

From the author of the million copy bestseller  
*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

# SISTER NOON



'Karen Joy Fowler  
has magic powers'  
Sophie Hannah

'I'm so glad to have  
discovered this author'  
Philippa Gregory

*Karen Joy Fowler*

'Sly, witty, elegant, unexpected' *New York Times Book Review*

KAREN JOY FOWLER is the author of three story collections and six novels, one a national bestseller, another a PEN/Faulkner winner, and all *New York Times* Notable Books. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

### Praise for *Sister Noon*

“In *Sister Noon*, Karen Joy Fowler re-creates a lost world so thrillingly, with such intelligence, trickery, and art, that when you at last put the book down and look up from the page it all seems to linger, shimmering, around you, like the residue of a marvelous dream” Michael Chabon, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

“Fowler’s prose is full of shimmering melancholy, and a ruminative irony that brings her characters and their world alive in the most unexpected ways—reading *Sister Noon* is like staring at early portrait photographs until the eyes begin to shine and your head is filled with voices that urge you to recall that these vanished lives, and your own, are stranger than you allow. A dazzling book” Jonathan Lethem, bestselling author of *Motherless Brooklyn*

“A playful literary mystery” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Fowler has a voice like no other, lyrical, shrewd, and addictive, with a quiet deadpan humor that underlies almost every sentence” *Newsday*

“Fowler’s lyrical prose and deft use of historical fact are a joy to read. She also exhibits a sly sense of humor ... A strange and enchanting novel” *The Oregonian*

### Praise for *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

“There have been many books written about sibling love and rivalry but few, I’m sure, can rend the heart and bore beneath the skin quite like this one ... prepare to be charmed and traumatised” Carol Midgley, *The Times*

“[An] achingly funny, deeply serious heart-breaker...This is amoral comedy to shout about from the treetops” Liz Jensen, *Guardian*

“Karen Joy Fowler’s smart, witty take on what constitutes a family, and the part the individual ingredients play in the whole, is a beautifully skewed look at domestic relationships” John Harding, *Daily Mail*

“Very good indeed ... nothing less than a full-on exploration of what makes human beings human” *Reader’s Digest*

“A novel so readably juicy and surreptitiously smart, it deserves all the attention it can get” Barbara Kingsolver, *New York Times Book Review*

“A dark cautionary tale hanging out, incognito-style, in what at first seems a traditional family narrative ... deliciously jaunty in tone and disturbing in material” Alice Sebold

“One of the best twists in years makes this novel unique, captivating and so moving it will stay with you for a long time” *Stylist*

“It’s been years since I’ve felt so passionate about a book. When I finished at 3 a.m., I wept, then I woke up the next morning, reread the ending, and cried all over again” Ruth Ozeki

“Utterly beguiling ... combines a precise Austenian sensitivity to emotional nuance with the discomforted perception of a narrator who feels herself an alien ... has an unforgettable, tender ferocity” Jane Shilling, *New Statesman*

“Reading *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is both a delight and a provocation. I turned the last page nearly breathless with admiration” Valerie Martin

“If you’re anything like me, you’ll finish this novel with tears in your eyes and want to turn right back to the beginning. Wonderful” *DIVA*

“No contemporary writer creates characters more appealing, or examines them with greater acuity and forgiveness, than she does” Michael Chabon

“*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is that rare thing, a comic novel that wrestles seriously with serious moral questions” *Salon*

“Anyone with an interest in animals—human or otherwise—will love this book” Henry Nicholls, *Guardian*

“This amazing and sad-yet-witty story begins in the middle and goes back to the start twice—with a huge twist along the way” *Company*

“A novel that is both one giant moral compass and a harrowing depiction of a family’s implosion, the prose of which zings on the pages ... deserves to be acclaimed for the right reasons” Lucy Scholes, *Observer*

“An unsettling, emotionally complex story that plumbs the mystery of our strange relationship with the animal kingdom—relatives included” Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

“Karen Joy Fowler has written the book she’s always had in her to write” Ursula K. Le Guin

“Rosemary’s voice hooked me in, making it impossible to put down this thought-provoking, moving and entertaining novel” *Woman & Home*

