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The Secret River

Kate Grenville

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Extract

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Strangers

The *Alexander*, with its cargo of convicts, had bucked over the face of the ocean for the better part of a year. Now it had fetched up at the end of the earth. There was no lock on the door of the hut where William Thornhill, transported for the term of his natural life in the Year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and six, was passing his first night in His Majesty's penal colony of New South Wales. There was hardly a door, barely a wall: only a flap of bark, a screen of sticks and mud. There was no need of lock, of door, of wall: this was a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water.

Thornhill's wife was sleeping sweet and peaceful against him, her hand still entwined in his. The child and the baby were asleep too, curled up together. Only Thornhill could not bring himself to close his eyes on this foreign darkness. Through the doorway of the hut he could feel the night, huge and damp, flowing in and bringing with it the sounds of its own life: tickings and creakings, small private rustlings, and beyond that the soughing of the forest, mile after mile.

When he got up and stepped out through the doorway there was no cry, no guard: only the living night. The air moved around him, full of rich dank smells. Trees stood tall over him. A breeze

shivered through the leaves, then died, and left only the vast fact of the forest.

He was nothing more than a flea on the side of some enormous quiet creature.

Down the hill the settlement was hidden by the darkness. A dog barked in a tired way and stopped. From the bay where the *Alexander* was anchored there was a sense of restless water shifting in its bed of land and swelling up against the shore.

Above him in the sky was a thin moon and a scatter of stars as meaningless as spilt rice. There was no Pole Star, a friend to guide him on the Thames, no Bear that he had known all his life: only this blaze, unreadable, indifferent.

All the many months in the *Alexander*, lying in the hammock which was all the territory he could claim in the world, listening to the sea slap against the side of the ship and trying to hear the voices of his own wife, his own children, in the noise from the women's quarters, he had been comforted by telling over the bends of his own Thames. The Isle of Dogs, the deep eddying pool of Rotherhithe, the sudden twist of the sky as the river swung around the corner to Lambeth: they were all as intimate to him as breathing. Daniel Ellison grunted in his hammock beside him, fighting even in his sleep, the women were silent beyond their bulkhead, and still in the eye of his mind he rounded bend after bend of that river.

Now, standing in the great sighing lung of this other place and feeling the dirt chill under his feet, he knew that life was gone. He might as well have swung at the end of the rope they had measured for him. This was a place, like death, from which men did not return. It was a sharp stab like a splinter under a nail: the pain of loss. He would die here under these alien stars, his bones rot in this cold earth.

He had not cried, not for thirty years, not since he was a hungry child too young to know that crying did not fill your belly.

But now his throat was thickening, a press of despair behind his eyes forcing warm tears down his cheeks.

There were things worse than dying: life had taught him that. Being here in New South Wales might be one of them.

It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real, something only imagined. His eyes were set so deeply into the skull that they were invisible, each in its cave of bone. The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks. Without surprise, as though he were dreaming, Thornhill saw the scars drawn on the man's chest, each a neat line raised and twisted, living against the skin.

He took a step towards Thornhill so that the parched starlight from the sky fell on his shoulders. He wore his nakedness like a cloak. Upright in his hand, the spear was part of him, an extension of his arm.

Clothed as he was, Thornhill felt skinless as a maggot. The spear was tall and serious. To have evaded death at the end of the rope, only to go like this, his skin punctured and blood spilled beneath these chilly stars! And behind him, hardly hidden by that flap of bark, were those soft parcels of flesh: his wife and children.

Anger, that old familiar friend, came to his side. *Damn your eyes be off*, he shouted. *Go to the devil!* After so long as a felon, hunched under the threat of the lash, he felt himself expanding back into his full size. His voice was rough, full of power, his anger a solid warmth inside him.

He took a threatening step forward. Could make out chips of sharp stone in the end of the spear. It would not go through a man neat as a needle. It would rip its way in. Pulling it out would rip all over again. The thought fanned his rage. *Be off!* Empty though it was, he raised his hand against the man.

