tell him. 'You said some bad lie!'

I think I could punch a fist at him, but he is putting those almost-man arms around me and he is picking me up like I am a small baby myself and he is carrying me back to our sand-house.

'You lied!' I say again, and I am pounding at those hard chest muscles of his like that would stop the pain and these tears are dripping out and perhaps they will roll across the sand and flood the world.

Oysters have a roof

In the morning, Ivo is watching me when I wake up and he smiles gently with those eyebrows all furrowed. That no-reply discussion with my ma last night is bleeding back into my memory like some ink was spilt.

‘I thought today we might go on a ramble, Tibb.’

‘A ramble? What is the meaning of that word?’

He smiles. ‘A walk. A walk to find oysters, because this low tide is perfect for it and I need your help.’

‘Oysters?’ I say.

‘Never eaten oysters?’

I shake my head.

We walk together a mile or so and I am noticing more things like the little worm-piles on this wet sand and that stalk-leg bird who is strutting like someone just stuffed a crown upon his head and I am trying to forget about the stars which did not answer a girl named Tibb.

We turn into a place that Ivo calls the saltmarsh. This is some flat puddle of water, with islands of grass floating here and there and black mud at the edges. He speaks a lot about the sea and the tide and it is nice to listen to his chatter. It doesn’t climb up or down like the voice of my ma which was oftentime roaring and other times mute. The steadiness of this noise is making me feel less sad since nothing about it reminds me of her.

‘How old are you, Tibb?’

‘Who knows, Ivo, but I should say somewhere around fourteen.’

‘O,’ he says, ‘you are little for fourteen.’