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'*Votes for women, chastity for men.*'

Christabel Pankhurst

Foreword

Victorian England saw the role of women change as they entered the workplace. The movement for women's suffrage had been in existence since 1870 but was given a new momentum by the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Unlike the other suffrage societies, their policy of direct action caught the headlines with the *Daily Mail* coining the term *suffragette* to distinguish them from their more traditional suffragist counterparts.

By 1910, thwarted by consistent broken promises, their militancy was increasing and this included hunger strikes which led to force-feeding in many of Britain's jails. In 1913, fearing the death of a suffragette in jail, the Government introduced an Act of Parliament which became known as the Cat and Mouse Act. This allowed for a hunger striker who was at death's door to be released from prison on licence and then re-arrested once their health was restored.

No hunger striker died directly from their actions, either inside or out of jail, but the Act was unpopular with the public who considered it unfair. It also proved difficult to implement due to the success of the suffragettes in evading the police who tried to re-arrest them.

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Clara comes as soon as she is able, hurrying along the Seven Sisters Road and arriving at the door of the small terraced house. She lets herself in, her father standing at the sound of the latch then sitting back in his chair when he sees that it's her. She takes off her coat, finds a hook from which to hang it. 'Is she upstairs?' She already has a foot on the first step and he lets her go without a word, though she feels his eyes upon her till she makes the landing.

The bedroom she enters is dim, lit by an oil lamp that stands on top of a small chest of drawers. Clara turns it up and sees her sister twist in the bed, escaping the light like an insect unearthed.

'Don't!' Nancy puts a hand over her face. She pulls the sheet up high across her shoulders.

Clara tuts. 'I need to see you, don't I?'

'There's nothing to see,' says their mother, sitting grim-faced on a chair in the corner of the room.

Nancy pants like a dog. 'Make it stop,' she whines. 'Oh, make it stop!'

Clara goes to the bed and kneels. She puts a hand to Nancy's head because it seems the right thing to do.

'She won't let it come,' says their mother bluntly.

Clara takes hold of her sister's wrist and lifts her arm away from her face.

Nancy shuts her eyes. Her nose and mouth are tight and small, her legs curled up into a ball beneath her. 'It hurts Clara. It hurts me terribly and I can't make it stop.'

Clara looks to her mother. 'How long's it been now?'

'Since lunch time. I came to get you straight off.'

'I couldn't get away.'

'I left a message at the door.'

'I had to finish up before they'd let me go.'

Her mother shifts in her chair so that she won't have to look at either of her daughters. She crosses her legs and sets her chin.

'Did you send for the midwife?' asks Clara.

'He wouldn't let me.'

'Well he's daft.'

'Said I should know my way around by now, what with having had the two of you. He says we'll have to manage it between us.'

Clara stands and walks across to the bowl on the dresser. The water is cool to the touch. She takes a flannel, dips it, then wrings it out and brings it back to the bedside. Nancy's hair is sweaty and stuck to her forehead so Clara pushes

it back behind her ears and holds the cloth to her brow. She turns the bedclothes back so they are down by Nancy's knees and when Nancy makes a grab for them she stops her hand. 'You're too hot, Nancy. You need to be cooler.'

'She's ill,' says their mother. 'She ought to stay in bed.'

'She's not ill.'

'I want to go to sleep,' Nancy complains. 'All I want is to go to sleep.' She screws her eyes tight shut as another contraction comes to meet her like a wave rolling in towards a shore. 'Oh make it stop; someone *pleeease* make it stop!'

Their mother arrives at the bedside. 'Should of thought of that, shouldn't you!'

Clara glares at her till she returns to her seat. 'I'm going for the woman.' She straightens her skirt. 'I shouldn't be long. Don't let her get too hot.'

When she opens the bedroom door, her father steps back. Clara walks past him. At the top of the stairs she says, 'I'm going for the woman.'

'No need,' he barks then follows her down the stairs.

She half expects his hand on her shoulder – if he means it then he won't let her go – but he stays at the foot of the stairs as she crosses the parlour and fetches her coat. She puts her arms into the sleeves and lifts her hair free of the collar.