“Smart, funny, moving” *Marie Claire*

“One of the greatest pleasures I take in reading is being able to hand over the books that thrill me, which this summer would be Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*” Ann Patchett, *Wall Street Journal*

“A gripping and surreptitiously intelligent book about a family’s falling apart after a young daughter is sent away ... The book is far deeper and more ambitious, however, than its central conceit would lead one to think” Khaled Hosseini

“Intelligent and forces the reader to question what we owe our fellow creatures” Elizabeth George

“This novel is weighty, yet written with a lightness of touch ... It charts a profound philosophic journey, mixing wit with scientific rigour. The result might be Fowler’s most important work yet”  
*Sydney Morning Herald*

“A masterful novel, painful and memorable, and, like all the best novels, it will stay with you long afterwards” *Psychologies*

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# Sister Noon

*Karen Joy Fowler*



A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library on request

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For Marian and Wendy,  
East Coast angels

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Words were invented so that lies could be told.  
MARY ELLEN PLEASANT



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## PRELUDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She should have been easy to find. There were so few women in San Francisco. Fewer still were beautiful. He sent inquiries to all the hotels. None had a Madame Christophe registered. He asked everyone he knew, he spoke of her everywhere, but could say only that she was a widow from New Orleans, that her eyes didn't match, and that she had his shawl. He was forced to depart for Mexico where he would conduct negotiations concerning the New Almaden mine, without seeing her again.

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

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

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

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

Her new home was in the country, overlooking a graveyard. This was not as dismal as it might sound. She had a curtained bed and a carved dressing table. The cemetery was filled with flowers. On a warm day, the scent came in on the sunshine. The boardinghouse was called Geneva Cottage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’ll rise again. I started with nothing.”

Mrs. Radford had often been embarrassed at how much beauty meant to her. At the age when Mrs. Radford might have been beautiful herself, she suffered badly from acne. It pitted her skin, and her lovely hair was little compensation. At the time, she’d thought her life was over. But then she’d made such a happy marriage and it had hardly seemed to matter. God had granted her a great love. And yet she had never stopped wishing she were beautiful, had apparently learned nothing from her own life. She would have been the first to admit this. It would have hurt her to have had ugly children, and that was a painful thing to know about herself. As it turned out, she had no children at all. “You had beauty,” she said.

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

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

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

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

“I was ten years old.”

“Oh, my dear.” Mrs. Radford was shocked and distressed.

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

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

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

“And did you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before her husband’s death, Mrs. Radford would only have had to write the invitations and San Francisco’s most eligible men would have gathered. Sometimes she let herself imagine the dinner with Alexander pouring wine. The gold-rimmed china. The sensation of the beautiful Mrs. Smith.

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

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

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

It was only a party. Only a fabulous ball. She did not mind for herself, not so much, really, although she had always enjoyed a party. But it would be just the setting for Mrs. Smith. With this in mind, Mrs. Radford finally called on Thomas Bell. He was living in the bachelor club on Grove. He

apologized for the cigar smoke, which did not bother her, but not for the fact that he had never come to see her, which did. His blond hair had receded over the years, giving him a high, wide forehead. He had always been a handsome man; now he'd attained a dignity he had lacked before. He looked marriageable. "Did you ever find your lovely shipmate?" she asked him, quite directly, with a cunning preamble.

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

"In the servants' quarters?"

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

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

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

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

"Dear Mrs. Radford," he said.

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

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

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

"Mrs. Radford," he said politely. "How lovely to see you here. And Madame Christophe. I mustn't imagine that you remember me, simply because I remember you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Radford of talking too much!

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

"You'll have many nights like this now. Many invitations. You were such a success."

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

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

"Everything I've told you is true."

"Why pick that moment to say it?"

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

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

This was the last party Mrs. Radford would attend in San Francisco. One month later she left on a boat filled with missionaries going to Hawaii. One year later she was one of only seven white women in Edo, Japan. From there she sailed to Russia; from there she made her way to Peking. She died somewhere near Chungking at the age of seventy-four.

