



LOVE AND FURY

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You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

‘WOMAN TO CHILD’, JUDITH WRIGHT

MRS B

30th August 1797

Mrs Blenkinsop arrived at a neat circle of three-story houses at the edge of North London, surprised to find her charge at the open door, holding her ripe belly with both hands and ushering her inside with an easy smile and no apparent terror of the event to come. The home and its mistress, in a muslin gown and indigo shawl, smelt of apple dumplings. Though they hadn't met, the woman took the midwife's hand and led her past half-furnished rooms, introducing them as she went, waving away stacks of books on a Turkish carpet, anticipating shelves, and the occasional wood box and leather trunk, as 'the old life still finding its place in the new.' Mrs Blenkinsop had seen far more disarray in her time, and liked the simple touches, cut flowers in every room and a single oval portrait, just a face (that looked very much like the missus herself) gazing out from over a mantel. In the garden out back, which was enjoying its first late-summer bloom, the midwife

caught sight of a little girl, three years old, she guessed, playing with a young woman who seemed to be telling her the names of plants.

It was a fine house, with fresh white walls and open windows, tall as Heaven, inviting a cordial breeze that followed them down a hall, up two steep staircases, and into the airy bedroom where the missus led her, answering each of Mrs Blenkinsop's questions with an uncanny calm: her waters had started as a trickle but ended as a gush as she'd stood in the kitchen that morning. She'd felt a dull ache and scattered pains, with no sensible pattern, but she wasn't unwell, and remembered eating, only two hours before, a small breakfast, which she hoped was enough nourishment to sustain her for the labour to come.

'I don't imagine there'll be much for you to do, Mrs Blenkinsop, but sit by and wait for Nature to do what your art cannot.'

'No objection by me.' The midwife put her old bag and bottle of gin on the floor.

'I can't abide the lying-in. I was up next day with Fanny.'

'Sweet girl in the garden just now?'

'Yes, with our dear Marguerite. Both too sweet for the world, I'm afraid. But Fanny wasn't shy coming into it.'

The midwife took off her brown cape and folded it over a chair. 'Well, I've never seen two births the same. Not in all my time. But we'll hope for the best.'

'I told Mr Godwin I'd be down for dinner tomorrow afternoon.'

'Let's have a look, then,' said the midwife, eager to attend to the business at hand. 'D'you mind if I take off my cap?'

'Of course, Mrs Blenkinsop. We don't stand on ceremony here.'

'“Mrs B” ought to do fine,' she said, taking some almond oil from her bag and rubbing her hands clean with it. 'Shortens things up.'

‘Mrs B, then.’

A servant appeared with a pressed apron for the midwife, which she wrapped around her own dumpling of a stomach and tied at the back. She removed the woman’s slippers, squeezing the arch of each foot before lifting her legs onto the bed, then laid her palms on the great taut womb, and closed her eyes as a way of gathering all her senses to feel the child inside. Satisfied that the baby had fallen down proper and headfirst, she sat on the edge of the bed to raise the missus’s knees to a slight bend, rolled her gown to the crest of them, pulled off her underthings, and lightly pressed her legs apart. They had the give of a woman who’d done this before.

As the midwife inquired into her case – dilated only one finger’s worth across – the pregnant woman exhaled a slow breath and talked to the ceiling.

‘I told Mr Godwin over breakfast I had no doubt of seeing the animal today, but that I must wait for you to guess the hour. I think he was somewhat alarmed at the prospect of it all, but relieved when I sent him away. Though I promised I’d send word throughout the day.’

‘Then it’ll just be the two of us, for now.’ The midwife wiped her hands on her apron. The custom of gathering a gaggle of female relatives and friends, as far as she was concerned, did nothing to serve the cause, or the patient. None of them, in her experience, could agree on a best course going forward or backward: was it oystershell powder for weak digestion, or crushed chamomile flowers? Cayenne pepper or laudanum for morning sickness? A ‘cooling’ or a ‘heating’ diet throughout? (Mrs B had seen too many women living like a horse on grassy food and water.) If a woman’s pains weren’t strong enough, her attendants promoted large quantities of strong liquors, and if very strong, even more.

The only thing worse, in her mind, was the calling of a doctor, who was always quick with the forceps and short on patience with a woman in pain.

‘We ought to have a good long time together, looks as if,’ said Mrs B, rolling the woman’s gown back over her calves.

‘Are you sure?’

‘We must have a little patience.’

‘Those were my mother’s words to me as she was dying.’

‘Tis true, comin’ or goin’.’ The midwife gave her a quick pat on the bodice of her dress. ‘Let’s get you out of this into something easier.’

The woman signalled toward a wardrobe, where Mrs B found a clean, pressed chemise, not a single heavy bedgown in sight, typical for lying-in but much too warm. She was of the view that nothing should be added to dress or bedclothes that the patient wasn’t accustomed to in perfect health. When she turned back, the woman was on her feet, arms surrendered to the ceiling, at ease in her body. Her hair was all soft chestnut curls, brown eyes to match, her figure like a bulging flower vase.

