

## The Legal Suicide

Temperance could feel the cold stiffening her fingers. Outside, the guard snored and inside, only the sound of her nails, filing themselves against the stone floor kept her awake. Each time she tried to rise, bolts of needles paralysed her feet. Her body remained pushed up against the stone wall, stuck in a cycle of haunting memories and pleasant dreams, shaking with elation for the latter. When her fever reached its peak, she cried as memories of how she was once touched taunted her.

*A pair of feet moved through the muddy terrain, silently, as if being pushed forwards by the absent wind. Temperance's overshoes protected her partially as mud tickled the backs of her ankles and the scent of grassy manure began to infiltrate her nostrils. Thistles and stingers dotted the path she trudged on, feet slipping over hidden rocks, pushing her lower to the ground. The path she followed was a long one, on the outskirts of Bideford town. But many women knew it. Even if it was just for a single night escape. She could see the clearing in the distance, illuminated by the orange tendrils of a fire, enclosed in a half circle of alder trees. She checked behind her to make sure no one was following. "Temperance?" The man took a step towards her. "I knew you would be able to make it." He smiled and stroked his hand over her curls. The fire reflected in the silver band on his left hand. The couple took each other in as the sky changed from orange, to red and the moon began to illuminate the grounds around them. "Oh Temperance," he moved his hands into hers, "I have so dearly missed you."*

Temperance woke to the rattling sound of metal keys being pushed through the key hole. Her hands hung next to her, limp and purple, desperate for heat from the sunlight. As the door swung open, Temperance kept her eyes locked onto the ground, her knees bound tightly to her chest. She listened as they entered, the heavy-footed steps of men, and the quick patter

of women's feet that mimicked the rain outside. They carried candles and mumbled in a tightly knitted circle. Temperance pushed her spine into the wall as far as she could and played with her fingernails.

She began to count the number of voices she could hear. *One, two*, before she could sense the figure stood over her and hear the deep intakes of breath that only a male body could make. Her hands began to shake. Pain hit her feet as they picked up her body and propped her in the centre of the room, like a rag doll. She cried as they removed her clothes, garment by garment, peeling them back from her body like a second layer of skin. She begged for some linen to cover her naked parts, desperate to hide from the circle of eyes. She lifted her hands to cover her breasts, so they bound them, a tight rope knot behind her back. Her legs twisted and caved, so they held them apart. Ice cold fingers prodded her delicate areas, and open palms ran up and down her pelvis, pressing down on any spots of loose skin. There were five people surrounding her, not an inch of body unseen. Three men, two women, *to keep it lawful in the eyes of god*, they had said. Her bare legs began to shake with exhaustion as one of the women cleared her throat. An alert to the inquisitor.

“What is this Ms Lloyd?” The inquisitor pinched a piece of flesh between his two fingers. She whimpered. A wart protruding from the side of her hip bone. Around half an inch long and thin in diameter. “A teat for suckling, might I suggest?” Temperance did not respond. The inquisitor repeated himself, before saying something to the women next to him. Bile burnt the back of her throat. How would they punish her? *Burning? Hanging? Stoning?* Her vision began to dot as she caught the last bit of his conversation, “for these marks were given to her by the devil himself!” Temperance roused herself. A sob caught in the back of her throat.

Tears burnt her cheeks as her bare feet dragged along the floor, paraded around the room for the hungry eyes to look at. Inside one of their hands was a book. She did not know

what they were writing. Women were not allowed to read. “Did the devil himself suckle the teats? Did you feed his fellow succubi, like you would nuzzle a child?” The inquisitor threw questions at her, as her head reeled from the impact. “Is this where your lover sucked, Temperance? The man. The devil you have been meeting with?” Temperance let the tears cloud the vision of her nakedness. Her knees hit the floor hard as the strangers dropped her. The door was bolted shut again.

She did not know how many hours had passed. Her body unable to reach the single window and see the sun outside. Her stomach growled as she ate the remainder of the bread they had brought. Her stomach rejected the water. She rubbed her tongue over her cracked lips and shivered. On her hip, a blueish mark began to form, tender to the touch. Her heart thumped with the threat the inquisitor had left her with, “we know there’s more of you.” She wondered if they knew about the path.

