

A Glimpse at Happiness

Jean Fullerton

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Prologue

Wapping, East London, 1844

Ma Tugman, owner of the Boatman freehouse, wedged herself into her usual chair beside the counter of the main bar. The pub was the only thing of any worth she'd got from her old man. Snapper, her stubbed-nose terrier with a temper as short as his docked tail, shuffled under her chair and lay down with a loud huff. Ma's broad hips spread across the surface of the seat and her feet just skimmed the sawdust-covered floorboards. She could feel the tightness around her ankles so she wriggled her toes inside her scuffed boots. The pain was always worse at the end of the day.

The Boatman was set a few streets back from the river and tucked up the side of Lower Well Alley. It wasn't frequented by watermen with wages burning holes in their pockets, as the Prospect or the Town were, but then it didn't have the peelers from Wapping police office passing through its doors either.

Ma rested her hands on the curved wooden arms of the chair and leant back. It was just after six and they would light the lamps in a while, but for the next half hour or so the light from outside would be enough. Not that it could illuminate much of the interior: most of the windows were covered by packing cases instead of glass, leaving the light from outside to cut through the darkness in haphazard shafts. Daylight never reached the back of the narrow bar, so the full extent of the beer stains and ground-in dirt on the floor remained hidden.

In the dim recesses of the room, men hunched over their drinks while a few of the local trollops jostled for their first customers of the night.

Ma thrust her hand under one pendulous breast and scratched vigorously. She had been a looker years ago but had long since given up wearing stays. She glanced across the bar at the thin

young woman cleaning the tankards and yelled across at her to bring a brandy.

The girl dried her hands and brought over a bottle and short glass, just as the door opened to admit Harry, Ma's eldest son. He stumbled in with his brother, Charlie, a step or two behind, then a wild-eyed Tommy Lee, a bargeman from Chapel Street.

Ma's gaze ran over her first-born. He had his father's looks – square and stocky. Unfortunately, he also had his father's hair, which had started to disappear in his early twenties. Rather than try to comb over what was left of it, Harry had shaved his head clean with his razor. Ma shifted her gaze to her other son, Charlie, ten years Harry's junior, and smiled. He had her slighter build and topped his brother by half a hand. He also had her golden hair, which she had spent hours combing and curling when he was a small boy.

Elbowing aside the men clustered near the door, Harry stomped across the floorboards, Charlie and Tommy Lee following close behind.

'Ows me best gal?' Harry asked, kissing his mother on her forehead.

'All the better for seeing my sweet boy,' she answered smiling at his brother.

Harry's lower lip jutted out. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a red and green apple. He threw it in the air, bounced it off his bicep and caught it again. 'I got this from Murphy's stall. He said I was to give it to you, to brighten your smile.' He handed it to her.

Ma slid her knife from her skirt pocket. She held it in her palm for a second to feel the smoothness of the ivory handle. It had been her Harry's and his father's before that, and it would no doubt pass to her son Harry in time. It was well crafted, balanced and razor-sharp. She ran her thumb up to the pin at the top of the handle and pressed it. The blade sprung out.

Suddenly, Tommy stumbled and looked for a moment, as if he might fall to the floor. Charlie dragged him upright and, holding him tight by the arm, said, 'Look who we found skulking in the Ten Bells.'

Ma looked Tommy up and down. 'The Ten Bells? What took you so far from home then?'

Sweat glistened on Tommy's narrow forehead.

‘Me ma’s talking to you,’ Charlie growled, ‘and I ’ope for your sake you’ve got an answer.’

Ma waved her knife in the air and it gleamed in the light. ‘Now, Charlie, Tommy didn’t mean no ’arm.’ She began paring the skin from the apple.

‘Nah, nah, I didn’t mean no ’arm at all, Mrs T,’ Tommy replied, his body losing some of its tension. ‘I just fancied a stroll and found myself up Shoreditch way.’

Harry snorted. ‘Long bloody stroll! Your old lady hasn’t seen you for a week.’

‘And neither ’ave we,’ Ma added, slicing into the apple and popping a wedge in her mouth. ‘Bring ’im ’ere.’

Snapper, who’d settled under the table to gnaw at his haunches, heard the change of tone and sprang to his feet. Tommy yelled and lurched away but Harry and Charlie thrust him towards Ma and held his hands down on the table.

Tommy’s eye fixed on the blade in Ma’s hand as it twinkled in the light. She paused, savouring his terrified expression then, with a twist of her fingers, she gripped the knife and slammed the blade through Tommy’s outstretched hand.