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

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# Visits

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BY THE 1890S, San Francisco was an entirely different city from the one Mrs. Radford had left behind. The streets were paved. The sand was landscaped. Cable cars ran up and down Nob Hill. The Railroad Kings were old or dead, and also the Bonanza Kings, and also the Lawyer Kings. Society had arrived and settled, its standards strictly maintained by Ned “I would rather see my sister dead than waltzing Greenway. Fashionable women belonged to the Conservative Set, the Fast Set, the Smart Set, the Serious Set, the Very Late at Night Set, or the highly respectable Dead Slow Set.

There were still many more men than women in the city. This imbalance resulted in a high percentage of unrequited passions. Afflicted men consoled themselves with horse racing, graft, and most frequently, liquor. Any woman whose nerves did not compel her to depend on Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound (alcohol, dandelion, chamomile, and licorice) or Jayne’s Carminative Balm (alcohol and opium) or Dover’s Powder (opium and ipecac) could count on the advantage of sobriety in her dealings with men. The destabilizing effects of widespread heartache combined with widespread drunkenness were somewhat alleviated by the rigging of local elections.

The city was propelled in equal parts by drunken abuse and sober recompense. In those days every steamer that docked in San Francisco Bay was fitted with a large box. Each box was the same—pinewood, a sizable slot edged with brass, and the words “Give to the Ladies’ Relief and Protection Society Home” burned in a circle about it. After the wreck of the *SS Rio de Janeiro*, one of the boxes was found floating past Alcatraz Island, and miraculously, the money was still inside. When levered open, the box contained rubles and yen, lire and pesos, all shuffled together like cards.

Successive treasurers for the Society counted out coins stamped with the profiles of queens they couldn’t name and birds they’d never seen. Some of the coins were worn so thin there was no picture at all, just a polished disk with no clue remaining as to its history or origin. Occasionally during rough seas someone would donate a holy medallion, usually Saint Christopher. One box held a single amethyst earring with a small drop pearl.

It was still charity, it was still begging, but it bore the semblance of adventure.

Lizzie Hayes wore one of the more puzzling coins on a chain around her neck, so whenever they looked at her, the people of San Francisco would be reminded that she needed their money. The coin was imprinted with a mermaid curled into a circle, her hair so wide and wild it netted the tip of her own tail. If anyone asked, Lizzie said it was the currency of Atlantis.

Lizzie Hayes had been a volunteer for the Ladies’ Relief Home for almost ten years, its treasurer for three. She had few intimate friends, but attended two churches, Grace Church and St. Luke’s Episcopal, which was good for her soul and also for fund-raising. In 1890 she was a spinster who had just seen her fortieth birthday.

She was working in the cupola one day in January, sorting through a box of donated books, when one of the older girls came to tell her Mrs. Mary E. Pleasant was at the door. “The front door,” the girl said. “She’d like to speak to you.”

Culling books was surprisingly dirty work, and Lizzie could feel a layer of grit on her hands and face. She wiped herself with her apron and went downstairs at once. She’d never spoken with Mrs. Pleasant, never been in the same room with her, although two years earlier she’d waited on a overloaded streetcar while the driver made an unscheduled stop so that Mrs. Pleasant could ride. Mrs. Pleasant walked the half-block to the car, and it seemed to Lizzie that she had walked as slowly as



possible. She had given the driver an enormous, showy tip.

Lizzie had also seen Mrs. Pleasant on occasion in her opulent Brewster buggy with its matched horses from the Stanford stables. Mrs. Pleasant dressed like a servant, but she had her own driver in green livery and a top hat, and also her own footman to attend her.

If she hadn't ever seen her, Lizzie would still have recognized Mrs. Pleasant's face. It was one of the most famous in the city, appearing often in editorial cartoons, particularly in the *Wasp*. (Although actually the last drawing had not used her face. Instead, a black crow had peered out from underneath Mrs. Pleasant's habitual bonnet.)

"Now, I never cared a feather's weight for public opinion," Mrs. Pleasant had been once quoted as saying, "for it's the ghostliest thing I ever did see." It was fortunate she thought so. Here are just a few of the things people said about Mary Ellen Pleasant:

She'd buried three husbands before she turned forty, and in her sixties had still been the secret mistress of prominent and powerful men. At seventy years of age, she'd looked no older than fifty.