‘Not to worry,’ said the midwife, undoing the gown at the back and coiling it up over her belly, head, and arms. ‘Everything’s in a fair way. You’ll meet her soon enough.’

In seconds the new garment replaced the old. ‘Her?’

‘Mmm.’

‘But we were expecting “Master William.” We’ve been expecting him from the first.’

All the bending and up-and-down had Mrs B blotchy in the face. She stopped to blow a few strands of hair away, and saw the surprise on her patient’s face.

‘Everyone does. Expect a boy. But you’re fleshy all over, not

just out front. Feet nice and warm. Skin smooth as a plum.’ The midwife put her hands on her hips to squint at the woman’s eyes. ‘Pupils closed up and small.’ She put her nose in the air and took a satisfied sniff. ‘But it’s that smell of apple dumplings gives her away. You’ve a yen for sweets. That means a girl. Who’ll take her time with you, upon my word.’

Mrs B bent over for her bag. She set the gin and satchel on a near table, and began unpacking.

‘Another girl,’ said the woman almost under her breath, ‘in this world.’

Something in the cadence of her voice made Mrs B turn to take her in. The missus had stepped back into her slippers and redraped her shawl. She was very still, hands circling her swollen belly, staring down through the thin white linen with a wistful smile on her lips, as if saying hello and goodbye all at once. She’d looked so unafraid of everything until then: an older woman, late thirties maybe, experienced, with the way of the world about her. The midwife thought most women made far too much of the difficulties and inconveniences of childbearing, that it was a natural condition – not a disease at all – and ought to be treated as such. The woman in front of her now seemed not like them at all. No, she seemed the sort to look the task in the face, let Nature take charge, but help it along where she could, a short country walk, she guessed, gentle ride in a carriage, walk up and down the stairs, or busy herself in the early going with the distraction of dumplings, the spiced scent of a groaning cake. But standing there, some softness bled through the woman’s strength.

‘Shall I call you “Mrs G”, then?’ asked the midwife. ‘Just to shorten things up, same for both of us?’

‘Mrs G?’

‘Or Mrs Godwin, if you like.’

‘Mrs Godwin? Who the devil is that?’ the woman said with a bright laugh.

Mrs B looked at her, confused.

‘I’m sorry. It’s only that I don’t think of myself that way. “Mrs Godwin.” Though it’s been four months already.’

Mrs B made the count of months in her head. She was a Christian woman but didn’t judge. ‘Well, then, new married. Congratulations, I guess, are in order.’

‘Except that it goes against everything I believe.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Marrying at all.’

Mrs B was accustomed to women in her state saying things they might otherwise not, especially as the pains came closer together – sometimes things they would later regret, causing them to swear her to silence. She had heard secrets and gossip, pleas and gibberish, screaming, moaning, crying and curses, but never a declaration so clearheaded as this. Mrs Godwin seemed to be staring at her, almost daring her to disapprove. But Mrs B only smiled, in a way that didn’t show her teeth.

‘Well, we’ve a bit of a wait on our hands,’ she said, setting out the last of her tincture jars. ‘What shall we do with it?’

‘I asked Mr Godwin to send me a newspaper, a novel, any book. Some amusement to while the hours away.’

‘Maybe tell her your story, why don’t you?’ said the midwife, nodding toward the missus’s womb. ‘Just for her.’

‘Why do you think she’s taking her time?’

‘Ooh, the darkness can be a comfort, I s’pose,’ said Mrs B. ‘It’s the darkness binds you to her, and her to you. S’where we all begin, don’t we?’

When the missus didn't answer, Mrs B turned to see a shadow sweep across her face as she gazed outside, pulling her shawl close around. Mrs B took her as chilled, and stepped toward the open window.

'Let me close that for you.'

'No!'

Startled by the sharp edge in her voice, Mrs B let go of the tall panes, and felt her own fleshy shoulders drop. She was tired, there was no way around it, eleven days straight, the thrumming chaos of the Westminster Lying-In Hospital, and now this, before a day of rest. Rhythm, routine, as long as was possible, she thought. She could bear up one more time, she told herself, letting the soft breeze dry the water pooling heavy at the back of her eyes. She wouldn't say a word, never would. It wasn't her place. She was tired, that's all.

'I like the feel of it on my face,' the missus said, by way of apology, Mrs B supposed. 'I cannot abide still air. I can't breathe.'

'Open's fine, till you tell me different.' Mrs B set her shoulders and returned to the table. She poured a dram of gin from the bottle.

'You think she can hear me?' asked the woman.

'Oh yes. Same as the whoosh-whoosh of your heart. Has done, all along. Why, you and her've known each other a good long while already.' She held out the small glass, an offering. 'And with God's blessing, you'll have a good long time to come.'

The pregnant woman took the glass, held it high, and swirled it, watching the gin catch the light.

'And you think I can talk her into the world?'

'Well, there's no talking her out of it.'

The woman's eyes smiled. She tipped her head back to drink down the gin in one swallow, closing her eyes for the burn of it

down the throat, which seemed to fortify her. She put the glass in Mrs B's hand, cupping her own slender fingers around the midwife's.

'Call me Mary,' she said, as if restored.

'I am Mary Wollstonecraft.'