The mouth of the black man began to move itself around sounds. As he spoke he gestured with the spear so it came and went in the darkness. They were close enough to touch.

In the fluid rush of speech Thornhill suddenly heard words. *Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly.

This was a kind of madness, as if a dog were to bark in English.

Be off, be off! He was close enough now that he could see the man's eyes catching the light under their heavy brows, and the straight angry line of his mouth. His own words had all dried up, but he stood his ground.

He had died once, in a manner of speaking. He could die again. He had been stripped of everything already: he had only the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place. He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans in the hut behind him. He was not about to surrender them to any naked black man.

In the silence between them the breeze rattled through the leaves. He glanced back at where his wife and infants lay, and when he looked again the man was gone. The darkness in front of him whispered and shifted, but there was only the forest. It could hide a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths.

He went quickly into the hut, stumbling against the doorway so that clods of daubed mud fell away from the wall. The hut offered no safety, just the idea of it, but he dragged the flap of bark into place. He stretched himself out on the dirt alongside his family, forcing himself to lie still. But every muscle was tensed, anticipating the shock in his neck or his belly, his hand going to the place, the cold moment of finding that unforgiving thing in his flesh.

PART ONE

London

In the rooms where William Thornhill grew up, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, no one could move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother. Light struggled in through small panes of cracked glass and the soot from the smoking fireplace veiled the walls.

Where they lived, down close to the river, the alleyways were no more than a stride across, and dimmed even on the brightest day by the buildings packed in hugger-mugger. On every side it was nothing but brick walls and chimneys, cobblestones and mouldering planks where old whitewash marked the grain. There were the terraces of low-browed houses hunched down on themselves, growing out of the very dirt they sat on, and after them the tanneries, the shambles, the glue factories, the maltings, filling the air with their miasmas.

Down beyond the tanneries, turnips and beets struggled in damp sour fields, and between the fields, enclosed behind their hedges and walls, were the boggy places too wet to plant in, with rushes and reeds where stagnant water glinted.

The Thornhills all stole turnips from time to time, running the risk of the dogs getting them, or the farmer hurling stones. Big brother Matty bore a scar on his forehead where a stone

had made a turnip less tasty.

The highest things were the steeples. There was nowhere to go in all these mean and twisted streets, even out in the marshy low ground, where some steeple or other did not watch. As soon as one of them was hidden by the elbow of a lane there was another staring down from behind the chimneys.

And under the steeple, the House of God. William Thornhill's life had begun, as far as his own memory of it was concerned, with the grandest house that God had: Christ Church beside the river. The building was so big it made his eyes water. On the gateposts there were snarling stone lions that his mother lifted him up to look at, but they made him cry out in fear. The vertiginous lawn seemed to engulf him as he stood in its emptiness. The bushes stood guard in a line, and tiny insects of humans laboured up the vast steps of the entrance far away. He was dizzy, lost, hot with panic.

Inside the church he had never seen such a vault of ceiling and such light. God had so much space it could frighten a boy from Tanner's Lane. Up at the front were complicated carvings: screens, benches, a great construction that towered over the people sitting in the pews. It was a void into which his being expanded without finding a boundary, all in the merciless light that blasted down from the huge windows and left everything cold, with no kindly shadows anywhere. It was a place with no charity in its grey stones for a boy with the seat out of his britches.

He could not understand any of it, knew only that God was as foreign as a fish.

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From the time he knew his own name, *William Thornhill*, it seemed that the world was crowded with other William Thornhills. For a start, there was always the ghost of the first William Thornhill, the brother who had died when only a week old. A year and a half

later, in 1777, a year with a bit of a ring to it, he himself had come into the world, and they gave him the same name. The first William Thornhill was a handful of dust in the ground, and he was warm flesh and blood, and yet the dead William Thornhill seemed the first, the true, and himself no more than a shadow.