She had a small green snake tattooed in a curl around one breast.

She could restore the luster to pearls by wearing them.

Although she worked as Thomas Bell's housekeeper, she was as rich as a railroad magnate's widow. Some of the city's wealthiest men came to her for financial advice. Thomas Bell owed his entire fortune to her.

She was an angel of charity. She had donated five thousand dollars of her own money to aid the victims of yellow fever during the epidemic in New Orleans. When she got to heaven, she would soon have the blessed organized and sending cups of cool water to the sinners below.

She practiced voodoo and had once sunk a boat full of silver with a curse.

She was a voodoo queen and the colored in San Francisco both worshipped and feared her. She could start and stop pregnancies; she would, for a price, make a man die of love.

She trafficked in prostitution and had a number of special white proteges with whom her relationships were irregular, intimate, and possibly sapphic. She was responsible for all of poor Sarah Althea Hill Sharon Terry's mischiefs and misfortunes.

She ran a home for unwed mothers and secretly sold the infant girls to the Chinese tongs.

She was the best cook in San Francisco.

Here is what people said about Lizzie Hayes:

She would have married William Fletcher if she could have got him.

No one had asked Mrs. Pleasant into the parlor. Lizzie found her standing just inside the heavy oak door under the portrait of philanthropist Horace Hawes, with his brooding Lincolnesque looks. No one had offered to take her wrap, a bright purple shawl, which she nevertheless had removed and carried over one arm.

Lizzie Hayes had not kept Mrs. Pleasant waiting, but neither had she taken off her work apron. Mrs. Pleasant was better dressed. She wore a skirt of polished black alpaca, a shirtwaist with a white collar, gold gypsy hoops through her ears, and her usual outdated Quaker bonnet, purple with a wide brim. She noticed the apron at once; Lizzie saw her famous mismatched eyes, one blue, one brown, flick over it, but her facial expression did not change. Her skin was finely wrinkled, like crushed silk, and she smelled of lavender.

There were no courteous preliminaries. "I've brought you a girl," Mrs. Pleasant said. She'd come to California forty years earlier with the miners, but never lost the southern syrup of her vowels. "Name's Jenny Ijub. She's just off a boat from Panama. Her mother took sick on the voyage and was buried at sea. When I ask how old she is, she holds up all five fingers. Quiet little thing. She doesn't seem

know her father.”

One of her hands rested on the little girl's hair. Mrs. Pleasant dipped her head as she talked, so her face was hidden by the bonnet brim. “I have my friends at the docks. I'm known to care for such cases.” As her face vanished, her voice grew softer, more confiding. She knew how to make white people comfortable.

She knew how to make them uncomfortable. Where had she really gotten the child? Lizzie felt the contrast between them. Mrs. Pleasant was tall, elegant, and spotless. Lizzie was short, dusty, fat as a toad. She was a person who rumbled, and not a person who rumbled attractively.

She cleared her throat. “We have a waiting list.” Lizzie would have said this to anyone. It was the simple truth. So many in need. “And I'd have to be certain of her age. She's quite small. We don't take children under four years.”

“I'll have to find somewhere else, then.” Mrs. Pleasant smiled down at Lizzie. It was a understanding smile. Seventy-some years old and Mrs. Pleasant still had all her own splendid teeth. She stooped a little and aimed her smile farther down. “Don't you worry, Jenny. We'll find someone who wants you.”

Lizzie looked for the first time at the girl. She was dark-haired and sallow-skinned. She had sand on her shoes and stockings, it was impossible to get to the Home without picking up sand, but was otherwise as clean as could be. Neatly and simply dressed. Hatless, though someone—Mrs. Pleasant—had woven a bright bit of red ribbon into her hair. Her cheeks were flushed as if she were too warm or embarrassed. She did not look up, but Lizzie imagined that if she could see the girl's eyes they would be large and tragic. She held her back stiffly; you could deduce the eyes from that.

Lizzie hated saying no to anyone about anything. Saying no, however you disguised it, was a confession of your own limitations. Not only was it unhelpful, it was galling. She reached out and touched Jenny's arm. “I have some discretion. Since she really has no one. We'll find a bed somehow. Would you like to stay with us, Jenny?”

