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The Virgin Cure

Written by Ami McKay

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The Virgin Cure



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PROLOGUE



I am Moth, a girl from the lowest part of Chrystie Street, born to a slum-house mystic and the man who broke her heart.

My father ran off when I was three years old. He emptied the rent money out of the biscuit tin and took my mother's only piece of silver–a tarnished sugar bowl she'd found in the rubble of a Third Avenue fire.

"Don't go . . ." Mama would call out in her sleep, begging and pulling at the blanket we shared as if it were the sleeve of my father's coat. Lying next to her, I'd wish for morning and the hours when she'd go back to hating him. At least then her bitterness would be awake enough to keep her alive.

She never held my hand in hers or let me kiss her cheeks. If I asked to sit on her lap, she'd pout and push me away and say, "When you were a baby, I held you until I thought my arms would fall off. Oh, Child, that should be enough."

I didn't mind. I loved her.

I loved the way she'd tie her silk scarf around her head and then bring the ends of it to trail down her neck. I loved

how she'd grin, baring her teeth all the way up to the top of her gums when she looked at herself in the mirror, how she'd toss her shawl around her shoulders and run her fingers through the black fringe of it before setting her fortune-teller's sign in the window for the day. The sign had a pretty, long-fingered hand painted right in the middle, with lines and arrows and words criss-crossing the palm. *The Ring of Solomon, The Girdle of Venus. Head, heart, fate, fortune, life.* Those were the first words I ever read.

It was my father who gave me my name. Mama said it came to him at a place called Pear Tree Corner–"whispered by a tree so old it knew all the secrets of New York." The apothecary who owned the storefront there told my father that he could ask the tree any question he liked and if he listened hard enough it would answer. My father believed him.

"Call the child *Moth,*" the twisted tree had said, its branches bending low, leaves brushing against my father's ear. Mama had been there too, round-faced and waddling with me inside her belly, but she didn't hear it.

"It was the strangest, most curious thing," my father told her. "Like when a pretty girl first tells you she loves you. I swear to God."

Mama said she'd rather call me Ada, after Miss Ada St. Clair, the wealthiest lady she'd ever met, but my father wouldn't allow it. He didn't care that Miss St. Clair had a diamond ring for every finger and two pug dogs grunting and panting at her feet. He was sure that going against what the tree had said would bring bad luck.

After he left us, Mama tried calling me Ada anyway, but it was too late. I only ever answered to Moth.

"Where's my papa?" I would ask. "Why isn't he here?"

"Wouldn't I like to know. Maybe you should go and talk to the tree."

"What if I get lost?"

"Well, if you do, be sure not to cry about it. There's wild hogs that run through the city at night, and they'd like nothing better than to eat a scared little girl like you."

My father had thought to put coal in the stove before he walked out the door. Mama held onto that last bit of his kindness until it drove her mad. "Who does such a thing if they don't mean to come back?" she'd mutter to herself each time she lifted the grate to clean out the ashes.

She knew exactly what had happened to him, but it was so common and cruel she didn't want to believe it.

Miss Katie Adams, over on Mott Street, had caught my father's eye. She was sixteen, childless and mean, with nothing to hold her back. Mrs. Riordan, who lived in the rear tenement, told Mama she'd seen them carrying on together in the alley on more than one occasion.

"You're a liar!" Mama screamed at her, but Mrs. Riordan just shook her head and said, "I've nothing to gain from lies."

Standing in front of the girl's house, Mama yelled up at the windows, "Katie Adams, you whore, give me my husband back!"

When Miss Adams' neighbours complained about all the noise Mama was making, my father came down to quiet her. He kissed her until she cried, but didn't come home.

"He's gone for good," Mrs. Riordan told Mama. "Your man was a first-time man, and that's just the kind of man who breaks a woman's heart."

She meant he was only after the firsts of a girl–the first time she smiles at him, their first kiss, the first time he takes her to bed. There was nothing Mama could have done to keep him around. Her first times with him were gone.

"God damn Katie Adams . . ." Mama would whisper under her breath whenever something went wrong.

Hearing that girl's name scared me more than when Mama said *piss* or *shit* or *fuck* right to my face.

The day my father left was the day the newsboys called out in the streets, "Victory at Shiloh!" They shouted it from every corner as I stood on the stoop watching my father walk away. When he got to the curb, he tipped his hat to me and smiled. There was sugar trailing out of a hole in his pocket where he'd hidden Mama's silver bowl. It was spilling to the ground at his feet.