Over the river in Labour-in-Vain Court, there were some distant cousins, and more William Thornhills. There was Old Mr Thornhill, a shrivelled little head nodding on top of some dark clothes. Then there was his son, Young William, a man altogether hidden behind black beard. At St Mary Mounthaw there was a William Thornhill who was a big boy of twelve and pinched the latest William Thornhill whenever he got the chance.

Then when the wife of Uncle Matthew the sea captain had a new baby, it was William Thornhill too. They visited with the baby and said its name, and everyone turned to him, smiling, expecting him to smile too, and he tried. But his sharp sister Mary, the oldest, saw his face fall. Later she punched him on the arm. *Your name is common as dirt, William Thornhill*, she said, and the anger rose up in him. He punched her straight back and shouted, *William Thornhills will fill up the whole world*, and she had no come-back to that, smart and all as she was.

~

His sister Lizzie, too young to hem sheets but old enough to carry a baby on her hip, had the care of the little ones. As a six-year-old she carried baby William to keep him from the mud, so that the smell of Lizzie, the coarse texture of her unruly hair coming out from under the cap, was more motherly to him than his mother.

He was always hungry. That was a fact of life: the gnawing feeling in his belly, the flat taste in his mouth, the rage that there was never enough. When the food came it was a matter of cramming it into his mouth so his hands could reach for more. If he was quick enough, he could grab the bread his little brother James was lifting

to his mouth, break a piece off and get it down his gullet. Once it was swallowed no one could get it back. But Matty was doing the same, ripping the bread out of William's hand, his eyes gone small and hard like an animal's.

And always cold. There was a kind of desperation to it, a fury to be warm. In the winter his feet were stones on the end of his legs. At night he and the others lay shivering on the mouldy straw, scratching at the fleas and the bedbugs, full of their blood, that nipped them through their rags.

He had eaten the bedbugs more than once.

There was one blanket for the two youngest Thornhills, and each other's smelly bodies the best warmth. James was older by two years and got the best of the blanket, but William, though smaller, was canny. He forced himself not to sleep, waiting for James's snores, so he could pull most of it over himself.

You were forever hungry, his mother told him when he asked about himself, but had to stop for her cough, an explosion that ripped through her body. It sometimes seemed as though her cough was the only strong thing left in her. *Greedy little bugger you was*, she whispered at last, and he went away ashamed, hearing his empty belly rumbling even then, and something in him going stony from the dislike in her voice.

Lizzie's story was the same, but different. *Greedy*, she cried, *my word you was, Will, and look at you now, great lumps of boys don't come out of thin air.*

Her voice did not say that being such a great lump of boy was a bad thing to be, and when she said, *Hollow legs, we called you*, she said it with a smile.

Lizzie was a good sister for a baby to have, good with a sugar rag, strong at carrying. But when William was not yet three, the mother grew big and fretful, and another baby replaced him as the youngest, the one that Lizzie carried around on her hip. William, already haunted by the dead William Thornhill he had

replaced, was now haunted by this other brother, John. It seemed he would forever be squeezed tight before and after.

Below him was John, and on top of him were Lizzie and James, the biggest brother Matty, and Mary, oldest of them all, scary with her shouting voice always scolding. She sat with the mother, crowding in around the little window sewing the shrouds for Gilling's. Then there was Robert, older than William but younger too. Poor Robert never had more than half his wits, and less than that of his hearing, after he had the fever when he was five and nearly died. William had heard his mother scream one day, *Better if you had died and been done with it!* It made him go cold inside, for poor Rob was a kindly boy, and when his face lit up at some little gift, he could not wish him dead.

Pa worked at the cotton mill, the maltings, the tanneries, nowhere for very long. His cheeks were hollow with points of red on them as if he were angry, and he crept about half asleep, always weary. When he spoke or laughed, the words or the mirth became a long wet rattling cough. *Victualler* was how he had described himself at John's baptism, but victualler meant nothing grander than a few gloomy men from Mr Choubert's tannery, gathered together in one of the Thornhills' two rooms, drinking ale out of dirty wooden tankards and eating pies the mother had made: too much pastry, not enough filling. When the tan-pits froze over in the winter there were no customers and the room was bleak, smelling of old ale in the floorboards and the cold chalkiness of ash in the fireplace.