An ear-piercing yell tore through the bar. Snapper barked and danced around their feet. Some of the patrons looked up but most, knowing where their best interests lay, continued to stare into their glasses.

Still clutching the ivory handle, Ma leant forward. ‘And how is your old lady and those four lovely kids of yours?’ she asked in a conversational tone.

A rivulet of blood was rolling off Tommy’s hand, staining the tabletop beneath.

Charlie shook him. ‘Me ma asked you a question.’

‘She . . . she’s f . . . fine, Mrs Tugman.’

‘And the children?’

Tommy was all but on his knees now in an effort to minimise the pull on his injured hand. ‘Grand. They’re grand.’

Ma’s free hand shot out, grabbed the tattered scarf around Tommy’s neck and hauled him towards her. He lost his footing and would have fallen but for his hand nailed to the table.

‘If you want ’em to stay that way, Tommy Lee, when my boys give you something to take upriver, you fecking take it.’ Ma wriggled the blade. ‘Understand?’

He nodded and, as Ma yanked the knife out of his hand, he

collapsed. Snapper barked a couple of times at the crumpled heap then waddled off.

Ma's hand went to her chest.

'Has 'e upset you, Ma?' Harry asked, glaring at the man on the floor.

'Just catching my breath,' she replied.

Harry circled around Tommy, who was now coming to and scrambling to his feet.

'You upset me ma,' he shouted, and booted Tommy in the stomach.

Tommy fell sideways, holding his bleeding hand, and vomited into the beer-soaked sawdust. Charlie went to boot him, too.

'That's enough!' Ma barked. 'Throw him outside. And you' – she jabbed her index finger at the girl behind the bar – 'get a bucket and clear up this mess.'

Harry and Charlie heaved Tommy up once again, dragged him to the door and threw him out to the street.

Ma wiped the blade of her knife on her skirt and resumed eating her apple, but felt a sudden sharp sting under her arm. Letting the knife fall to her lap, she slid her right hand between the buttons of her grubby blouse, over to her left armpit, where she caught her minute tormenter between her thumb and forefinger. She extracted it and idly studied the flea as it struggled. 'You can hide from Ma and give 'er a nip when she ain't looking,' she told the insect as she cracked it between her black-rimmed nails, 'but she'll get yer in the end.'

Chapter One

Stepney Green, 1844

With her hand on the polished banister, Josephine O'Casey, known as Josie ever since she could remember, lifted her skirts and made her way down the uncarpeted stairs from the main part of the house, to the kitchen. The heat from the room burst over her as she opened the door. Tucking a stray lock of her auburn hair back behind her ears, she stepped down to the flagstone floor.

The kitchen of number twenty-four Stepney Green was half below street level. The range, with its two ovens, roasting spit and six hotplates, dominated the space. Daisy, the maid, lit it at five in the morning and it supplied the household not only with food but, thanks to the copper incorporated into its design, a constant stream of hot water.

Standing with her back to Josie was Mrs Woodall, the Munroe family's cook. Her wide hips shook as she furiously stirred the contents of one of the large saucepans.

On a normal day Mrs Woodall accommodated the erratic working hours of Josie's stepfather, Dr Robert Munroe, as well as the vagaries of the tradesmen and the children's fads and fancies; however, today was not a normal day, and the usually unruffled cook looked as if she was about to boil over, just like one of her pots.

'Oh, Miss Josie, it's you. I thought it was your mother again,' Mrs Woodall said, some of the worry leaving her face.

Josie smiled. To her knowledge her mother, Ellen, had already been down to the kitchen three times in the last two hours and by the look on Cook's face she was expected again.

'You'd think the Queen of Sheba was coming, the amount of dishes I've got to prepare,' Mrs Woodall continued.

Queen of Sheba! No, someone much more important: Mrs Munroe, her stepfather's elderly mother.

‘Can I do anything to help?’ asked Josie, skirting around the stained chopping block which still had the odd chicken feather stuck to its surface. She, too, had escaped from the turmoil upstairs.

Apart from her trips to see Cook, Ellen had visited the guest room twice to check that the bed linen was properly aired, and her temper was shortening by the minute.

‘Thank you, Miss Josie, but I’ve taken the plates up and now I just have to wait for the meat to cook and the fruit to arrive.’

There was a crash from the floor above. Josie and Mrs Woodall looked up.

‘Your poor mother,’ tutted Mrs Woodall, and, turned her attention to the pile of cabbage sitting ready to prepare. ‘She shouldn’t be running about in her condition.’

Josie agreed and, pushing her way past the basket of potatoes on the floor, went over to the roasting hook to rewind the clockwork that had begun to slow.