Some people have grand, important memories of the years when the war was on–like the moment a brother, or lover, or husband returned safe and sound, or the sight of President Lincoln's funeral hearse being pulled up Broadway by all those beautiful black horses with plumes on their heads.

"Victory at Shiloh!" and my father's smile is all I've got.

The rooms I shared with Mama were in the middle of a row of four-storey tenements called "the slaughter houses." There were six of them altogether–three sitting side by side on the street with three more close behind on the back

lots. If you lived there, there was every chance you'd die there too. People boiled to death in the summer and froze to death in the winter. They were killed by disease or starvation, by a neighbour's anger, or by their own hand.

Mothers went days without eating so they could afford food for their children. If there was any money left, they put ads in the *Evening Star* hoping to get their lost husbands back.

MY DEAREST JOHN, **please come home.**
We are waiting for you.

Searching for MR. FORREST LAWLOR.
Last seen on the corner of Grand and Bowery.
He is the father to four children,
and a coppersmith by trade.

MR. STEPHEN KNAPP, **wounded in the war.**
I'll welcome you home with open arms.
Your loving wife, Elizabeth.

They stood in the courtyards behind the buildings, pushing stones over the ribs of their washboards and sighing over the men they'd lost. Elbow to elbow they put their wash on the lines that stretched like cat's cradles over that dark, narrow space.

Our back court was especially unlucky, having only three sides instead of four. The main attractions were one leaky pump and the row of five privies that sat across from it. The walls and roof of the outhouses leaned on each other like drunken whores, all tipsy, weeping and foul. Only

one of the stall doors would stay shut, while the other four dangled half off their hinges. The landlord's man, Mr. Cowan, never bothered to fix them and he never bothered to take the trash away either, so all the things people didn't have a use for anymore got piled up in the court. Rotten scraps, crippled footstools, broken bits of china, a thin, mewling cat with her hungry litter of kittens.

The women gossiped and groused while waiting for their turn at the pump, hordes of flies and children crawling all around them. The smallest babes begged to get up to their mama's teats while the older children made a game picking through boards and bricks, building bridges and stepping-stones over the streams of refuse that cut through the dirt. They'd spend all day that way as their mothers clanged doors open and shut on that little prison.

Boys grew into guttersnipes, then pickpockets, then roughs. They roamed the streets living for rare, fist-sized chunks of coal from ash barrels or the sweet hiss of beans running from the burlap bags they wounded with their knives at Tompkins Market. They ran down ladies for handouts and swarmed gentlemen for watches and chains.

Kid Yaller, Pie-Eater, Bag o' Bones, Slobbery Tom, Four-Fingered Nick. Their names were made from body parts and scars, bragging rights and bad luck. Jack the Rake, Paper-Collar Jack, One-Lung Jack, Jack the Oyster, Crazy Jack. They cut their hair short and pinned the ragged ends of their sleeves to their shirts. They left nothing for the shopkeeper's angry hand to grab hold of, nothing even a nit would desire.

Girls sold matches and pins, then flowers and hot corn, and then themselves.

By nine, ten, eleven years old, you could feel it coming, the empty-bellied life of your mother–always having to decide what to give up next, which trinket to sell, which dreams to forget.

The most valuable thing a girl possessed was hidden between her legs, waiting to be sold to the highest bidder. It was never a question of yes or no. It was simply a matter of which man would have you first.

There was a whole other city of us, on rooftops, beneath stair steps, behind hay bins, between crates of old shoes and apples. Rag pickers, hot-corn girls, thread pullers.

We got by, living on pennies from a lady's purse or nickels from men who paid us to let them look at our ankles or the backs of our necks for "just a little while longer." Some of us were orphans, most of us might as well have been. "Dirty rags," Mr. Alsop the fishmonger called us, as he stood there waiting with a long, thin stick, ready to crack our shins black. His stall was lined with barrels of salt herring–dried, chewy secrets with lonely little eyes.

In summer we slept sideways on fire escapes. In winter we fought rats and beggars for filthy stable corners.

We came from rear tenements and cellar floors, from poverty and pride. All sneak and steal, hush and flight, those of us who lived past thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old, those of us who managed to make any luck for ourselves at all–we became New York.

1871.



BOARD FOR A YOUNG LADY.

A woman wishes to obtain board
in a private house of respectability
for her daughter,
where she would receive
a proper upbringing and firm supervision.



