

Same Time Next Tuesday

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Abigail first meets Kitty in the doorway of the old shoe factory, on the corner of Union Street, late one night in early April. The ashy light from a half-moon dangling overhead gives the shadows a sharper edge. Kitty is bleeding. She wears a beautiful coat that Abigail thinks would be a shame to see ruined. The tip of Abigail's tongue nudges the unlit cigarette between her lips; she has been searching her pockets in vain for a match, but feels that to ask the injured woman crouching in the doorway if she has a light would be perhaps insensitive. Kitty necks gin straight from the bottle in her hand and her face contorts briefly, demonically. The air-raid siren wails on overhead in a tone of almost boredom.

"Excuse me," ventures Abigail. "Do you need help?" She regrets asking almost immediately as she realises there's nothing she can feasibly offer by way of assistance. If the woman has suffered mortal wounding then there's no use blotting it clumsily with a pocket handkerchief. Abigail doesn't know Belfast well enough to be sure where the nearest hospital is, and Kitty seems in no fit state to walk anywhere; they can hardly hail a taxi. Furthermore, there's no telling whether the hospital will have been bombed to bits by the time they arrive there, and certainly no guarantee they won't have been bombed to bits themselves.

Kitty tried to get a cab an hour before the sirens started, but no drivers would take her; they thought she was drunk. She wasn't then, though she is now, not that it's helping. Pain, unblunted by the gin, screws tighter into her abdomen. Kitty's best friend Orla calls the private part between her legs her *gash*, which Kitty has always disliked for the violent visual it conjures; but now, with a crimson crust forming along the scalloped edge of her stockings and fresh blood leaching forth, Kitty considers it's probably an apt term.

She did think a tampon might at least cork the flow, but it overflowed within minutes. It sat discarded beside her in its own little pool of blood until Kitty, forgetting it was there, jumped at the sight of its tail and small body streaked with gore, thinking momentarily that it was some dead

or dying creature. Realising what it was, she kicked it into the gutter. Kitty's mother once warned her in an undertone against using tampons during her time of the month, at least until she was married, as they were widely known to cause accidental loss of virginity. Kitty reasons it is altogether too late for that.

The woman who's stopped in front of her wears a dark uniform and has a cigarette protruding from between her lips; Kitty's run out of matches, she wonders if the woman might give her a light, until Abigail puts it, unlit, back into her pocket and peers down at Kitty.

"Where are you hurt?" she asks, concern furrowing her brow.

Kitty doesn't really have a name she prefers for her private parts; she doesn't talk about them aloud if it can be at all avoided. At one extreme there's Orla's sharp, staccato terminology (gash, snatch, cunt), and at the other, the way Kitty's mother used to refer to it, her *special place that God made*. She starts laughing at the thought.

Abigail already regrets stopping; she should have known the woman was mad, nice coat or not. She looks young enough, perhaps only a few years older than Abigail's twenty-one; pale-faced and with bright blonde hair, spidery black smudges under her eyes, and a scar of red lipstick. Abigail doesn't wear makeup; she owns some face powder, and one lipstick in a daring purple shade, but as advertising for cosmetics tends to only show beaming white-skinned women, Abigail grew up under the impression that it wasn't something meant for her. She has only worn the lipstick once and it left a messy crayon smear across Nella's mouth. Nella had a movie star's mouth, lips pink and pouting, with a small mole at the corner like a dot next to a note in sheet music. When Abigail was little and used to sit next to her father while he played the piano, she asked what the dots meant and he told her that they added half again the value of whatever they were placed next to. Abigail once told Nella that the mole added half again the value to her already pretty smile, and Nella looked pleased.

"You're not from round here," Kitty slurs suspiciously; Abigail thinks it a reference to her dark colouring until Kitty adds, "Is tharra Scouse accent?" in a very poor imitation of a Scouse accent.

Kitty, apparently reluctant to sit fully on the ground, keeps shifting her position from squatting on her haunches to leaning crookedly against the door frame, and now she's standing bent over at the waist with her hands gripping her hips, a rivulet of blood skating down the full length of her

stocking and into her shoe.

“Yes, I’m from Liverpool,” Abigail replies, pushing on, “Listen, can you walk? Is there somewhere I can take you? It’s not safe out here.”

“Then why are *you* out here?” accuses Kitty. Abigail doesn’t reply, and Kitty asks, “What’s your name?”

“Abigail French. And you?”

“Kitty Murphy.” Kitty puts out a hand as if to shake hers but they both notice at the same time that it’s grubby with crescents of blood under the nails, so she draws it back and performs a kind of half-salute instead.

“Come on, look at the state of you. You can’t stay here. If some unsavoury character doesn’t find you then a bomb surely will.”