*Inside the closure, old rugs lined the woodland floor, damp from the daytime spurts of rain. Women over the years had collectively dragged old blankets and linen into the clearing as makeshift seats. They would heat a small fire. Not large enough for the towns people to see, but large enough to keep some of the cold weather at bay and to remove the soggiess from the rugs. “I am happy that no one else is here,” Temperance said. In her hands she held a small metal cup filled with a hot substance. “It’s unusual to not see anyone though.”*

*“I heard from the bread maker that they accused Mary Trembles,” the man said. Temperance raised her brow, “the widowed beggar.” Temperance nodded.*

*“I’ve heard that too. That young girl Grace Barns was shaking and saying something about the devil himself. God bless her soul,” Temperance said. “Loitering around her house like that. Who would’ve thought?”*

*“Enough about that,” the man said. Deep wrinkles curled themselves around her veiny hands. The man took them into his own. “I have brought you some bread.” From the inside of his outer layer he pulled out a small loaf. He ripped off half and gave it to Temperance. They ate and drank hot liquid in silence. Their bodies wrapped in each other’s limbs before the sun began to rise on the horizon and the path home appeared less sinister.*

Pigeons tapped like a familiar friend against the windows. Yet, they slapped their wings and flew, a freedom that taunted her. She was parched, tongue bone dry whilst they basked in the water that ran freely outside. Her voice refused to leave her mouth, a strained moan amongst the silence. A small hole in the roof created a puddle in the corner of the room. She tried to crawl towards it, but her wrists caved under her bodyweight. Her usual day would begin by begging for meat and bread at neighbour’s doors, she reminisced on not being shackled. The stone walls towered over her, an impenetrable fortress, which trapped in the life and air around her. Rats crawled across the edges of the room. The faint, *tap, tap, tap* of their burrowing conscious in the back of her mind. They had previously stolen the last of her bread. She had then spent the day thinking about how nice they would taste roasted. Flies attacked her knotted hair as her eyes watered, stinging from the stench of the room. She felt like the crows were watching her. They wanted her to commit the dreaded sin, commit it so that they could spend their day feasting on her remains. *Caw, Caw, Caw*. A sudden flutter of wings made her jump. Her heart thudded. The inquisitor’s voice penetrated her mind, “Did you take the Devil as a lover Temperance?”

*The clouds covered the moon. No light illuminated the path she walked along. She was on the edge of Bideford, near a stream that ran along the outside of the town. A trickle of water covered the sounds of her footsteps as she struggled to remain upright, body contorting as she tripped over stones. They had agreed to meet here the last time they met, the fear of being followed or discovered rendering them panicked. There was a small clearing next to the stream*

*and she could feel his presence, even from this far away. She knew that he was stood there and could see the perfect outline of his body waiting. She smiled and opened her arms towards him. “Temperance! Oh how long it has been.” He wrapped her in a tight grip before they touched lips. He felt different, thinner and slightly taller than usual. She opened her eyes partially to look at the face she had missed for so long. His eyes were open too. Dark, not the bright orbs she was used to looking into. For a while he squeezed her tighter as she screamed and tried to untangle herself from his grasp. Her lungs contracting as she struggled for breath. He laughed, spewing drops of dirty saliva onto her face. “What’s wrong Temperance, my love?” Rain began to pour over them, blurring her vision and sticking her hair to her face. Her body shook from the coldness as she squirmed in his frame. His eyes pits of darkness. “What a mess you have gotten yourself into Temperance, dear,” he said, stroking her hair.*

*“Who are you?” Temperance asked.*

*“If you don’t confess they will get it out of you. They have devices you know,” the man laughed, “ones that will stretch you like a piece of dough at the bakery.”*

“I didn’t do it!” Temperance cried. A loud bang on the door woke her. Sweat pooled on the floor and stuck her hair to her forehead.

“Shut up in there,” someone said. They banged on the wooden door again. The sound reverberated throughout the room. Her head thudded and pieces of crust had formed along the edges of her eyes, sealing them partially shut. The arch of the sun had begun its decent, the room getting darker with each breath she took. The door swung open. In her peripheral vision stood a man.