Jenny made no response. Her eyes were still lowered; she had one knuckle firmly hooked behind her front teeth, and her spare hand wrapped around the cloth of Mrs. Pleasant's skirt. When Mrs. Pleasant was ready to leave, Jenny's fingers would have to be pried apart.

“That's lovely, then,” said Mrs. Pleasant. “Now I know she'll have the best of care.”

“We might even find a family to take her. Be better if she had a bit of sparkle. Don't put your fingers in your mouth, dear,” Lizzie said. She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a silver bell. “This is how we call Matron,” she told Jenny. She rang the bell twice. “We have two Jennys already, but they are both much older than you. So we must call you Little Jenny. Shall we do that?”

The bell sounded very loud. Jenny's fingers twisted inside Mrs. Pleasant's skirt. Mrs. Pleasant knelt. She pulled a violet-hemmed handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped Jenny's mouth with it. She had the face of a grandmother. “Listen,” she said. “You must be brave now. Remember that I'm your friend. I'll send you a present soon so you'll see I don't forget you, either.” Mrs. Pleasant said these things quietly, intimately. It was not for the matron to hear, but she arrived just in time to do so.

“I hope your present is something that can be shared,” the matron told Jenny as she took her away. “If you have things the others don't, you can't expect them not to mind.”

The matron was a fifty-year-old woman named Nell Harris. She had come to the Home as a charity case; she had stayed on as an employee. She had soft-cooked features and a shifting seascape for a body. Her bosom lay on the swell of her stomach, rising and falling dramatically with her breath. Her most defining characteristic was that no one had ever made a good first impression on her.

She took Jenny down to the kitchen and offered her a large slice of wholesome bread. “Mrs. Pleasant gave me cake,” Jenny told her. The kitchen counters were piled with dishes, half clean, half not. Two girls in aprons were washing; another was drying. That one smiled at Jenny and flicked her

dishrag. The air was wet and warm and smelled of pork grease.

~~“And that’s all it takes to make you think she’s nice as pie. She gave you away pretty fast, didn’t she?”~~ Nell said.

LIZZIE HAYES went back upstairs to the cupola. Out the window was an unbroken view of sand dunes loosely strewn with scrub, chaparral, and bunches of beach grass. A storm was coming. Far to the west, the clouds were black and piled solidly against one another like rocks in a cairn.

Straight beneath Lizzie the prow of Mrs. Pleasant's bonnet cut through the wind toward her carriage. Her purple wrap was around her shoulders and the ends of her bonnet ribbons whipped about her head. Mrs. Pleasant walked away quickly, like someone who had someplace to go.

The foghorn blew in the distance. Gulls streamed inland, shrieking, and the wind spun the ghosts of sand castles into the air. Lizzie returned to her box of donated books. Suddenly, unjustly, she found herself resenting them. What did such donations do but make more work for the staff? Nothing arrived in good shape; everything needed to be sorted and cleaned and mended.

She blew the dust off *The Good Child's Picture Book*. The author had the improbable name of Mrs. Lovechild. Lizzie opened to a woodcut of two girls picnicking together in an English garden. One of them had dark hair, the other light. They wore sun hats, which circled their heads like the auras of medieval saints, but tied in bows on the side. The flowers were as large as the girls' faces.

Lizzie brought the picture closer. The book had an odd smell, like fermented fruit. The title page had been torn out, but a handwritten message on the flyleaf remained. "To my darlingest Mitzy," it read. "On the occasion of her fourth birthday. Hope you feel better soon! Your Uncle Beau." The book was probably filled with infectious germs.

Lizzie Hayes was an easy person to underestimate. Slow to act, she often appeared indecisive, but once she'd fixed on a course, it was fixed. She was hard to dissuade and hard to intimidate.

As a child she'd been passive and biddable. "So dependable. Quite beyond her years," her mother had said on those frequent occasions when Lizzie did as she'd been told. But just beneath this tractable surface lay romance and rebellion. She loved to read, engaging books with such intensity that her parents had allowed only the dullest of them, and then curtailed the time she spent with those. Her mother was quick to spot the symptoms of overstimulation, and Lizzie had spent many hours lying in bed, sentenced to absolute inactivity until she could be calm again.