Mrs Woodall gave her a grateful smile. ‘I could do with Daisy down here to help,’ she said, attacking the wrinkled leaves of the Savoy cabbage with her vegetable knife. ‘I don’t know why nurse needs help with the children.’

Josie repositioned the dripping tray under the roasting side of beef turning in front of the fire. ‘George and Joe have been up since dawn,’ she said. ‘Their racket woke Jack, who grizzled for an hour, and then the girls got out of bed. Poor Nurse has to help Miss Bobby and Lottie into their best clothes and take the rags out of their hair, and at the same time try to soothe Jack, who’s teething. She needs Daisy to make sure they are all ready on time.’

Mrs Woodall looked unconvinced. Josie noticed the jam tarts on the cooling tray by the open window.

‘I can see your eyes, Miss Josie,’ Mrs Woodall said, a small smile lightening her face. ‘I suppose I had better let you make sure they’re all right before I send them up with the afternoon tea.’

Josie grinned, then went over and scooped up a tart. She blew on it for a second and then popped it in her mouth, licking her fingers.

Mrs Woodall’s gaze ran over Josie and her eyes grew soft. ‘With your sweet tooth, I’m surprised you stay so slim. It must be all that dashing about you do.’

Large windows let light into the kitchen but, since the kitchen was below street level they remained firmly shut to keep out the dirt that would blow down from above. To keep the temperature of the room down, Mrs Woodall worked with the back door ajar.

‘And where *is* the grocery boy?’ she asked herself now, glaring around the room as if the pots and pans might know.

‘I’m sure he’ll be here soon. Mr Grey is very reliable,’ Josie assured her.

‘He is, but that boy of his, Jaco, is a bit flash for my taste. I caught him chatting with Daisy outside the back door last week,’ Mrs Woodall replied. ‘How am I supposed to make Dish of Orange without oranges, I ask you?’

At that, there was a double-tone whistle and the young man in question stepped through the back door.

‘Morning, Mrs W,’ he said, swinging his basket up onto the work surface beside the deep sink.

Mrs Woodall pointed at Jaco with her knife. ‘I’ve been expecting you for hours and I’ll have something to say to your master when I see him.’

‘Now then, hold your horses there, it ain’t my fault I’m late.’ Jaco repositioned his cap at a preferred jaunty angle. ‘The missus’ brother been away at sea for nigh on two years and he come back last night. They’re all a bit foggy, you might say, this morning after the celebration.’

‘Where has he been?’ Josie asked, thankful to talk about something other than Mrs Munroe’s imminent arrival.

‘According to him, everywhere – India, China and other savage lands,’ Jaco replied, squaring up the bottom of his colourful waistcoat. ‘Brought back all sorts of things, he did. Some strange cups with no handles from Japan, a bolt of silk from Bombay and some carved masks that scared the nippers.’

‘It’s a pity he didn’t bring some oranges with a bit of juice in them,’ commented Mrs Woodall, squeezing one of the fruits with a work-worn hand.

Jaco turned to Josie. ‘As I said, all around the world and sailed back on the *Jupiter* on the evening tide.’

Josie’s mind whirled.

The Jupiter!

Why did that name ring bells in her head?

‘Anyhow, Mrs W, Mr Grey says to tell you he’ll be by in the

morning for the rest of the week's order,' Jaco said. He winked at Mrs Woodall. 'Oh, and tell Daisy I was asking after her,' he said, dashing up the steps two at a time.

'I'll do no such thing,' Mrs Woodall called after him.

Turning back to the table, she seized a large potato and jabbed her knife into it. 'The cheek of him,' she muttered, scraping off the skin in short strokes.

The kitchen door opened and Bobby, Josie's twelve-year-old-sister, appeared around it. Nurse had worked a miracle on Bobby's straight hair and her young face was now framed with reddish-blond ringlets.

'Mother's asking for you,' Bobby said.

Giving Mrs Woodall a brief smile, Josie followed Bobby up the stairs.

Shoving the niggling issue of the *Jupiter* aside, she reached the ground floor of the house and stepped back onto the hall carpet, the smell of lavender and beeswax tickling her nose. The door to the parlour, the main family room to her right, was open wide and Josie glanced in.

The sofa and chairs sat at right angles to each other with their cushions plumped and the whatnots standing ready to receive books and drinks as required. Josie's embroidery hoop lay across her needlework box on the table by the window. Ma had wanted to tidy it away but Josie had argued that it would show Mrs Munroe that they spent their leisure time in industrious pursuits.