Then it was lean times for the Thornhills. At five, William was old enough to go with Pa round the streets at dawn with a stick and a sack, gathering the pure for the morocco works. Pa carried the sack, young William was the one with the stick. Pa walked ahead, spotting the dark curl of a dog turd from his greater height. If none could be found, then there was nothing but brown water from the river as a belly-filler. But when Pa saw one, it was

the boy's job to push it into the sack with the stick, trying not to breathe in the stink. The worst was when the dogs chose the cobbles at Tyer's Gate with the wide gaps between, so the stuff dropped into the gaps and he had to gouge at it with the stick, or even with his fingernails while Pa stood coughing and pointing.

A full sack of pure was worth ninepence at the morocco yard. He had never asked what they used it for, only felt he would rather die than go on scraping the stuff off the cobbles of Southwark.

Except that the ache in his belly was even worse than the stink of the shit.

Ma was willing to risk less smelly ways to buy a loaf of bread. They watched her one day from behind a cart, William and Lizzie and James. Thornhill thought she looked obvious, lurking and slinking and tight-faced. Hold your head up, Ma, he wanted to call. And smile!

They saw her approach the trestle of books. The bookseller was inside her shop and it was hard to see if she was watching. William wanted to run across the road and lift the book himself, she was taking so long and looking so black about it, fingering the books and flipping their pages when she knew no more of her letters than the man in the moon. Then at last she slipped one into a fold of her apron, but looked at it as she did it, and used both hands so she nearly dropped the baby: it was clumsily done.

Suddenly the shop woman was there beside her, shouting, *Now give me that, if you please, Missus,* and they heard Ma cry out, too shrill, *What! I have nothing of yours!* but clutching at the book in the folds of her apron so it gave her away. The shop woman, a stringy old boiler, jerked her arm so Ma fell down on her knees and the book fell and the baby too, rolling onto the cobbles and setting up an almighty roar.

The shop woman pounced on the book, and, while she was stooping for it, Ma from her knees gave her a clout across the back of the head. Old and all as she was, the woman was up in a trice

and hit Ma on the shoulders with the book—they could hear the thwack of it from across the street—all the time hanging onto her and yelling, *Thief! Thief!* Ma was up now, the baby under her arm, and she began to kick out the legs of the trestle and claw all the books till they lay in the mud.

This was the signal for the children behind the cart to rush over and grab at the scattered books. William got one in each hand, right under the woman's feet, so she let go of Ma to grab them back, and when he stepped away, Ma ran and now the woman was spinning from one to the other in a dither. Two gentlemen stepped out of the Anchor to come to her assistance, but by then the Thornhills were gone like a lot of rats up the alley.

They got a book each. William's was the best, red leather with gold lettering, good for a shilling at Lyle's, no questions asked.

~

He grew up a fighter. By the time he was ten years old the other boys knew to leave him alone. The rage warmed him and filled him up. It was a kind of friend.

There were other friends, of course, a band of boys who roamed the streets and wharves together, snatching cockles off the fishmonger's stall at Borough Market, scrabbling in the mud at low tide for pennies tossed by laughing gentlemen.

There was his brother James, a whippy boy who could climb a drainpipe quicker than a roach, and poor simple Rob smiling at everything he saw. There was bony little William Warner, the runt of a litter on Halfpenny Lane, and Dan Oldfield whose father had drowned, being the passenger in a wherry trying to shoot London Bridge at low water, the boatman half-stupefied with liquor at the time. Dan was famous for his ability to steal roast chestnuts from the pedlar in Frying Pan Alley, enough to be able to share them, hot out of his pocket, with the other urchins. One frozen morning at Dan's suggestion he and William had pissed on their own feet:

the moment's bliss was almost worth the grip of cold that came after. Then there was Collarbone from Ash Court with the red mark across half his face. Collarbone liked Lizzie. *She has skin like a nun*, he told Thornhill, wonderingly, and then, perhaps thinking of his own livid skin, blushed red to the roots of his hair.