I.

Mama sold me the summer I turned twelve.

Everything stuck like corn silk that season– my dress to the small of my back, the catcalls of the bootblack boys, the debts Mama owed every man with a "Mister" in front of his name for five blocks around. There were riots just after the strawberries, and people went mad from the heat all June, July and August. Miss Lydia Worth, the seamstress next door, got sliced across the face with a knife by Mr. Striech, the butcher, just because she refused to marry him. The woman who lived above Mama and me, Mrs. Glendenning, hid her baby away in a stove-pipe when it died because she didn't know what else to do with it. I listened at our door when the police came to take her away. She'd only been able to afford swill milk and she was sure it was the milk that had killed her child. She wailed and sobbed, her cries of sadness filling the dark of the stairwell like the howls of a dying dog.

In the evenings, when it was too hot to sit inside, I'd leave Chrystie Street and walk up Second Avenue. Moving between pushcarts and passersby, I'd get as far away from Mama and our rooms as I dared. The journey was safe enough, even for a girl, alone, as long as I paid attention to the alleys and corners. Crossing Houston my heart would twist, not because there was any danger to it or Mama forbid me to go there, but because reaching the other side of the street always made me feel as if I were headed more towards home than away from it.

Peering through windows, I'd gaze into people's gaslit homes, keeping track of all the things I wanted for myself. Number 110 Second Avenue held a handsome gentleman, resting his arm on a mantel, mouth rounding into a satisfied O each time he puffed on his cigar. In the parlour of number 114, three little boys were sprawled out on their bellies across a flowery rug, rolling marbles in the channels of petals and leaves. At number 116, two lovers were sitting together on a settee, their elbows barely touching. A thin-lipped woman lorded over them, her arms crossed in front of her chest as if to say, *Don't you dare*. Glowing, moving pictures of ease, they made me want to lick my lips, my longing burning the sides of my tongue like I'd been lucky enough to have too much sugar.

Businessmen paraded by me in fitted, neat suits, their shoes perfectly black. Street vendors pushed and pulled their carts, the wares still looking orderly and fresh, even at the end of the day. The pigeon man came blowing a bosun's whistle, carrying braces of birds across his back. Shopkeepers cranked up their awnings and swept off their stoops, forcing clouds of dust to fly up around their feet.

They scowled as the dirt settled back down into the cracks between the cobblestones, staring after it as if it ought to be ashamed for coming too near their door. If it weren't for Mrs. Riordan once telling me you had to cross the East River to get there, I would have sworn I'd walked all the way to the beautiful place she called Brooklyn.

At the corner of St. Mark's Place and Second Avenue was a grand house on a large plot, rising five storeys above the street. Although the other houses surrounding it had been divvied up into *a*'s and *b*'s to accommodate the growing number of merchants who were setting up shops in the area, this house, with its blood-red brick and white marble trim, belonged to just one person, Miss Alice Keteltas.

Quite particular about the house and the gardens that surrounded it, Miss Keteltas had placed several notices on the lawn to keep strangers at bay.

Be advised, I am not dead and this house is not for sale. –signed, Miss Alice Keteltas.

All visitors without an appointment (good-intentioned clergy included) shall be turned away. –signed, Miss Alice Keteltas.

Curiosity seekers shall be met with suspicion and a stick. –signed, Miss Alice Keteltas.

Please, don't feed the peacocks. –signed, Miss Alice Keteltas.

Miss Keteltas generously donated her peacocks to the Central Park Menagerie two months after she acquired them. This practice was quite common with ladies who mistakenly wished for peacocks, or forty-two white swans, or perhaps a bear cub, or three sweet-faced monkeys. Thus, a zoo was born, to save the fine ladies of New York from their misguided game keeping and guilt.

Although the peacocks were long gone, the tall iron fence that had been erected around the gardens to keep the birds from escaping still remained. Menacing black spikes ran along the top and bottom of it, bayonets against the wild impulses of rioters, boys and dogs.

I liked to run my hand along the fence as I walked past, my fingers slapping the pickets just hard enough to make the metal hum. If I took hold of one of the posts while it was still singing, a delicious tickle would come between my lips, like paper over the teeth of a comb, or a whistle made from a blade of grass. I liked to think that this set the house to buzzing as well and that Miss Keteltas was somewhere inside, sitting at the dining room table or even reclining on her bed, suffering pleasant tremors of laughter without knowing why.

