

THE FOUNDLING

by Sarah Kennedy

England: 1528

Catherine knelt on the dirt floor to wrap the dirty linen cloth around the body. She placed coins on the eyes to hold them shut, then went to the open window to breathe. The girl gazed over the Yorkshire moors, counting up the dead in her mind. Fifty, she thought, since the beginning of June. Almost a quarter of the village of Mount Grace. She looked down at the woman again. The grey skin sagged away from the bones, and Catherine felt the pain of her new small breasts pushing against her bodice. One day she would come to this if the court did not summon her.

Catherine was on her knees again, pushing back the filthy rushes that were strewn across the earthen floor, when the old nun appeared in the doorway. "Leave your physic, child," the woman said. "There are men on the high road, about a mile off. I would venture they come from the queen." The girl jumped to her feet, and the nun turned her attention to the still form. She had been a goose woman, and it had only taken her three hours to die. "You waste your time here. We must see to it that there is no sign of sickness."

"Yes, Sister Veronica." The girl wiped her hands on her apron. "Where is Mother?"

"Awaiting you," the old woman said. "Come quickly. We must get the smell of rot off your dress before they get wind of you. You stink of the grave and those men can ride out as easily as they ride in."

Catherine was already at her side, and they stepped into the road, Sister Veronica shading her withered face with her headpiece. Two men hurried past, their hats pulled low against the

raging sun, posies of lavender at their noses. They did not speak. "Are you sure they're the queen's men?" the girl said.

"They looked right royal to me. But they are a way off yet."

The girl's heart skidded in her chest and her voice went tight with excitement. "I will be a lady, Sister Veronica. Will I not?" But then she glanced back at the cottage. "We must have the corpse wagon here at once."

"Let the dead bury the dead this day. You have greater business before you," said the old nun. She raised her hand to her brow and squinted down the road, but the men were still beyond the village gate. They ran across the road to the stone convent, Veronica bellowing for the prioress. "I have her! I have Catherine!"

Mother Christina, tall and grey-eyed, opened the side door. "Is anyone about?"

"No. You take the child and I will see to it that the roads are clean of bodies." Veronica thrust the girl toward the prioress and hurried off.

"Have the sexton close the gate to the graveyard," the prioress called after her, "and throw more lime down." Catherine stood twisting her hands until the prioress shut the door. "Come and let us have a look at you. Quickly now." The convent was a large open square, with a garden at its center. The stone walls kept the building cool, but the leaves of their vegetables and herbs looked parched, and Catherine glanced up in fear at Christina. "Mother, why do they come today? They will know we have the sweat upon us, and I will not be chosen." She felt the tears swell behind her eyes.

"No weeping, Daughter. It mars your eyes."

At thirteen, Catherine was almost as tall as the prioress. Mother Christina swiped a thumb over the girl's cheek and tilted her chin upward. "A bit of colour will do. Come with

me.” Catherine was seldom invited into the prioress’s chamber, and she hesitated at the door.

“Snap, child, you want to go to court or no? Take off that dress. Do it quickly. And wash your face.” She poured water into the basin and Catherine could smell the rose petals as she cupped her hands to splash herself. “Here is a frock.” Christina held out a white dress embroidered with daisies. “Veronica and I have done the work ourselves and you must wear it like a lady. Have you got your locket on?”

“Yes, Mother.” Catherine dried herself and stepped into the dress. The prioress tightened the bodice and tied her fast, then she pulled a box from under her bed and drew pots of colour from it.

“You will paint me, Mother? Is it not forbidden?”

“Tush, Catherine, don’t talk like a fool.” The prioress stained her mouth and pinched her cheeks hard. She took a tweezers and, turning Catherine’s face to the window, plucked out hairs along the girl’s forehead until her eyes leaked tears. Then Christina brushed a white powder over Catherine’s face and neck, lifting the locket to get at her chest. “No blood. Good girl. Now give those bubbies a push so they can be seen and stand straight while I do your hair.” Catherine adjusted her breasts upward while the prioress braided and twisted her auburn curls into a knot and fixed it with a pearl-studded stick. “Let me see your hands.”

Catherine held out her fingers for inspection. She kept her nails short and clean and the prioress nodded. “Good enough. Now let us go pray until they ring.”

The convent of Mount Grace had dwindled to nine nuns, and the prioress had ordered them cloistered when the sweat came, all but Catherine, who had not taken the veil and whose growing skills as a healer were required. The rich twins had withdrawn to their private room to burn rosemary and drink wine and read poems. The rest stayed in the dormitory, and now they

clustered in their doorway, watching as Catherine followed Christina down the walk and into the church. Catherine thought she heard someone mutter “spoilt brat” as she passed, but Christina did not turn and so neither did Catherine.

They had settled themselves on their knees in front of the altarpiece when the ringing came. “Not a breath about the sweat now, child, or you will ruin your fortunes,” said Christina, and she rose to unbar the door, looking up and down as though she had not the least expectation of visitors.