They were all thieves, any time they got the chance. The dainty parson could shrill all he liked about sin, but there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly.

Rob came to the other boys in their little rat-hole by Dirty Lane one day with a single boot that he had taken from where it hung outside a shop. He would have got the other too, he said, but the bootmaker saw him in a looking-glass. The man ran after him, and caught him, Rob said, but he was old, and the boy was able to get away. William hefted the boot in his hand and said, *But what is it worth to you, Rob, just the one?* And Rob thought long, his face creased with the effort, then through his loose rubbery lips, on a spray of spittle, cried out, *I will sell it to a man with one leg! It is worth ten shillings at least!* and it was as if he already had the money in his hand, his face fat with satisfaction at his scheme.

~

When Lizzie played mother to John, and then to baby Luke after that, Lizzie's friend Sal from Swan Lane became sister to William. Sal was the only fruit of her mother's womb. Had been a bonny baby, but she had cursed the womb as she left it, for every baby after her sickened and died within the month.

Her family was a notch up from the Thornhills, for Mr Middleton was a waterman, as his father had been, and his father's father before that. They had lived in the same street in the Borough for as long as anyone could remember, in a narrow house with a room upstairs, a fire of coals in the winter, glass in the windows, and always a loaf of bread in the cupboard.

But it was a sad house, filled with the tiny souls of those

departed babies. With every promising son who had sickened and died, Mr Middleton became a sterner and more silent man. His trade was his consolation. He was out every morning, the first of the watermen to be waiting at the steps. He rowed all day and came home when darkness fell, never speaking, as if looking inward to his dead sons.

Sal's Ma and Da were gentle with their precious child. The mother would hold the girl against herself, putting a hand along the side of her face, calling her *poppet* and *sweet thing*. Within the means of the household, Sal was indulged with every delicacy she could desire: oranges and sweetbreads and soft white bread, and for her birthday a blue shawl of wool as fine as a cobweb. It was another way altogether of being a Ma and a Da, and William—whose birthday was not even remarked—looked on wondering.

Sal flowered under such care. She was no beauty, but had a smile that lit up everything around her. The only shadow in her life was the graveyard where her brothers and sisters were buried. They haunted her, and made her puzzle, the way they had no life while she, deserving it no more than they, had all the love that should have been shared out. That shadow made her soft in a way new to William. He knew no one else like her, who could not bear to watch the head cut off a hen, or a horse beaten in the street. She had run at a man whipping a little dog one day, shrilling at him, *Leave off! Leave off!* and the man had shrugged her away and might have turned the whip on her, except that William pulled her, gripping her arms tight until the man and the cringing dog had disappeared around the corner, when she turned her face into his chest and cried angry gusts of tears.

It was easy to wish to belong in this house, number 31, Swan Lane. Even the name of the street was sweet. He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. It was not just the generous slab of bread, spread with good tasty dripping: it was the feeling of having a place. Swan Lane and the

rooms within it were part of Sal's very being, he could see, in a way no place had ever been part of his.

If he was haunted by the presence of so many brothers and sisters, Sal was haunted by so many absences, and the two of them found a comfortable common ground. They slipped off together, away from the mean smelly streets, striking out between the fields of turnips and cabbages, jumping over the ditches in which water lay all year, down to the patch of waste ground at Rotherhithe that they thought of as their own. There was a spot where bushes curved around in which they made a little hovel to shelter from the wind. Down there the big pale sky, the sheet of dun water, the sounds of waterbirds cawing, was a different place altogether from Tanner's Lane, and William felt himself become a different kind of boy. He loved that place, its emptiness and its clean windy feel. No houses, no alleyways, nobody watching, except now and then the gypsies passing through, but they were soon gone and the place was theirs again.