“Are you awake?” A voice called to her. She tried to move her head, but her neck had stiffened like the beginning of rigor mortis. The sound of footsteps entering the room encouraged her to twist onto her knees. Outside of the room, someone was banging a stick

rhythmically against metal. She did not answer. Her voice trapped between gasps of breath. Her eyesight was blurry and the palms of her hands bled in the shape of nail arcs. “You know who I am Ms Lloyd,” he said. The inquisitor stood at the edge of the room, his well-rounded figure taking up most of the doorway. She let out a slight moan. He began to walk towards her, his steps heavy and slow. Deliberate. She dragged her nails against her metal shackles. A useless attempt to pry herself free. “Ms Lloyd, I know you can hear me, there’s no need to be difficult.” He grabbed her shackled hand hard and she gasped.

“I don’t know why you are here,” Temperance said.

“We’ve been waiting to see if your incubus, your male demon, has come to engage with you,” the inquisitor said. He shifted position to lean against the wall. Inside her mouth was a phlegmy film, she found it hard to swallow. “As you may know, you will be put on trial.”

“You’re going to kill me,” she said.

“Well, the town’s people, they’re saying things now they are,” the inquisitor said. Temperance kept her eyes on the floor. He began to pace, kicking the bowl of water next to her. “You know the young maiden, Grace, sister of Thomas Eastchurch?” Temperance acknowledged him with a sound. “They’re saying you saw her and wept after she was bedbound with illness for all that time.”

“I’d never hurt a child,” Temperance said.

“The townspeople have been telling me that you were tormenting her with a doll or something of the sorts. Then the shopkeeper said he saw you with a man, he thinks it was the devil. That you two were planning an attack on the girl,” the inquisitor said.

“Oh, you’re going to kill me! I’m going to be strung up by the next moon!” Temperance heard the inquisitor stop. His voice was closer when he next spoke.

“Temperance, I won’t lie to you. I would not cross the holy Lord like that. There is no one to protest against it for you, no husband to testify to your good nature. Only a lover. The whole town believes you to be a witch,” the inquisitor said. She began to cry, her body convulsing with the gasps of air. “But, there is a way to stop it all,” he said. Temperance lifted her head from the ground. She used the dirty sleeve of her outerwear to wipe her face.

“How? What do you mean?” From outside, the insistent noise of the crows deafened her, “I did not hurt a child.”

“There’s an easier way out of this Temperance,” the inquisitor said. She looked him in the eye for a few seconds before returning her eyes to the floor. The stone walls threatened her with their emerging shadows, pushing her into the corner with their darkness. “You will be hung after your trial,” the inquisitor said.

“It is an unforgivable sin,” Temperance said. But, the inquisitor was no longer there. She heard the key slide back through the keyhole, and knew she was alone.

*“Temperance, my love,” the man wiped at her tears, “what’s happened?” They sat within the clearing. The moon was at its highest point, clouded from sight by the rain.*

*“You know that this cannot go on,” Temperance said. She saw his shoulders cave as he exhaled. Somewhere above a flutter of wings sounded in the tree. The cry of a bird. She looked at her hands, wrinkled, dirt hiding under the fingernails. She looked at his, moments ago soft and young, now claw-like. “What do you want from me?” The man laughed. A different laugh to the man she knew. “Where is he?” The bird above continued its cry. Caw, Caw, Caw. The trees began to dance along to the cry. She tried to move, but her hands were shackled, her body bound to a tree. “What are you doing?”*

*“Let’s see if we can find a teat to suckle, shall we,” the man said, a small smirk lining his lips.*

“Please stop,” Temperance cried. She pounded her fists against the wall, blood spewed onto the floor. The guard shouted at her to be quiet. But she could barely hear him. The consistent buzz of the flies penetrated her ears, so that she felt like they were inside of her skull. The inquisitor’s threat hung in her mind. A sin, an unforgivable one. Outside, the crows watched her shackled arms spasm. *Caw, Caw, Caw*. The sound tormented her, attacked her as the flies laid their eggs in her ears. The draft found its way under her clothes as she pulled at the shackles. Begged them to release her from her secured place. She gagged as she opened her mouth, desperate for the air that was suffocating her body. “Please,” she shouted. Her heart pounded, as she gasped, tears salty on her cheeks. *Caw, Caw Caw*. “I did it all,” she cried. The banging on the door subsided. “Please just take me away. I’m a slave to the devil.”