To the rear of the house one of the pickets was missing, leaving a space in the fence just wide enough for me to slip through. *It means she wants me here,* I told myself when I first discovered it. *It's a sign.*

Mama was always talking of signs to the women who came to our place to have their fortunes told. I'd watch from behind the curtains as she sat at her round-topped table with whichever woman had shown up at our door looking for answers. Putting a finger to the small, heart-shaped birthmark on her right cheek, she'd gaze into her witch's ball or stare at the lady's palms; then she'd give the woman the news. Sometimes good, sometimes bad.

I liked it best when a woman was willing to pay Mama enough to converse with the spirits. This called for both Mama and the lady to rest their fingertips on an upended glass. Then Mama would start humming and sighing, and

soon the glass would go sliding over the wooden tabletop, dancing between the letters and numbers she'd painted there to help the spirits spell out fate. Even though the spirits said the same things time and again, it was still quite a thing to see. "You're gonna die young," Mama told every woman with fat wrists. "But that's all right. There will be flowers at your funeral and nobody will say a bad thing about you." Then she'd squeeze the woman's hand, tears coming to her eyes, making them shine. "We should all be so lucky."

The evening I decided to steal into Miss Keteltas' yard and across her lawn, a light shone from a wide window into the garden. No one had ever come out to stop me from touching the fence, and I'd never seen so much as a hint of Miss Keteltas or her stick. *All good signs,* I thought, *leading me to this very moment.* I decided that if I got caught, I wouldn't lie. I'd simply say, "There's a hole in your fence, Miss Keteltas. You really should have someone fix it."

When I reached the window, I could see into a parlour meant for the lady of the house. Miss Keteltas wasn't there, but right next to the window was a pair of birds inside a cage. They were brilliant green, like the first leaves of spring, all except for the feathers on their faces, which were a deep pink, making them look as if they were blushing.

I watched as one of the birds took a single seed from a bowl and fed it to its mate. The second bird kindly bowed its head and returned the favour. They went on like that, their stubby beaks pinching and putting, gentle and fair, until all the food was gone. Then they took turns preening and nuzzling each other's necks, stopping every so often to puff

up their feathers in delight. Stout little things, they'd wobble apart and then together again, dancing along the length of their perch. Finally, the larger of the two seemed to tire of it all and closed his eyes. His mate tilted her head and stared at him while he slept, her wings folded tight behind her back. She looked just like Mrs. Riordan did whenever she was having a hard time hearing what I had to say.

Before long, a maid came into the room. As soon as I saw her, I went to my knees, crouching beneath the window and holding as still as I could. For a moment, I was certain I'd been caught, but then the light went out and the garden became dark enough for me to sneak away.

As I walked home, I didn't think about how late I'd be getting back to Mama. I just kept thinking of how much I wanted to be inside Miss Keteltas' parlour, with nothing to do but watch those lovely little birds. I wondered if any two people had ever cared for each other like that. *Not my mother and father,* I thought. *Mrs. Riordan and her husband, perhaps.*

Lovebirds mate for life. Thus, pains should be taken not to separate an established pair. A lonely bird will engage in destructive behaviours such as pining, biting and plucking out its feathers. If you are faced with a single bird, you must become what the bird longs for and lavish all your attentions upon it, lest it lash out at you.

Although Mr. Riordan died long before I was born, Mrs. Riordan still spoke of him often, her voice catching in her throat whenever she said his name. "Twenty years without my teeth or my husband and still it's Johnny I miss most."

Mama was on the front stoop when I got home, fanning herself with a folded newspaper. "It's too dark for you to be out," she said, glaring at me. "Go inside and get to sleep."

When she came to bed she didn't speak to me. Even though she didn't ask where I'd been, her silence on the other side of the mattress we shared made me feel as if somehow she knew. Maybe her glass and the table had spelled it out for her. *M-o-t-h w-a-n-t-s t-o r-u-n a-w-a-y.*

The next morning, my boots were gone.

"Shoes in summer are nothing but a waste," she said when I went crawling under the bed searching for them.

They weren't the nicest pair of boots in the world. The leather had begun to crack across the toes and they were nearly too small for my feet, but they were mine. I'd paid Mrs. Riordan a nickel for them. She'd gotten them off the body of a girl she'd dressed out for burial. The girl had died of consumption and her mother had told Mrs. Riordan that she should have the boots, it was the least she could do to thank her.

A girl with shoes can hold her head a bit higher. She can run away.