It was an ill-conceived punishment. With everything but her imagination forbidden to her, Lizzie's reveries grew ever more fevered. She could lie without moving for hours in the semblance of obedience, and all the while an unacceptable cascade of pirates, prophets, and Indians pounded through her mind.

She was not trusted with fairy tales until she was sixteen years old; they were so full of murder and mayhem. She was not trusted with poetry at all, not since, at the age of six, she had wept bitterly while listening to Sir Walter Scott's "Proud Maisie." She had made it only as far as the second stanza.

*"Tell me, thou bonny bird,  
When shall I marry me?"  
"When six braw gentlemen  
Kirkward shall carry ye."*

Sermons could have the same effect. When the Reverend Paul Clarkson came to luncheon, her mother was forced, over a nice lobster bisque, to suggest a little less exaltation on Sundays. "For

woman, religion should be a steady thing," she'd suggested, and the reverend, who had just burned his mouth on his soup and was taking great gulps of cold water medicinally, had not disagreed.

In adolescence, Lizzie had been prone to the type of satisfying melancholia that expresses itself in diets and music. "I'm not raising any saints," her mother had said one morning when Lizzie was irritating her by fasting. She stood at the doorway to Lizzie's bedroom, carrying a breakfast of steamed peas and peas, and then stayed to watch each bite. In our modern age, she informed Lizzie, extravagant holiness is ill mannered as well as ill advised. "The world is as the world is," she was fond of saying. "And just as God made it. You're ungrateful to Him when you wish it otherwise."

Lizzie's mother knew that she hated peas. Lizzie ate them all silently, offered them to God, one by one, as a form of fleshly mortification.

As she'd aged Lizzie's inner and outer aspects grew increasingly ill matched. Her breathless romantic imagination, charming in a young woman, and delightful in a beautiful young woman, was entirely ridiculous in someone short, fat, and well past her middle age. Lizzie was sharp enough to know this, and since there was no way to keep the outer woman private, she generally kept the inner woman so.

The outer woman: Often when she'd misbehaved, her mother would march her to the dressing room and mirror to look at herself. "That's what a bad girl looks like!" her mother would say, her own sagging eyes floating behind the bad girl's head, as if the mere sight of Lizzie's face was a punishment. (As a consequence, Lizzie didn't like mirrors much. When she was finally allowed to read the story of Snow White, she'd instantly understood that the mirror was the real villain of the piece. "Why, I couldn't possibly choose between two such beautiful women," is what the mirror would have said if it hadn't been bent on blood.)

"You have only the beauty of youth," her father had told her when her refusal to marry his good friend, Dr. Beecher, had made him angry enough to be honest. "I'm not a fussy man," Paul Burbar had said on the occasion of her second proposal. "You won't be expecting romance," Christopher Ludlow had said on the occasion of her third.

Lizzie remembered these things partly because they'd hurt, but mainly because for most of her life her appearance had been so rarely commented on.

The inner woman: And yet, as far back as Lizzie could remember, she had suffered from a kind of self-importance that expressed itself as the conviction that every move she made was watched. This made a certain sense among ladies out in society, where the mere whisper of eccentricity could cost reputation, and among the religious, since God was interested, exacting, and everywhere. Lizzie was both out and devout.

Even so, her conviction was pronounced. Add to society and God that special circumstance familiar to every passionate reader: An unseen narrator hovered somewhere behind Lizzie, marking her every move.

And *then* add the fact that for most of her life Lizzie had been haunted by a photograph of an angel in a christening gown. Her mother had made the picture frame herself, an intricate, heartbroken oval of ribbon roses and wax lilies encircling the likeness of Lizzie's brother, Edward. Lizzie was five years old when Edward was born. He'd lived less than three weeks and died, sinless, of inanition. Lizzie hardly remembered him alive.

Dead, he'd been inescapable. His picture hung first in the nursery and later in her bedroom. "I'll watch over you," Lizzie's mother had said. It was the sort of misunderstanding Lizzie and her mother were likely to have. Eventually Lizzie knew the difference between watching someone and watching over someone. Eventually she understood that her mother had intended this as a comfort. But by the time she'd made the distinction, Edward was a pale, palpable, disapproving presence who could be neither banished nor appeased.