When it started to rain, softly, evenly, persistently, he and Sal would still linger, a bag over their heads, watching the grey river dimple under the rain, not looking at each other, but staring out side by side, the rain a reason not to disturb the arrangement, a reason to go on sitting wedged up close together, watching the white puffs of their breath mingling.

Something about her face made him want to keep watching it. There was no remarkable feature to it, except perhaps the mouth, a top lip that was full all the way along, not thinning thriftily towards the corners the way most people's did, so there was an impression of generous eagerness, as if at any moment she was about to smile and speak. He loved to watch that mouth, waiting for her to turn to him with a thought in her eyes that she would share with him, so they could laugh together.

With Sal there was no need to be a fighter or guard himself every moment. A boy could be a boy, and do foolish things, such

as showing her how far he could spit. They watched the glittering gob fly through the air and land on the grass. When she tried, William watched her mouth as she pursed it up, gathering the spit, and shot it out. She could not spit as far as he could, but he let her think she could, so the pleasure of the moment would continue.

He loved the way she called him Will. His name had been used by so many others that it was stale with handling, but Will was his own alone.

At night, being kicked in the back by James, hearing Pa and Ma coughing in their sleep, Rob snoring and snorting beside him, the rats running through the rotting thatch, feeling the gooseflesh on his legs and his belly growling from having nothing but watery gruel in it all day, he thought of Sal. Those brown eyes, the way they looked at him.

Thinking of her, he was warmed from the inside.

~

During his mother's last illness, the year William turned thirteen, the lions on the gateposts at Christ Church haunted her. She relived, over and over again, a memory from her childhood of climbing up onto the fence and reaching out to pat them. He could see how her body felt it, again and again, being snatched away as her father whipped her off the railings, and the pain of the cuff around the ear he gave her. *I were just reaching out,* she said, and smiled with her death-pale lips, remembering. *I were as near as near. Then—whoops!—down I go.* Her skinny arm, roped with sinews, the skin papery, stretched out towards the dirty whitewashed wall, her gnarled hand opening, and her face lit by the sweet yearning smile of that long-ago girl.

She died soon after. There was no money for the parson to say a prayer over her—she went into the common hole. By way of remembrance, the next day William took a clot of muck under his coat wrapped in a bit of rag, and went down to the church. The

lions stood there still, that haughty look on their faces just the same as when his mother had smiled and reached out for them. He got the muck out from under his coat and hurled it at the nearest one, a thick black gobbet smack in the middle of that smug snout. Wipe the smirk off your face, that did, he thought, and was heartened by the memory on the long walk home. He never saw the lion again without a glow of satisfaction, because all the rain in the world had never got out the mud from one of its nostrils.

~

Soon after that, Pa died too, coughing his way into another hole in the damp ground of Bermondsey. That left the family without a head. Big brother Matty had gone for a sailor-man on the *Osprey*, had been away now for four years. They got word he was in Rio de Janeiro, then a year later that he had been shipwrecked off the Guinea coast and was on the *Salamander*, bound for Newfoundland, and hoped to work his way back to them, but nothing had been heard from him for two years.

James had gone over the river one day when he was fourteen and not come back. Sometimes they heard things: how he had got away with a silver candlestick out of an open window, or climbed down a chimney to relieve a gentleman of his watch while he slept. It was on the shoulders of William that the survival of the others seemed to depend.

For a while he took his father's place at Mr Pott's Manufactory, but the cotton dust, the din and the pounding of the machines was unbearable, and, on the day he saw a little shrimp of a child stamped to bits by the engine when he was sent crawling underneath to clear a jam, he left and did not return. He worked then at White's tan-yard, humping the reeking skins on his back in a stench of blood gone bad, from the carts over to the vats where the stained men sourly eyed him. It was his greatest fear to

have to become one of them, plunging up to his waist in the pits, hardly human.

When there was no more work there, he worked with a shovel at the maltings, scooping up the waste malt that the goodness had been soaked out of, so that what was left was a vile-smelling mass of fibrous stuff the colour of a baby's shit.