'Didn't you hear me?' He raises his voice but she knows now he's only doing it to save face, like a dog snarling at a passer-by. 'I said there's no need!'

'There's ways to do it right, same as anything,' she tells him calmly. 'Something might go wrong.'

‘Wouldn’t be terrible, would it?’ He walks over to his chair and sits himself down. ‘Might be the best way. Might be better for all of us.’

Clara slips out into the street and walks quickly, thankful to be away from him. The woman she brings back to the house is terse with common sense and hardly looks at their father, save to nod in his direction as she takes to the stairs. That annoys him and he makes a grab at Clara’s arm as she passes.

‘I won’t pay her,’ he hisses. ‘You know that, don’t you?’ But he lets her go. ‘Like living with a houseful of cats,’ he mutters as she reaches the landing.

Her mother stands with the midwife at the dresser. ‘This water’s cold,’ the midwife tells her.

‘We’ve been keeping her cool,’ says her mother, glancing at the covers that are up around Nancy’s neck again.

The woman walks to the bed. She pulls the covers back so Nancy is exposed, all curled up and whimpering. ‘C’mon, pet.’ The midwife takes a hold of her shoulders and eases her round till she can see her face. She plumps up one of the two pillows. ‘Try to sit up a bit.’ But Nancy wails, all frightened and lost. The woman nods to Clara. ‘Bring me my bag.’ She orders their mother downstairs for hot water.

Clara watches as the midwife lifts Nancy’s nightdress up around her hips. The sudden nakedness shocks her and she turns her back. But she knows she’s of no help to anyone like that. The loss of control makes her feel faint. She gives herself a talking to. This is happening. This is actually happening

and nothing she can do will change it now, so she'd better get used to it, the same as Nancy has to. She takes a deep breath to clear her head then turns back to the bed.

The midwife has her hands on Nancy's belly. She presses gently on the sides as she moves up towards her navel then takes a small wooden trumpet from her bag, puts one end of it over Nancy's belly button and the other to her ear. 'Has he been kicking much?'

'I don't know,' says Nancy, all surly and tired.

'What? You haven't felt him? You must have a belly of stone then cos he's got a good heart.

'Has he?'

'Nothing wrong with him there.'

Nancy clenches at her pillow, bringing it up to her face as another contraction arrives. 'Why won't he come then?'

'Not ready yet.'

Nancy bursts into tears. She howls and screws up her face and shuts her eyes.

The midwife quickly takes her hand and puts it firmly at the top of her belly. 'Feel him kicking? There! Can you feel that?'

Nancy's face opens up, all wide eyed in wonder. 'Is *that* what it is?'

'Didn't you know?'

Clara steps closer. She wants to touch her sister's belly too, to feel what it's like to have something alive and kicking at your insides.

Something happens that makes Nancy break into

laughter. 'Oh, oh the little bugger.' She moves her fingers to the bottom of her belly. 'He's trying though, isn't he?' she asks the midwife. 'He's trying to push himself out.'

The three of them watch in silence, the way you wait for nature, but then quite suddenly the shape of a foot curves across Nancy's belly, like a fish turning in water, and the sisters look for each other, needing to know the other saw it, both of them holding their breath with the wonder and the horror of it.

'Come and help your sister up.' The midwife moves to let Clara in and together they take hold of Nancy under each arm and bring her to her feet.

'Where's she going?'

'She's not going anywhere. Just walk her round. It's good for the both of them. Helps get things going. Gets some air in the lungs.'

Clara's almost too scared to touch but she puts an arm around Nancy's waist and it's not as strange as she might have imagined. The two of them lean into each other. They walk together round the bedroom, holding each other's hands, taking five steps to the window and then back again. They'd shared a bed until a year ago, and Clara knows her sister's body, the shape and line of her beneath a nightdress, though never like this, never bursting and brazen and careless. Nancy's not a girl to have heavy breasts and a large round belly. She's a quiet girl. Never says boo to a goose.

Their mother returns with warm water and startles at the sight of them. 'What are you doing out of bed? You should

be resting.' She looks for the midwife's approval but gets none. 'I'll get a pan,' she says and makes for the door again. 'Your father says you've driven him down the pub.'