"Where are they?" I asked Mama.

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Mr. Piers . . . but don't bother asking him about them, he took them apart for scraps right on the spot."

A knife grinder by trade, Mr. Piers had a pushcart he wheeled up and down Chrystie Street. His hands were shiny–not greasy like a butcher's after handling lard, but slick with the oil that made a blade sharp and exact. Mr. Piers wore his hair in two long braids and his eyes were almost black. All the women thought he was the handsomest

man they'd ever seen. I felt that way about him too, until he had my shoes.

Mr. Piers also shaved people's lousy heads, and sold bottles of Dr. Godfrey's Cordial. He'd sit on the street at night, his feet pumping the grinding wheel, sparks flying, looking like the Devil's man as he waited for women to come and ask him for his "best."

Mothers called the cordial "quietness," because their teething babies would stop wailing as soon as they rubbed it on their raw, red gums. A few drops under the tongue and the child would fall into a deep sleep. Mama said it did much the same for her, so she'd drink half a bottle of the stuff whenever she felt weary from life. I didn't see it quite like that. I thought it just turned her too tired to find her way around the room. I hated those square bottles, with their fancy, boastful labels.

Dr. Godfrey's Cordial–"a soothing syrup, concocted from the purest ingredients!" (*sassafras, caraway, molasses, tincture of opium, and brandy*). "For all manner of pains in the bowels, fluxes, fevers, small pox, measles, rheumatism, coughs, colds, restlessness in men, women and children, and particularly for several ailments incident to child bearing women and relief of young children breeding their teeth."

With the heat of summer, Mama's fortune-telling business had dropped off. "The hotter it is, the less people like taking a chance on getting bad news," Mama would say for every day that went by with no customers. "Come September, it'll pick up. You'll see."

When our cupboards got bare, anything we didn't need got sold to Mr. Piers. By July, Mama was taking things to him every few days, in exchange for a bit of money, or more often in trade for a bottle of Dr. Godfrey's. My boots had gone towards the cordial along with Mama's tortoiseshell

hair combs and the amulet she wore around her neck to protect her from the evil eye.

"I'll get you a new pair," she told me. "Come September."

After that she started talking of other mothers who'd had great success in arranging positions for their daughters–as house maids or cooks' helpers, as seamstresses and laundry girls. Lingering over the details, she made them sound more like saints than servants. "They were nearly at the end, you know–no food in the cupboard, no money to speak of." Sighing with admiration, she'd go on, "It was the daughter that saved them. If she hadn't stepped up, the whole family would be dead."

Her stories were always the same. First, a sad, worn-out mother would manage to save up enough pennies to place a help-for-hire ad in the *Evening Star*. Then, a week later (no more, no less), the woman's daughter, "a bright and willing girl, mind you," would be plucked from the slums and miraculously placed in a situation that paid more than enough to keep her family from starvation. "She's living with a fine, well-bred lady, all the way up on Gramercy Park. Her mother says there are at least a dozen other maids in the woman's employ, and the house has too many rooms to count. Can you imagine?"

I could not. At least not in the way Mama hoped I would.

Whenever I tried to imagine a place that grand, I always wound up picturing myself not as a maid or a cook, but as the lady of Miss Keteltas' house, floating through ballroom and conservatory wearing a dress made from the finest silk. Sometimes the dress would be forget-me-not blue, sometimes it was a demure lilac. More often than not it was petal pink, with yards of black velvet ribbon looped around the

hem. No matter the colour of the dress, the vision would end with me smiling and lying naked on a feather bed. The mattress was so deep I could hardly find my way out of it. Mama didn't know that her uptown mansion with too many rooms to count only made an appearance in my head if the house and all that was in it were mine.

Thirteen, I'd tell myself, any time Mama started to go on about servants' quarters and maid's wages. *I'll stay with Mama until I'm thirteen.* I hoped by then to find a way of becoming something on my own, something beyond Mama's expectations.

She came to me, pushing at my shoulder while I was asleep. Ignoring her, I curled myself into a ball on my half of our sagging straw mattress.

"Wake up, Moth," she nagged. "Get out of bed and get dressed."

Her voice wasn't right. It was thin and tight in the wrong places and all I could think was that there must be a fire.