“And how do I know you’re not some unsavoury character?” challenges Kitty; but she winces furiously as pain needles into her belly, so doesn’t push for an answer. She lowers herself into a sort of squat with her knees up and her pelvis slightly tilted towards Abigail, and Abigail suddenly wonders, horrified, if Kitty mightn’t be in labour. Or, perhaps more likely given the amount of blood streaking her thighs, she might be miscarrying. Abigail doesn’t know how one might deliver amateur medical attention in either scenario. Her own mother died from infection shortly after giving birth to Abigail; and while Abigail doesn’t know what might have improved her odds of survival, she’s fairly certain that sitting outdoors during a German air raid isn’t widely medically recommended.

“You’ve got to see a doctor,” Abigail insists, bending down to Kitty’s level. “You’re losing a lot of blood - we’ll find someone to help, get you to hospital...”

The corners of Kitty’s mouth turn down and her eyes glisten suddenly with tears.

“I’m sorry, I know you’re trying to be kind,” she wobbles, “but I can’t see a doctor, I can’t go to hospital. I’m sorry, but they’d know at once what’s happened to me and I’d rather die in a doorway than a prison cell.”

Kitty doesn’t know how Lawrence would respond if she told him, not that she’s going to. His upstanding lawyerly principles would surely have him feeling duty-bound to report such a crime;

first to her father, then to the police. But then her father would demand in a blazing roar how Kitty got herself in trouble in the first place, something Lawrence (as her father's fellow crown prosecutor and long-time friend) would surely want to avoid. Lawrence's own daughter is, at twenty-four, just two years younger than Kitty. Kitty ran into her in a department store queue a few weeks ago, and they laughed at the realisation that they were both buying the same dress. Kitty doubled back on herself an hour later and returned the garment, feeling that any resemblance she bore to Lawrence's daughter would cast upon their already problematic relationship an uncomfortable layer of transgression that would be difficult to ignore.

Perhaps, Kitty's considered, any horror he might feel at what she's done, or what a dubious surgeon in Rosemary Street smelling of chemicals and clove sweets has done *to* her, might be subsumed at once by relief. What an efficient secretary she's been; she has managed to take care of the problem without having to ask him for help at all, and outside of office hours too! He'll owe her a glowing letter of reference if she ever decides to get a job elsewhere.

She did think about keeping it, making up a story about how it happened. *A man ambushed me in the street, Father, I didn't see his face, it was all over so quickly!* Or perhaps she could blame the whole affair on the machinations of the Holy Spirit. But Kitty worried she and the infant might be parcelled off to a home like Mary O'Donnell was after falling pregnant when they were fourteen, and she didn't much fancy that. Mary hasn't kept in touch since then.

Abigail wonders if she has the sort of face that naturally invites confidence, or if Kitty would have disclosed her misfortunes to any passing stranger; a singularly foolish thing to do, Abigail thinks, since for all Kitty knows she's a staunch puritan who'll go straight to the nearest constable. Kitty seems to realise this at the same time, and her eyebrows snap desperately together.

"Oh, *please* tell me you're sound and won't tell anyone," she moans, her head rolling back against the door momentarily before it lifts upright again, and she adds, "Although actually, I wouldn't make it to prison; my da would throttle me with his own hands if it all came out."

"I won't tell anyone," promises Abigail. A plane drones by overhead and they both look up. "Come tomorrow, there mightn't be anyone left to tell."

"Why're you out walking the streets anyway?"

Abigail takes the cigarette out of her pocket again. "You haven't got a light, have you?"

“Bugger, I was going to ask you the same. I’m all out.’ Kitty swigs again from the gin bottle and, gurning, offers it to Abigail. Abigail pauses, before accepting the bottle and sitting down on the doorstep next to her. Kitty has lowered herself onto the ground where she rocks with her knees drawn up to her chest. “So, come on,” she presses in a strained voice. “You should be down in a shelter. Why’ve you a suicide wish? You might as well spill; you’ll never see me again, if you’re lucky. Or we’ll both die in this doorway. Either way, there’s no point being secretive. I’ve told you my troubles, and I’m one whole minute less of a stranger to you than you were to me when I did that.”

“You’d also had a whole lot more gin than me,” points out Abigail.

“Fair. Drink up, then.”

Kitty sleeps through the bombs. When her head first slumps against the door frame Abigail wonders if she’s died; but no, a pulse still jumps at her throat. The blood staining her skirt and legs is no longer sticky, but instead a dry rust. Abigail doesn’t sleep. She wonders where’s been hit, whether they’ll emerge at dawn to find the city in splinters and the docks dissolved into the sea.

“How do you feel?” Abigail asks when Kitty wakes up.

“Perfectly horrid,” she replies, “but I think that’s mainly the gin.”