Five men sat horseback in the road, and Christina stepped into the porch. “Who rings our bell?”

The finest of the group swung himself down and yanked off his hat. He bowed and turned to glare at the others, who wearily dismounted and stood holding their reins. One of them was Robert Overton, brother to their twins, but he was occupied with his bootsole and did not acknowledge the prioress.

“Christina Havens of Mount Grace?” said the first one. He was tall but lean as a rake. His skin was livid with pustules, and Catherine withdrew behind the prioress.

“You have found her,” said Christina. The prioress extended her hand, palm down, and the lumpy one kissed it. Catherine could smell him. “And this is the child.” She pulled Catherine from her skirts and presented her.

The men looked Catherine up and down and she felt her face flame. “This is the foundling?” said the man. “She is almost a woman.” He turned to the others. “Say, Robert, you never said she was so fine.”

Overton shrugged, and the prioress said, “As my adopted daughter, she bears my name, but she is called Catherine.”

“How do you, Catherine Havens?” The man reached for the girl’s hand and she gave it reluctantly, holding her breath.

“She is grown taller since the queen has seen her,” said the prioress, “and her skills have improved with her.”

“How many years has she?”

“Catherine?”

“I was born in a cold January of the year of our Lord 1515, sir, and so I am now thirteen years of age. God be willing I will see fourteen in the service of her majesty our queen.” She made a small curtsy.

“Well spoken. She has the bearing for it.” He was grinning, the bad skin alight.

“And what is your name, sir?” said the prioress.

“Bartholomew Witherington.” He had not taken his eyes from Catherine. “Does the girl look to marry?”

“Marry? You have heard the child say she is just gone thirteen. She seeks to do the bidding of her majesty. She does not go to look for a husband.”

“Younger than she have been fitted with men. She may find her one just the same.” The man lifted his lip and the others sniggered.

“She studies to be a healer under my tutelage. She can read and write. She does illuminations.”

“Well. Strange talents for a female.” The man reached for Catherine and turned her one way, then the other. “I will be the judge of her fitness.”

The prioress yanked Catherine back to her side. “She will be the finest lady in the queen’s court.”

“Yes, but which one?” said Robert Overton, and the other men laughed.

“What is your meaning?” said Christina. “There is but one queen of England.”

“Eh, there is talk,” said Witherington. “Come, come. I do not mean to inflame you.” He held out his elbow. “Show me your charming village. The air has a sweetness to it.”

They walked the high road, Catherine following, and the men at a distance behind, laughing among themselves. “You see how our house prospers,” said Christina, lifting her hand. “We manage the sheepfold. Our sisters excel in embroidery and lace.”

The courtier stopped at a crossroads and gazed down the long grassy lane. It had been planted with willows and ran to the graveyard, then to the sheepfold. “This looks a pleasant way.”

The sexton came through the gate, pulling it shut behind him. He tipped his finger to his cap and went the other way. “We will not walk down there,” said Christina. “Some of the women prefer to be cloistered and keep themselves from the eyes of men. That is where they take their exercise of an afternoon.”

“I see. Very modest. And what does your priest say to all your industry?”

“Father John is much given to studying the reforms of the church. He is freed by our industry to manage his library and his claret and his angling of an early morning.”

The man put his head back and roared. “I see you women of the North have learned to keep your men in a fold as well as your sheep.”

Christina’s mouth tightened but she said nothing. Her eyes were on the doors of the cottages, where villagers had hung bunches of sage, but none of the men noticed. They had almost arrived safely at the inn when Alise Bocock the haycutter came wobbling through her wooden gate. Her hand was beating at her chest and she called, “Christina, Mother Christina,

lend me your girl. I feel the palpitations upon me.” She stepped into the road, pulling the napkin from her bodice. “I freeze, Mother. I need physic, I beg you.”

Alise’s husband had fallen a week before with the sweat in midst of their work and buried his own scythe into his wrist, but was too weak and trembling even to call out. Catherine had helped her find him in the long grasses, but he had already gone over to fever, and she had barely lifted the stained blade from him when he groaned for a draught of ale and died.

The courtiers trailing behind stopped and someone said, “They have plague here.”

Witherington turned on the prioress. “Mount Grace is diseased?”

“Mount Grace has no plague.”

“It is the sweat, then.” The men circled. “Bartlemy,” said one. “We ride. Now. The village is unclean. The King will have nothing of disease near the court. Leave the girl. We can find us a hundred of her like.”

“This woman complains of a different malady every day. It is nothing.”

Alise Bocock leaned on her gate post and stared. “My head will split apart,” she whispered.

“How many?” said Witherington. “How many dead, I ask you?” He took Catherine by the elbow. “How many, little genius?”

“It . . . it is not for a girl of my years to judge. I leave accounts to my elders.”

Catherine’s knees trembled and she pushed her legs together to keep them still.

“If the village is sick, the King will not have her.”