The midwife takes their mother's chair. She produces knitting from her bag, keeping herself to herself as the sisters pace the room.

Clara hadn't thought it would be like this. She'd come home to look after her younger sister, to tell her what to do like she always had. Only Nancy is going through something that is new to the both of them, probably the first time she has ever done something before Clara. Still, Clara thought to bring the woman. That was something useful at least. 'Does it feel better when you walk?' she asks Nancy.

'A bit.' After another turn of the room Nancy says, 'We haven't done this for a long while.'

'We've never done this at all!'

'In the park we did,' Nancy reminds her. 'We used to walk together in the park.'

'Not for a long time,' says Clara. 'Not since we started working.'

'No,' says Nancy. 'Not since then.'

Each time the contractions come, the pair of them stop by the window and Nancy holds onto the edge of the dresser, bends herself forward and breathes deeply. Clara keeps a hand in the small of her back. When she can walk again, Nancy pushes her head into Clara's shoulder and the pair of them shuffle round the room till they have lost track of the time and who is there and who is not.

Their father comes back from the pub. They hear him slam the door shut behind him. 'Is it done yet?' he shouts up from the front room. They hear his boots on the first few stairs but then their mother's voice, telling him to come away and leave them be.

'No better than witches.' He cusses and descends again.

The midwife makes Nancy eat a biscuit and take a mouthful of water and then they go back to knitting and walking, knitting and walking. A little while later Nancy's arm stiffens around her sister's neck. 'Oh . . .' she says and pinches at the waistline of her dress. 'Oh . . . oh . . . I think something's happened.'

Both of them step back from each other. Nancy's nightgown is wet at the front and there's a puddle on the floorboards.

'That's good,' the midwife tells them. 'That's just right.'

Nancy tugs at the neck of her nightgown. 'I want this off, Clara. Help me get it off.'

Clara gathers the hem and lifts the cotton gown up over Nancy's head.

Once Nancy stands naked, she reaches for Clara's neck again. 'Oh!' she groans.

Clara holds her tightly by the elbows as Nancy bends her knees and rolls her hips. She's moaning now, finding something deep inside, something that is animal and giving it a voice, so that Clara thinks she seems almost possessed, as though her sister is being used by a force that cares nothing for any of them. Nancy gets heavier to hold, sinking down

toward the floor and Clara has no choice but to follow, till they are both on their knees, looking like cattle calving on a barn floor and lowing in the half light.

The midwife comes and kneels beside them. She doesn't appear to be shocked at all. 'Better to breathe him out, girl. Don't rush it. Let him come in his own time.'

Nancy raises herself, squats upright on her knees and Clara tucks in behind her, letting Nancy lean back into her chest, though it takes all the strength in her back to stay there. She can feel Nancy tense and stretch, can feel the tremor of her bones and muscle. For the love of God, she thinks, why'd you let him do this to you? And then everything changes again. Nancy stops moaning. She is staring at the door handle as though it's the most important thing in the world.

The midwife appears in front of them holding a warm flannel that she presses up between Nancy's legs. 'You can feel the baby's head,' she says and takes hold of Nancy's fingers. 'Go on. You won't hurt him.'

Nancy eases herself off Clara's thigh and lowers a shaking hand to touch for herself. 'He's there, Clara!' She throws her head back, laughing, her face glowing like a rising sun. 'He's really there!'

'Next one'll bring his head out full,' the midwife tells her and it comes immediately, Nancy rising up in Clara's arms and then bearing down again, the force of her pulling both sisters forward to the floor so the midwife has to push them back against the side of the bed with a hand on

Nancy's sternum. 'We've got the head,' she tells them. 'He's a stargazer, this one, got his eyes fixed on higher things. Now save your strength, girl. Don't push till you have to.'

Nancy breathes deeply. She drapes herself from Clara like a puppet. Suddenly she heaves herself forward again with such force that Clara has to let her go then bring her back again, the way you coax a kite into the air. And then something gives. Nancy falls forward again and suddenly Clara sees the baby, the head and shoulder of him, all blue and grey and slipping out into the world, a startled hand grasping at thin air and Clara reaches out, catching him by the shoulders just before he comes again, a second later, being fully born into her hands.