Kitty’s coat (which in the light Abigail realises isn’t black, as she’d thought, but a very dark green) covers up most of the carnage, although a few errant seams of crimson are visible on her stockings.

“You should take those off,” advises Abigail, “or they’ll give you away.”

“They’re good stockings,” grumbles Kitty, examining them crossly. “It seems such a waste.”

“You could always try scrubbing them with baking soda. If it works for red wine stains...”

“There’s a thought. Thanks!” Kitty strips off her stockings and balls them up in her pockets. “Anyway, what’s the damage?” The buildings around them are still standing as before. Kitty peers around the corner as though half-expecting someone to reveal it’s all been a grand joke to put the wind up them.

“I don’t know yet.”

Kitty folds her arms to keep her coat closed around her. “Well, I suppose I’d better get on. But, here, it was kind of you to stop for me. Plenty wouldn’t have. Let me buy you a drink.”

Abigail looks sideways at the now-empty gin bottle sitting on the pavement, and Kitty lets out a throaty cackle. “A proper drink. By way of thanks.”

“There’s really no need, I didn’t do anything.”

“But I want to. Humour me.”

Abigail shrugs. “All right, then. But you should have a few days to recover first. And it’s Easter this weekend coming; let’s give it a week.”

“Deal! One week from today, say, eight o’clock? Where?”

Abigail nods at the Tavern, the bar visible on the corner a little way down the street. “There.”

“Perfect.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Oh, grand. A hot bath and a proper rest, that’s all I need.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Take care.”

“And you! No more bomb-strolls till I see you next.”

“If you insist.”

The news of the casualties and the shipyards desecrated during the air raid is of course upsetting, but Abigail feels a particular twinge of sadness hearing about the zoo. Fearing that a direct bomb hit might result in polar bears on the loose up Cave Hill, the authorities have had most of the zoo animals killed. Abigail wonders (not without distaste) what will happen to the bodies, whether there’ll be a newly-stuffed wolf’s head hanging in a Glengormley pub by the end of the month, whether one of the zookeepers now has a majestic bearskin rug that he claims at dinner parties was stripped from a wild bear he once shot in Siberia.

Nella was draped in an oversized fur coat like a barbarian chieftain when Abigail first met her. She introduced herself as Petronella, followed by whatever stage surname she had taken a liking to that week. She spoke with a mid-Atlantic accent, despite being from Stockport, and didn’t like

to be challenged on this. She was singing two nights a week at the Grafton, with a band that included Abigail's father on the piano. *Your father is a master of the ivories*, she told Abigail imperiously, adding in the same tone, *I think you and I are going to be very good friends*. And so they were, and more, for a time.

Abigail hopes Kitty won't probe, when they meet. Hopefully she'll just gas on about herself. Abigail found Kitty's candour endearing, whether it was drink or distress that had prompted it, or whether it was simply her natural manner. Nella behaved with exuberant over-familiarity but was on the whole evasive, changing her name and affecting her accent and neglecting to mention her husband back in Manchester.

Abigail's drink is a gin and tonic; Kitty has a neat vodka with ice.

"Gone off the gin?" asks Abigail.

"Balanced diet," Kitty replies, tapping her glass against Abigail's. "Cheers."

Lawrence suggested a drink in his office yesterday evening, but Kitty refused, delicately implying menstrual cramps about which he did not interrogate her further. She is no longer in pain but fears what might be the consequences of exerting herself again too soon. Kitty hasn't so much walked this last week as glided from place to place, anxious that any energetic movement might dislodge something fragile inside her. She's worn tampons just in case, but these have remained unspotted by blood. Still, Kitty worries that letting Lawrence hoke around in there might set off some kind of bodily reaction that could incriminate her, or even that he'll somehow be able to tell just by the feel of it that the equipment, so to speak, has been tampered with. She can't keep him waiting forever, though, or he'll no doubt tire of her. Kitty wonders if she'd even care. Perhaps she ought to seek a new job, just in case. She could get a job with the war effort, like Abigail, wear a smart uniform and do some good in the world instead of answering the telephone and making endless cups of tea and being bent over a desk by a rich man with a red pocket square. She's better than being someone's secretary for the rest of her life, she thinks. Or is she? Who can say.

Kitty unloads the lot of this to Abigail without pausing between thoughts, a spatter of staccato words like typewriter hammers beating meaning onto a blank page. She hasn't been able to tell any of her other friends about the whole sorry predicament for fear they would report or, worse, judge her, and it's cathartic being able to vent.