For a while he was at Nettlefold & Mosers, his job being to sweep up the swarfings from underneath the lathes, shovel them into sacks, and lump them up into the wagons. He was all day up and down the ramp with a hundredweight of swarfings on his back, hanging onto the ears of the bag over his shoulder with all his strength, keeping himself focused so as not to fall. He felt that his back would break, but at least swarfings did not stink. In bed at night afterwards the muscles of his legs would twitch, still labouring.

The best work, when he could get it, was being a lumper down on the wharves. Down there the wind came in fresh off the river, and the ships tied up three and four deep at the wharves told him there was a world beyond Bermondsey. There was a man down there on Sloane's Dock, a beggar who had once been a sailor-man, with a green parrot that travelled on his shoulder so there was a long streak of white down his back. The thing stepped from claw to claw, nibbled at his ear, screamed when anyone came too close. It was a bird out of a dream. Yet here it was, its colours gaudy on the man's shoulder.

He loved the docks for their excess. So many casks of brandy, sacks of coffee, boxes of tea, hogsheads of sugar, bales of hemp.

With such a quantity, how could a little be missed?

William came across a group of men one day in a corner of the warehouse, up on the third floor, irons in their hands. It was the work of a moment to lever the lid off the nearest hogshead. The wood came up with a splintering noise that seemed to fill the whole place, except one of the men had a coughing fit to cover

the noise, and there inside was the dull brown sparkle of the sugar. The sheer mass of it made it seem another substance from the way he had only ever known sugar before, as a precious twist in a bit of paper. Looking at it, the spit rushed into his mouth.

Well, one of the men said, *what a shame, the cask is broke*, and another spoke up with the straight face of a parson: *Waste is an abomination, saith the Lord.* William thrust his hand in with the rest of them, laughing to feel sugar in fistfuls, and crammed his mouth full of it, the sweetness starting up a savage craving so he could not stop. The others meanwhile filled up little bags they had dangling inside their coats, and were gone while William was still licking the sugar off his palms.

Overhead he could hear the rumble of the barrows over the floor, the squeal of the pulley as loads were drawn up the side of the building and manhandled in, and closer at hand there were footsteps. He glanced around, but the pile of casks and packages hemmed him in.

He had no little bags hanging inside his coat, only his greasy old felt hat, so he whipped it off and began to fill it, shovelling the sugar with both hands, and when the hat was full he tried to get some into his pockets, but the stuff stuck to everything it touched, would not pour, only clung and clogged.

And now there were footsteps just on the other side of the bales of hemp, coming closer. He put the hat under his arm and started to make for the back corner where he could hide it somewhere until the end of the day, but even as he turned, even as he tucked the hat under his arm, he was right up against the striped chest of Mr Crocker the gangsman. *This is a pretty trick, Thornhill*, he shouted. *A feed for the nits, eh?* and struck the hat away from under his arm so the sugar scattered across the floor. *Make a monkey of me, would you, Thornhill?*

But William Thornhill had his story ready. *It was broke open, sir, when I come across it*, he said. *As Jesus is my saviour.* The words felt no

lie. He could see it all in his mind's eye: himself, coming around the corner of the hemp parcels, seeing the hogshead there, the splintered top, the sugar lying scattered. *There was a deal of the sugar between the hogsheads and the wall, sir,* he said. *There were a man there bid me take it, it seemed no wrong, sir, as God is my witness.* He could hear his voice rich with conviction.

But Crocker did not listen to the story, did not even bother to hear him out. Crocker's was a plain world in which a boy found with a hat full of sugar, in the vicinity of a hogshead of sugar broken open, was a thief.

All hands stopped work to watch as Thornhill was whipped a hundred yards along Red Lion Quay.

Crocker pulled Thornhill's shirt off and dragged his britches down to his knees, and shoved him in the back to start him off. The flail landed smack on the skin of his back so he could think of nothing but getting away from it, but the britches hobbled him and Crocker was there beside him for every step that he stumbled along.