Mama loved watching buildings go up in flames. We had a collection of sooty bric-a-brac on the front window-sill to prove it. She'd pulled things from the rubble of every fire she'd ever chased. A gentleman's shaving mug cracked in two; a blackened doorstop shaped like a dog; countless bits of melted glass–brown, green, blue; even a tiny porcelain chamber bowl meant for a dollhouse. It had words painted around the rim: *Piss or get off the pot.* Mama had a scar on the palm of her right hand from where the thing had burned her.

"You go on without me," I mumbled, my tongue feeling thick with sleep. "I don't need to see it."

"Get up," she insisted, twisting the fine hairs at the back of my neck until the pain of it made me sit up and open my eyes.

The hoops she always wore in her ears were winking at me, shimmering in the light of a candle she'd just lit. Reaching to the post at the end of the bed, she grabbed my dress and tossed it at me. Then she began taking my things out of our dresser drawers and throwing them on the bed: a pair of stockings with the toes worn through, my old petticoat, the ragdoll I carried around as a child and called Miss Sweet. The doll's arm came off in Mama's hand and the rest of Miss Sweet fell to the floor. She picked up the thin, limp body and looked at me.

"You still want her?" she asked.

"Yes," I mumbled, as I pulled my dress on over my head.

Mama took the doll and its arm and pushed them into an empty pillowcase. Then she held the case out to me and looked to the pile on the bed. "Put the rest of your things in this."

"What's happening?" I asked, as she reached around my middle to tie the sash of my dress. "Is there a fire? Are we in trouble?"

"There's no fire and there's nothing for you to worry about," she said, working my hair into a loose braid down my back. I heard the slither of a length of ribbon being made into a bow, felt the ache of it being pulled tight. She turned me so I was facing her and brushed a stray hair away from my brow. "You're going on a little trip, that's all. I've found you an excellent position, but you have to

leave tonight." Putting the lumpy pillowcase in my hands, she took me by the arm and led me to the front room.

There was a woman sitting next to Mama's fortune-telling table, resting in our velvet rocker, one of the few things of value that Mama hadn't sold. She was wearing a fine, dark dress with a long matching cape that pooled around her in her seat. Her face was soft looking, her eyes moist and shining at the edges. The wide bow of her hat was tied under her chin, and the flesh of her neck folded against it as if she were made of butter and cream. Looking at me, she picked up the front of her skirts and shifted in her seat. I could see her shoes peeking out from her petticoats–black leather boots with scalloped trim around the buttons that reached far above her ankles.

"Say hello to Mrs. Wentworth," Mama said, as she pushed me towards the woman.

Still staring at her boots, I stumbled, nearly falling into the lady's lap.

Mama smiled at her apologetically. "It takes her a while to warm up to strangers. You understand."

Mrs. Wentworth stood and held her hand out to me. "How do you do, Miss . . . ?"

Speaking up before I could, Mama said, "Miss Fenwick will do." Then she looked to me and nodded as if she'd just named a stray dog.

Fenwick wasn't my father's name or even my mother's. It was the name on the label that was peeling off an old biscuit tin Mama kept with the rest of her fire souvenirs. The box had been painted to look like it was made of gold, and from a distance it seemed as if it were meant to hold some great treasure. Up close, the thing was a disappointment,

with rusty holes eating away its underside, and a dented lid that wouldn't stay shut. *Fenwick Brothers Shortbread, a cut above the rest.*

Mrs. Wentworth took my hand in hers. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Fenwick," she said. Looking me over with her large, watery eyes she added, "I'm sure we'll be very happy together."

Mama stared at me not with sadness, but with pleading. She was thinner than I'd ever allowed myself to notice, looking more like a child than a woman. I wanted to believe she knew what was best for me. I wanted to believe she was like every other mother and that she loved me more than I loved her. I hoped if I followed her wishes, I would finally make her happy.

There were no tears at our goodbye. I knew Mama wouldn't stand for it. Tears offended her more than just about any other wrong a person could do. "That's enough," she'd say, scowling and stomping her heel on the floor whenever my eyes showed the slightest sign of being wet. "American girls never whimper."

After Mrs. Wentworth led me out of the house, I heard Mama shut the door behind us, turning her key in the lock.

"Come now, Miss Fenwick," Mrs. Wentworth said, taking my hand and urging me down the steps to the street.

Looking back, I saw Mama's arm reaching to close the curtains on the front window, her figure changing to a silhouette. Led by the tired bend of her neck, she moved to turn the lamp down, making the room go dark.

Thirteen, I'd thought, would be my time to go.

Mama thought, *twelve.*