For a brief moment there is nothing in the world but the two of them staring at one another and then the midwife is beside her, holding a piece of cloth that she wraps around the little creature, leaving the pulsing grey cord to hang as she passes the baby back for Nancy to hold.

Clara slumps like a bag of bones on the bedroom floor. She watches Nancy sit back against the bed, looking at her baby in disbelief. 'What'll I do with it?' she asks the midwife.

'Go on and see if it'll feed.'

Nancy eases the baby to her nipple with a hand behind its head. 'I can do it,' she says, all disbelieving and proud. 'Clara, look. He wants me. See?'

'It's not a he,' laughs the midwife. 'Have a look for yourself. It's a baby girl.'

‘Oh,’ says Nancy, as though that changes everything. She looks at the baby closely. ‘Isn’t she lovely though?’

Clara goes to wash her hands in the bowl. The midwife comes and does the same.

‘Should she be holding it?’ Clara whispers, but the midwife ignores her and she feels ashamed for having asked. Her father’s footsteps pass the door as he goes to his own room. ‘I better wash this floor,’ she tells the midwife.

Her mother is sitting alone in the kitchen. ‘Is she done?’

‘A baby girl.’

‘Well, that’s that then.’ She opens a cupboard door and closes it without bringing anything out. ‘You’ll be going back, I suppose.’

‘I’ve got a shift first thing.’

Clara fills a pan full of water and puts it on the heat. When it’s halfway to boiling she pours it into the bucket and finds the scrubbing brush. She meets the midwife coming down the stairs and pays her from her own purse before she lets her leave. She takes the bucket up to the room. She turns the wick a little higher on the lamp. Nancy is almost asleep, propped upright in bed with the baby on her chest.

Clara gets down on her knees and begins to scrub at the floor, beginning in the middle of the room where Nancy’s waters broke and moving back toward the bed. God she is tired. She hasn’t stopped to rest since breakfast and her back aches terribly. She gets a glimpse of Nancy closing her eyes. ‘Nancy? Nancy! Don’t go to sleep now.’ And then more softly, ‘I’ve got to take her. Remember?’

Nancy startles awake. ‘Not now, Clara. Please. Not till the morning.’

‘It won’t get any easier, will it? Better to do it straight off.’ She stands, putting the brush into the bucket. The only way to do this is to be practical. To keep busy. She thinks of her mother as she folds away the unused linen and stands over the bed.

Nancy looks like a little girl holding onto a doll. ‘Just a bit longer?’ she asks. ‘Only a moment more.’

Clara frowns, but she goes back downstairs with the bucket and brush. She pours the water down a drain in the yard then goes to the pantry for the wicker basket that her mother takes with her for the shopping. She lines the bottom with a blanket that is warm and soft enough to weaken her resolve. Perhaps it is better to wait till morning? It might not do to go knocking on doors in the middle of the night, waking half the neighbourhood. That’s the sort of thing to start people gossiping. She tells herself to stop it. It’s better done as soon as possible and anyway, the woman has been forewarned. She knows what to expect.

She returns to the bedroom, steps inside the door and puts the basket on the floor by the side of the bed. Nancy begins to cry.

‘Come on, now,’ Clara says gently. She leans across and puts her little finger to the side of the baby’s mouth. ‘See? That’s how you do it without waking her up.’

The baby stirs then calms herself back to sleep as Clara lifts her up. For a moment she lies naked and warm on the

palm of Clara's hand but she daren't hold onto her. She lays the baby in the basket and covers her up and Nancy rolls away till her back's turned and Clara thinks, that's it then. Better done without the fuss. She closes the bedroom door quietly.

The house she goes to is close enough and the woman answers her door without Clara having to knock a second time.

She takes the basket with only a quick glance inside. 'Does it have a name?'

Clara hadn't thought about that. 'No,' she says. 'Does she need one?'

The woman shrugs before she shuts her door.