The lesson, he learned, was do not get caught. Collarbone showed him how to tap a cask of brandy with a screw, nice and clean so the loss would not be noticed. He gently tapped one of the hoops towards the tapering end of a cask, and used his gimlet to bore two small holes through the wood where the hoop had been. Then he produced a tin pipe, made in two sections to fit neatly into his pocket, and drew off the brandy into a bladder he had hanging inside his coat. Thornhill breathed deep of the hot heady fumes of brandy. Just the smell was enough to warm a person from the inside. Collarbone offered it to him. *Bit of a waxer, Thornie?* Thornhill took a gulp, then Collarbone seized it back and took such a deep drink Thornhill could hear the fluid going down his throat.

When both of the bladders had been filled and hung back on the loops in the armpits of his coat, Collarbone got out a pair of

splines he had already made, tapping them into the screw holes. Then he hammered the hoop back down over them. *What the eye don't see, Thornie,* he said with a wink. *Eh? Like it says in the Good Book.*

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There was one morning every November when he woke to a quilted silence. The room was lit as from below, the split and sagging timbers of the roof, the shingles black with years, painfully illuminated. Even with his head under the blanket he knew it was there waiting for him: snow. It smoothed over the piles of filth, stopped the stinking tanneries in their tracks, covered the smells under its whiteness. These were good things.

But the winter he turned fourteen, the river froze over, stone-solid for two weeks. Down on the ice there was a frost-fair, with Irish fiddlers and dancing bears, chestnut stalls and every man and woman loose-mouthed with gin. For those without the pennies to pay for the chestnuts and liquor, though, the fair was a time of being pinched hard. With the river froze over, there was no work on the ships, no work at the tan-yards.

In the little room off Mermaid Court, the Thornhills were starving. Mary was stitching away at shrouds as if her life depended on it, her fingers too cold to work properly, but the window that gave her light had no glass, so it let in the wind as well. Lizzie, taken with the quinsy, lay abed groaning and panting, John was out trying to lift potatoes from Tyrrell's stall with young Luke watching out, and there was Rob mooning about smiling, poor loon, when there was nothing to smile about.

It was Mr Middleton, that gloomy, though kindly man, who saved him. One more baby had died, yet another son who would not grow to learn his father's trade and inherit his father's business. Something had shifted in Mr Middleton, some hope finally died. *He is gone very stern, Will,* Sal told Thornhill. *Says there will be no more babies.* After a long silence she went on: *No sons. Only*

me. He heard how she tried to keep her voice light, airy, saying words of no consequence, but he could hear the misery in it.

But then Mr Middleton told Thornhill that he would take him on as apprentice. *No thieving, mind,* he warned him. *Any thieving and you are out on your ear.* For the sisters, Mr Middleton knew a man who needed plain sewing done, which would keep the wolf from the door.

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On the hardest freeze of the year, a day in January when the pearly clouds themselves seemed made of ice and the air was painful to breathe, Mr Middleton took Thornhill up St-Mary-at-Hill to the Watermen's Hall for his binding. A door led into a draughty passage flagged with worn stone, and here boys waited to be bound over. The bench they had to sit on was hard, and too narrow for a bottom, and the cold from the flagstones froze his feet in their wooden pattens, but he felt that on this day his life might lunge forward out of its rotten past. Mr Middleton sat puffing beside him from the steep climb up the hill and Thornhill felt breathless too, with the possibility of a future better than anything he could have hoped.

If he could get through the seven years of the apprenticeship he would be a freeman of the River Thames. Folk always needed to get from one side of the river to the other, and coal and wheat always had to be got to the docks from the ships that brought them. As long as he kept his health he would never outright starve. He swore to himself that he would be the best apprentice, the strongest, quickest, cleverest. That when freed in seven years he would be the most diligent waterman on the whole of the Thames.

With a trade behind him, he could marry Sal and keep her. By and by Mr Middleton would need a strong son-in-law to help him in his business and, in the natural course of things, inherit it.