Nell Harris appeared, startling Lizzie with her large pudding face rising over the top edge of the book. "She's in the kitchen, having a bite now," Nell said. "I'm afraid she looks to be a fussy eater. Shall I'm to squeeze a bed in for her somewhere?" Everything about her tone and posture expressed reproach. We have a waiting list, she might as well have said. We have no beds. We have no money. We have standards. Deciding who we take in is not your job.

"She's a friendless child," said Lizzie. "With a father somewhere. And unless I miss my guess, a wealthy father. Out of wedlock, of course. But quite, quite wealthy. Mrs. Pleasant wouldn't bother otherwise."

"So you don't think that the child might be colored?" Nell asked.

The idea had been so far from Lizzie's thoughts as to shock her now. She responded slowly. "There's nothing of the colored in her face."

"You can't go by that. Mammy Pleasant herself fooled a lot of people for a long time, if the stories are true. Though I never credited them myself. You saw, she's black as a Mussulman. But if this child comes out of the Home, if she's adopted somewhere, no one is going to question her. They'll just take her as white. It will be as if we've said so."

Lizzie set the book down and wiped her hands on her apron while she thought this through. Lizzie Hayes believed it was better to be white than colored, believed it so absolutely that this was not the part she thought about. But within these confines, she was a well-intentioned woman. She genuinely didn't care what or who Jenny was. Lizzie wanted to be an influence for good in the world. If she could take in a motherless colored girl and turn her out white and adopted, she would count it a good day's work.

Still, many of their most generous donors would no doubt feel differently. The Ladies' Relief Home had no savings, no margin for error. Even a small drop in donations could mean ruin. Wasn't Lizzie's first obligation to protect the wards already there? Could she set them all at risk for the sake of one child?

The next book was a *Robinson Crusoe* someone had evidently dropped in the bathtub. Lizzie picked it up and tried to flatten the crusty cover with her hand. What she admired most about *Crusoe* was his calm sequentiality. He found himself in an overwhelming situation and survived simply by dealing with each task in its turn. The mere sight of the book was clarifying.

These are the things Lizzie thought, and in this order:

Today's task was to take care of Jenny. Possible repercussions were not today's task.

Besides, she had often noticed that charity made misers of donor and recipient both. She had always sworn that it wouldn't work this way on her.

Plus, she genuinely thought it likely Jenny had a wealthy father. What might such a man not do in gratitude for the preservation of his daughter? Lizzie was in charge of the Ladies' Relief Home finances, and in her professional opinion the financial risk was easily outweighed by the possible benefit.

And then Mrs. Pleasant was no one to trifle with. Lizzie would do nothing wrong to please her, but if she did the right thing and it pleased Mrs. Pleasant as well, wasn't that a bit of luck?

And who would not be moved by little Jenny's situation?

"You're not to say this to anyone else," Lizzie told Nell. "Once you've said it, it won't be unsaid, no matter how untrue. And it is untrue. Mrs. Pleasant cares about money. She doesn't care about the colored. You mark me, she'll be back within the month with a wealthy father in tow." Her voice began friendly, but sharpened as she spoke.

"What kind of a name is Ijub?" Nell Harris asked, and since Lizzie didn't know the answer, she said nothing, but she said it to good effect. It shut Nell up entirely.

Two weeks later a box arrived for Jenny. Lizzie Hayes was there to open it. It contained a doll wrapped in tissue, and a note. "I have noticed that many young girls are more interested in the needlework if they have a friend to sew for," Mrs. Pleasant wrote. "This is a doll that needs just such a friend." Her penmanship was as twisty as wrought iron. The note was signed "Mrs. Mary E. Pleasant."

Lizzie unwrapped the doll. Her head was made of china, her hair was paint. She had a sweet pouting face. She wore a necklace with a tiny coin, and a work apron over her dress. She fell out of Lizzie's hand and her head broke into several curved pieces. On one piece Lizzie could see a little heart-shaped mouth.

