

Abide With Me

13th

There are bats nesting in Cloister Court, did you know? I think about them during morning prayer because it helps me to avoid thinking of you. Today, I stifle a yawn with the back of my hand and wonder how many of them are sleeping above me in the crumbling gaps between timber and stone. Mother Abbess is not happy with the state of the chapel – she likes to tell us in a voice of high drama that it may bury us all alive at any moment. I do not think that she knows about the bats, indeed, barely anyone does. Only those of us who like to linger in the cloisters at dusk with a low-burning candle, looking up at the sky.

I am reciting now without fervor, scripture pouring off my tongue in the way it does when my thoughts are roaming. I look down at my clasped hands and see that my nails are digging into my skin and my knuckles are white. It has been almost three months since I last saw you, and I have not for a single second ceased being furiously angry with you for ever having had the audacity to exist in the first place. I will never see you again, not the flash of your eyes as you pore over Latin and then grandly translate it slightly wrong (it is the tenses that always get you) nor the corner of your habit as it disappears round a corner, followed by your muttered curse as you hit your head on some low-hanging archway. Or if I do see you, we will stand stiffly at a good distance apart and avoid one another's eyes as we talk. I can hear the conversation playing out already, the grit of your bland platitudes rubbed into still-aching wounds. But I am settled now. I will despise all earthly desires fervently, as I once despised God for you.

18th

‘What are you doing?’ someone asks. You twist carefully on the ladder to see a young man staring up at you, smartly dressed and squinting through a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. Bloody students.

‘Clearing out the bats, sir,’ you reply. ‘Master’s orders, they’re getting to be too many.’ You show him the bucket of mortar.

‘That’s terrible,’ the student says, shivering. It’s sunny. Shuddering then, theatrics. ‘You’re walling them up?’

You shrug, annoyed by his tone. You’re just doing your job, after all. ‘Only way to get rid of them, sir,’ you say. ‘Are you going somewhere?’

‘Lunchtime eucharist,’ he says, as you thought he would, and checks his wristwatch. ‘But I’m late to chapel in any case.’ He won’t stop looking up at you. ‘I’ve seen you doing odd jobs around college a lot,’ he says. ‘Mending things. Just the other day I saw you in Pump Court. Why do you like it so much here?’

‘They pay me,’ you say. You don’t quite know why you’re giving him such short answers. You’ve seen this student before and noticed how perfectly formed his long-fingered hands are, clutching a stack of books as he hurries through First Court to class. Perhaps he’s luring you into something. You slide down the ladder with nervous anticipation lodged in the back of your throat like a hook.

‘So, the bats,’ he says, suddenly nervous. He can’t look you in the eye in case someone walks past. ‘Why does the Master want to exterminate them?’

‘Any animal can become a pest, sir,’ you say. ‘And I reckon-’ you lower your voice, ‘- between you and me, they give him the creeps. He’s afraid of walking through here in the

dark. I see him swinging his lantern about him like a mad thing. To ward off the bats, and-' you drop your voice to a whisper, '-the ghosts.'

The young man laughs to please you. His teeth, though crooked, are unstained. He stands in the centre of one of the Cloister Court archways like a saint in a stained-glass window, head tilted slightly to one side. He knows what you are thinking. Your hands are shaking with fear.

'I'm a bit like a bat myself,' he says hesitantly. 'I like to tuck myself away in little forgotten corners of college for some peace and quiet.'

'Is that right, sir?' you say. Careful, careful. He could so easily be reeling you in. 'And where might those be? I have a few forgotten places myself.'

'Oh, here and there,' he says. His hand is clasped to his chest as though clutching an invisible book. 'Behind the stables. Here in Cloister Court – they leave the door to the Prioress's Room open often, and I go in there to read at night. No one ever interrupts me.'

There it is, the hope of a moment and suddenly you are lost to a greedy danger. 'Eleven tonight?' you ask him in a very low voice. He nods sharply, eyes darting into smiles, and takes the bucket of mortar from your slack hand before walking off as if you had never spoken.

21st

She sits with her back against one of the arches, looking up. To the east, the sky is the liminal grey of four-in-the-morning, but the stars are still out. There are six or seven bats circling between the four walls of Cloister Court. The moon is almost full tonight and too pale, as though the bats have bitten into it and drained the colour out. The only other real light

is the chapel taper she's burning between her fingers like a cigarette. Thin and hungry, the flame is already lapping at her knuckles. She leans forwards, pouts her lips as if for a kiss, and blows it out. A torch beam catches her eye from the top of the chapel tower, so she stands and stretches.

Snaking up the tower, the scaffolding is ugly green by day and a soft, threatening grey by night. The climb is more tedious than exhilarating – she's so unfit now, God, she should have kept up cycling – until she emerges on the flat plateau, where I'm sat waiting and looking down into Cloister Court. She sits down next to me. I can see her pulse in her throat. She's so scared we'll get found out and deaned, and scared of something else, too.

'What are you listening to?' she asks. A torch I brought with me is balanced on the crenelated stone beside us, and it makes us both look like ghosts.

I reach out and switch it off, turning the volume down on my phone and silencing the hymn it's playing. '*Abide with Me*,' I say. 'That's the song, not a command.'

She laughs. 'It might as well be,' she says, giving me a look. 'I can't believe I'm risking my degree to come and break my neck up here with you.'

'Look,' I say gently, turning eastwards to where the sun has begun to rise properly over Midsummer Common. It's a June sunrise, embossed and straining to free itself from shimmering ribbons of mist. My hand finds hers, and after a pause I feel her lean forward and turn to meet her kiss like something choreographed long ago.

'Do you think anyone's done this before?' she asks me. This, what is this, the climbing or the kissing?

'Not for a long time,' I say, and I wonder at the bounding arcs of history, looping and crisscrossing and never quite coming back to themselves but slotting into place one behind

another. Books on a shelf. We are silent together, listening to the falling song of night-birds in the trees. Soon they'll be gone and we should be, too. There it is, I realise, subtle as a pronoun shift; the *I* has become *we*. And what have we become, in the fast-fleeing shadows of the dawn?