Mounting the stairs to the first floor, her eye caught the print of the steamship her stepfather had bought shares in. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. That's it! The *Jupiter*.

She peered at the name underneath the picture. It wasn't the *Jupiter*, it was the *Juno*.

'For goodness' sake, she thought. The *Jupiter* was threatening to turn into one of those questions that tap at your brain for hours until you remember the answer.

'Josie!' her mother's voice called from above her.

'Just coming, Mam.' Josie hoisted her skirts and made her way up to the next floor.

When Robert Munroe had left New York ahead of them to take up his post as Chief Medical Officer of the nearby London Hospital, and to find his family a suitable house, he had asked Josie what she would like in her bedroom. She had said two

words: pink and lace, and now her bedroom incorporated both with pink candy-striped wallpaper, darker toned curtains and lace bed hangings. The room also had a rosewood wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a marble-topped washstand. As Josie had spent the first half of her life in a one up, one down cottage by the Thames she hadn't yet grown tired of the pleasure of her own room. It was a far cry from the creaky wooden bed with the straw-stuffed mattress that she, her mother and her gran used to share all those years ago.

Josie stared around her bedroom as images of her old house, its cracked glass in the windows and its ragged curtains, drifted into her mind. Instead of the Turkey rug on the wooden floorboards she saw the old rag rug covering the beaten earth and shabby furniture.

Ellen's voice cut through her musing.

'For goodness' sake, Josie, where have you been?' she asked, laying the skirt of Josie's best dress on her bed alongside four petticoats. 'You need to get ready. They could be here any moment.'

Josie shut the door. 'There's hours yet. Pa has to get to the Black Swan to collect her and then get a cab back.' She began to unbutton the bodice of her workaday brown dress. 'Mam, stop worrying or you'll get a headache and then Pa'll have something to say.'

Robert Munroe wasn't actually her father. Michael O'Casey had died before she could walk, let alone remember him, so Robert was the only man she'd ever called Pa. She'd first met him when she was twelve and he had just set up his medical practice around the corner from where they lived in Anthony Street. Her gran had called Dr Munroe to their old ramshackle home one night after Josie had returned home from school with her throat feeling as if she'd swallowed broken glass. From that very moment, he became one of her favourite people, and had remained so ever since.

A soft look crossed Ellen's face and she ran her hands over her swollen stomach.

'Why don't you sit down while I freshen up, then you can help me with my laces,' Josie said soothingly.

Ellen duly sat down and patted the dark auburn bun at the nape of her neck. She glanced out of the window again and her fingers drummed on the armrest.

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure Mrs Munroe isn’t as fierce as all that,’ Josie said, as she sponged herself down.

‘Maybe so, but I’m sure she still regards me as a godless papist who nearly ruined her son and forced him to live in America for the last twelve years,’ her mother replied, fiddling with her hair again.

‘I’m sure she thinks no such thing.’

Ellen raised an eyebrow.

Before they married, Josie’s mother and stepfather had been at the centre of an infamous trial. Danny Donavan, who had the look of a bulldog chewing gristle, had ruled the dockside area for years with a fist and a blade of iron until Robert Munroe exposed his corrupt practices. Donavan was sent to trial at the Old Bailey, and it was Ellen, who used to earn a few coppers singing in Danny’s pubs, who supplied the vital piece of evidence against her boss. The trial was reported widely; so too was Ellen’s relationship with the reforming young doctor. They had married, but because of the scandal, Robert had been forced to practise in America for the past twelve years.

Although Robert’s father, the Reverend George Munroe, had gone to his grave refusing to acknowledge his son’s marriage to an Irish Catholic, his mother was more pragmatic. After Ellen and Robert had been married for eight years and produced five children, Robert’s mother had graciously condescended to acknowledge Ellen.

Josie put on a bright smile. ‘Besides, I’m sure that once she sets eyes on her grandchildren she won’t mind if you’re the Pope’s sister.’

‘It’s been hard on your father being apart from his family. He has longed for his mother to meet us all and I am determined that nothing should mar his joy.’

Josie reached for the towel. ‘Mam, what was the name of the ship we sailed to America on?’

Ellen shrugged. ‘I can’t remember.’ She stood up slowly and then, going to the bed, picked up the new, finely worked corset she had bought for her daughter in Regent Street.

Ellen shook it at Josie and grinned. ‘Now then, Josie Bridget O’Casey, turn around and prepare yourself.’

She slid the corset on Josie, who fastened the hooks at the front. Josie held her breath and her mother pulled the laces at the back. Pulling each side together she worked her way down

and tied it off temporarily. Josie let out her breath.