Abigail had a few close girlfriends in Liverpool who would chatter away to her about their jobs and lovers, but their conversations became more muted and infrequent after Abigail told them she'd been in love with a woman. They did not express any open distaste but developed a strange habit while talking to Abigail of looking at her as though she was an impostor who was holding the real Abigail hostage, and they wanted to convey a message to the real Abigail, without her captor knowing, that they were deeply concerned for her welfare. When her father died a year ago and she went directly from the funeral to booking her ferry passage away from Liverpool, Abigail's friends promised to write, but she's had nothing. They might have died, she supposes. Things like that do make one a poor correspondent.

The WAAF girls are good sports, but Abigail's got very little in common with them. Most of them are married with a small litter of beaming infants and a parade of in-laws and they'll talk often about how worried they all are that so few children have been evacuated and fret over their vast extended families and how everyone can possibly be safe when there aren't enough shelters for when the siren sounds. Abigail has nothing against this kind of chat but she has nothing to contribute; she has no-one to shepherd into an air-raid shelter, no-one to seek out once she's down there.

"It's a terribly lonely thing," Kitty's saying, though not about Abigail. "Strange to think that the only people in the whole world who know about it are me and some dire back-alley surgeon. Surgeon my hoop, by the way, that man was *not* a qualified medical professional, but that's another story. And *you* know, of course. And God, I suppose, if he's still watching this disgrace, although I doubt that." She swallows the last of her drink and sighs. "I mean, I complain that no-one can know, and yet I don't know what to do with the fact that *you* know. I'd like to think I could trust you not to say anything but then I don't know a thing about you. It's my own fault, of course, I've been rabbiting all this time without letting you get a word in. Look, I'm still doing it! It's terribly annoying, isn't it?"

Abigail opens her mouth as the air-raid siren begins to caterwaul.

"For the love of Jesus," curses Kitty, crestfallen. "Not *again*."

"At least you can walk this time," reasons Abigail. "Better get on, then." The stool legs protest against the stone floor as she pushes it back to stand.

“I’m sorry, I’ve rattled on for absolutely hours,” Kitty says, getting to her feet as well. “I’ve learned absolutely nothing about you and all you’ve really learned about me is that I’m *completely* mad. Can we rectify that in another week? Not the thing about me being mad, that’s beyond help, but I want to hear more about you, I do. If you like.”

“If you like,” echoes Abigail. “If we’re both still knocking about after *this*,” she points skywards, where there are presumably angry airborne Germans zooming about overhead, “then same time, here, one week?”

“Agreed!” Outside the pub, Kitty puts out her hand, this time clean and bloodless. “Same time next week.”

Abigail shakes it with a stout nod. “All the best.”

“And to you!”

When Kitty was a child she always liked the tidy uniformity of the market; meat fillets fanned out across a bed of ice, brightly-coloured fruit stacked in crates, cakes freckled with icing sugar and served in neat slices. She fancied at one stage that her future might be in one day owning a stall of her own, imagined herself perhaps selling sweets, separating them into jars and arranging them by colour on display to make for a charming, orderly aesthetic.

The marketplace is so familiar Kitty almost expects to walk through the arched gate and be greeted by the tang of fresh fish and the bustling of industry. She stops three steps inside, her heart walloping her chest. Everything is laid out in neat rows but it’s all wrong.

She overheard her father yesterday saying that the market was being used as a morgue after the raid; some two hundred dead have been brought there, he said, though it might well be more. Some have been identified, others not.

How silly she’ll feel, Kitty thinks, when she arrives at the Tavern on Tuesday evening to see Abigail sitting exactly where she had not a week ago. “You’ll never guess,” Kitty will most likely gush, swinging into the seat opposite. “I wondered if you mightn’t be dead.” But she mustn’t go off rambling about herself for hours again, that’s partly to blame for why she’s come here in the first place. Kitty knows Abigail hails from Liverpool but she doesn’t know what family she has, or friends, or where they are. She doesn’t know how long Abigail has been here or who she knows,

who might miss her.

Kitty tiptoes along the rows as though she's in a library and trying not to cause disruption. Abigail isn't there. The rest of the unclaimed are buried the following day.

She might just be late, Kitty thinks, draining the end of her first drink.

Or perhaps she lost someone in the bombing and she's grieving with her loved ones; she doesn't have time to spend being talked at by some gowl she barely knows.

She might have realised the fragility of life and gone back to be with her family in Liverpool before enemy fire tears through them all. Kitty hasn't a clue where Abigail's people are, be they family, friends, lovers... like a fool, she didn't ask.

Kitty's got tomorrow morning off work; she told Lawrence she has a number of important errands to run, but she's going for a job interview. She doesn't want to arrive smelling of vodka with shadows hanging under her eyes.

Abigail was awake when Kitty woke in the doorway that morning a fortnight ago. Kitty wonders if she slept at all that night. Perhaps she doesn't sleep well generally; perhaps that's why she takes late-night walks. Kitty doesn't know. She wants to find out.

Kitty asks for an orange juice at the bar and settles in to wait.