Mary Ellen Pleasant was a voodoo queen and Lizzie Hayes was an Episcopalian. They had had a very cordial exchange. There was no reason for Mrs. Pleasant to be angry. Except that Lizzie hadn't removed her work apron. Such a small thing, a careless thing, an oversight, honestly, when the best thing, Jenny's care, had all gone exactly as Mrs. Pleasant wished. Lizzie told herself that Mrs. Pleasant would not send a doll to curse her, and reminded herself that she couldn't be cursed by a doll even if Mrs. Pleasant had.

In fact, Lizzie had parts of this right. Mrs. Pleasant was angry about the apron, but the doll was just a bit of a joke, a bit of misdirection. There was no need to curse Lizzie with a doll. Not when she had been given Jenny Ijub.

No one ever mentioned the doll to Jenny. It would have been pointlessly cruel, since she was already broken.

THE LADIES' RELIEF and Protection Society Home occupied a lot on the corner of Geary and Franklin. There wasn't a tree on the property, just scrub and sand, so storms hit hard. The Home was familiarly called the Brown Ark. Though blocks from the ocean, it had a shipwrecked, random air, like something the tides had left. In this respect, it matched the fortunes of most of its residents. During the year of 1890, the Ark housed a total of two hundred thirty-nine women and children, many only on a temporary, emergency basis.

The motif of randomness was carried up from the basement, with its kitchen, laundry, and schoolrooms, all the way to the bell-tower cupola. The furnishings had been donated, and represented the worst taste of several decades. The parlor, into which Mrs. Pleasant had not been asked, contained a clock face painted with clouds and trapped under a bell jar, a handmade mantelpiece decoration of gangrenous velvet, pinned into tufts with brass studs, and an old set of stuffed chairs that crouched before the fireplace like large, balding cats. The effect was little offset by the posting of embroidered quotations intended to uplift and edify. "He who loves a friend is too rich to know what poverty and misery are." And "Some flowers give out no odor until crushed." And "The true perfection of mankind lies not in what man has, but in what man is."

The last had been gleaned from the deplorable Oscar Wilde. In 1882, Wilde made a visit to the city and was absolutely undone by the vulgarity of it. He said so in public lectures addressed to the badly dressed perpetrators themselves. "Too, too utter," he said, though they all felt this described him far better than them. His observation on the parlor wall of the Ladies' Relief and Protection Society Home was unattributed.

The Bell place was only a few blocks away, on the corner of Octavia and Bush. It was known throughout San Francisco as the House of Mystery, although there was a second House of Mystery, one on the beach at Land's End, owned by the Alexander Russells. Mrs. Russell, despite her increasingly vehement denials, was widely believed to be the center of an Oriental cult whose disciples all called her Mother. Soon there would be a third House of Mystery, the Winchester house, but that would be torn down by San Jose.

The Bell House of Mystery was the occasional home of Thomas Bell, his reclusive wife, Teresa, and an indeterminate but large number of children, servants, and Mrs. Mary Ellen Pleasant. Mrs. Pleasant was the housekeeper, although everyone knew she was too rich and too old and too famous to be a servant. This was part of the mystery. In the 1890 census she listed her occupation as "capitalist."

Mr. Bell had another house on Bush Street where he sometimes stayed. Mrs. Bell had a house in Oakland. Mrs. Pleasant had a house called Geneva Cottage on the San Jose Road, and properties on Washington Street and in Berkeley and Oakland. She was currently thinking of buying a large country ranch in the Valley of the Moon.

The Octavia place was a thirty-room mansion shadowed by blue gum trees. It had a red mansard roof, a southern mood. The interior was stuffed with hidden passageways, spiral staircases, statuary, and gold-veined mirrors. Rock-crystal chandeliers dripped from the ceilings. Every Saturday, even in winter, cut roses were arranged in vases with ferns and peacock feathers. The rooms smelled faintly of old bouquets. Mrs. Pleasant had chosen the decorations, many of which were imported from Italy. She had a fondness for vaulted ceilings and also for the gilt cupids that were so liked by everyone.

Lizzie Hayes was seriously considering walking from the Brown Ark to the House of Mystery. The



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