‘We’re not done yet, my girl,’ her mother told her.

‘You know Pa said it can be dangerous to lace too tight,’ Josie said, hoping her mother gauged her waist to be slender enough.

‘Just a pinch more,’ Ellen said. She repeated the process.

After five more minutes of being pulled back and forth, Ellen drew the two sides of the corset together at the back and finally tied the laces. She tipped her head to one side and admired her daughter. ‘That’s not too tight, surely,’ she said. ‘I read in the paper that there are young women of your age with waists of eighteen inches.’

‘What, fainting in the street?’ Josie replied, twisting back and forth. ‘It’s all right for you. You don’t have to wear one.’

Ellen laughed ‘You look grand, so quit your fussing and get dressed. You can’t greet Robert’s mother in your underwear.’

Josie stepped into her fine petticoat and then the other three padded ones and Ellen tied them at the back. She held Josie’s dress aloft so she could slip into it.

‘The turquoise and green in that fabric really suits you,’ Ellen told her as she snapped the last metal clip in place.

‘I loved the colours when we saw it in the warehouse.’

‘It brings out the colour of your hair and eyes,’ Ellen said. ‘And I’m not the only one to think so. That young doctor, Mr Arnold, your father invited to dinner last week could barely find his food on his plate for looking at you.’

‘We were talking about his work, that’s all,’ Josie replied, lowering her head. She was acutely aware that her cheeks were turning red.

‘It doesn’t matter what you were talking about,’ Ellen said, straightening the pleats around the neckline of the dress. ‘He is from a good family and his grandmother left him well provided for.’

Josie had noticed William Arnold’s interest but hoped that her mother hadn’t. He was pleasant enough but when he shook her hand there was no strength in it. She pulled a face.

‘And if not him, what about Mr Vaughan? I could see he was very taken with you and his father owns most of the High Street.’

‘Mother! We have only been home a month and already you’re wanting to marry me off. Will you just stop throwing young men at me?’

‘Only when you decide to catch one. You want to marry, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do, but you didn’t marry Pa to be provided for,’ she said, and her mother’s eyes flew open. ‘You married Pa because you loved him.’

‘That is entirely a diff—’ she caught Josie’s amused expression. ‘I just want the best for you, sweetheart,’ she said. ‘I don’t want you to have to wash other people’s dirty clothes to put food on the table or—’

‘Sing in a public house to keep my daughter from the work-house,’ Josie said.

The iron-rimmed wheels of a coach sounded below. Josie and Ellen dashed to the window. A carriage had slowed and the driver halted the horse. He stowed his whip, then hopped down from the top box. The door opened and Josie’s stepfather jumped down. He straightened his coat and held out his hand. The coach lurched and a woman stepped out. She was dressed completely in black and her hat had a modest brim by fashionable standards, with only a Petersham band around the crown by way of adornment. The half-veil of the hat hid all but the tightly drawn lips of the woman. She straightened up stiffly and stared up at the house.

Taking her son’s arm with one hand and leaning on her cane with the other, Mrs Munroe mounted the seven whitened steps to the front door.

Ellen rushed from Josie’s room. ‘Judy! Daisy! Quick, quick! Mrs Munroe has arrived and we should already be downstairs. Bring the children down at once.’

As Josie joined her mother, Bobby, and ten-year-old Lottie, were already making their way down to the parlour below. Both wore their new clothes, and their tight ringlets bobbed either side of their faces.

Following them was Nurse in her navy uniform and starched white apron, carrying baby Jack while guiding six-year-old Joe down the stairs. Nine-year-old George followed in his new sailor suit, complete with a hat.

Josie just stood, caught in the moment, hardly able to breathe. Patrick! The *Jupiter* was the first ship he had sailed on.

Her head spun for a second at memories of her first love,

Patrick Nolan, danced in her mind. The ache of a loss that had dulled but never disappeared rose up in her.

Josie continued to stand unseeing, as her mind took her back twelve years to when she and her mother had lived in the tiny cottage by the river. She was thirteen then and her head had barely reached Patrick's chin. He had been her 'fella' and she had been his 'gal'. He had signed articles on the *Jupiter* just before she and her mother had sailed for America and he had visited them each time his ship brought him to New York.

It was seven years since she had waved goodbye to him from the quayside in New York. She remembered thinking that, with a strong wind behind him and a swift turn around in London, he would be back to her within the year. As he kissed her goodbye he'd told her that when he came back he would ask Dr Munroe's permission to court her.

He had never returned.