“Mount Grace is clean,” said Christina, but her voice wavered.

Witherington gazed up and down the road. “Why is it that your people are not about?”

“The spring has been hot as the devil. They stay within doors.”

“So it seems.” He regarded the woman leaning on the gate before them. Her eyes were glazed with pain. “I suppose we could stand here until this one dies. Robert, do you not care to visit your sisters?”

“Are they sick?” Overton asked.

“They are as well as you or I,” said the prioress. “Do you wish to see them?”

“Another time. If they are well.” He yawned. “Is there a bed and a bite to be had at the Hare and Hound?” He sauntered on down, speaking in low tones to Witherington. The others tagged along after them, leaving a wide berth around Alise.

“May I tend to her now, Mother?” said Catherine.

“She will tend to herself,” said the prioress. “Get you indoors, Alise, before you kill us all.” The afflicted woman did as she was bidden, making her slow progress back to the little cottage. “Now back to the convent before all Hell breaks loose.”

Christina had undone her hair and gone to check on the health of the twins. Catherine knelt in the garden, pinching lettuces for a cooling draught. “You must take only the young leaves,” the prioress said, stepping over the low wall behind her. “When you are called upon to give physic to the queen or her daughter, you are to say your prayer to the Virgin before you touch any herb and you are not to touch anything at all when you have your courses upon you. Do you understand me?”

Catherine nodded, rocking back onto her heels to wipe her forehead. Sister Veronica flung open the side door and rushed across the walk. “Alise Boccock lies dead on her floor. What shall I do, send for the corpse wagon?” She pulled off her wimple and scratched her scalp.

“The corpse-wagon?” blurted the prioress. “Are you mad? It will be smelt all over the village.” She thought for a moment. “Leave her lie. They may be ready to ride by tomorrow.”

“It is no godly thing to do.”

“Then tell Father John that he must tend to the body before we remove her. That will give us time enough, to be sure. And get some lime from the sexton to keep the stench down.”

Veronica looked at the big sun. “We are to be scorched again today. Your greens will wilt.”

“I will not be taken,” said Catherine. “The queen will forget me.”

“That she will not,” said Christina. “You will go to the inn and prove yourself. You will do it now.”

“To that horrible man? Mother, what is wrong with his face? Has he the plague?” Christina and Veronica exchanged a look. “What is it? Shall I offer him a remedy?”

“It is not plague, girl. It is, well, it is a French disease. It makes him no more horrible than that monster of a name he bears. He is an ape, but we will make use of him.”

Veronica snorted. “I do not wonder that the sweat does not concern him. He has infirmity enough. Do not let him touch you too close.”

“He knows better than to lay a hand on a queen’s maid,” said Christina. “We will fix you for their eyes and they will forget all this talk of sickness. You must please him, do you hear?”

The men were gathered at table when the three women arrived at the inn. The priest sat with them, a pot of ale before him. “Catherine,” he said, rising. “You are shining today, Daughter. These gentlemen have been praising you for an angel and here you come, like the light of the day.”

“Her ears were burning,” said the prioress, nudging her forward. “She comes to answer your prayers.”

“I pray, then,” said Witherington. “Have her sit here and show me what she can do.” He withdrew a small book from his pocket and laid it open. “Fetch me a quill, man, and a parchment.”

One of the men found the tools and laid them out. Catherine trimmed the quill and studied the page. “Can you read it?” asked Witherington.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let me see you copy a few lines.” He sat back and folded his hands in his lap. He had removed his gloves, and Catherine could see an open boil on his forefinger. It wept blood, and he picked its edges with one nail. “Go on, then.”

Catherine looked from the prioress to the priest. She wanted to switch to her left hand, but only used the right under their eyes. The quill felt heavy, and she tipped it toward the sheet and began.

“You see? She is perfection itself,” said Christina.

A small wail sounded from the street, and Veronica rushed to the door. A ragged boy stood in the road, holding out his greasy hands. His feet were bare and his hair was tousled about his ears. “My father,” he cried out. “He is down in the shop with the headache and says Satan hisself is inside ‘im. There’s three ponies that need shod and I dunno how.”

The courtiers piled through the door to see. The boy stumbled backward and fell. “He needs the doctor nun, Sister. Needs her now.” He scrambled to his knees. “Please, Sister, don’t let him go. It’s only me now and I can’t—”

“Be still.” Christina was shoving through the knot of men and grabbed the boy by one grubby shoulder. The rag of shirt he wore slipped down his arm and he went slack in her grip. “Your father wants confession, is that it?” She turned and found the priest in the crowd. “John,

you will go see to this matter.” The priest went, dragging the sobbing boy, and Christina shooed the men back indoors. “You see what care we take of our people.”

Catherine was standing at the back, the quill in her hand. Witherington was behind her. “This is the sweating sickness, as I stand here,” he murmured.

“No. We are well,” insisted Catherine, pushing him back to the table. “Let me work. Let me show you.” She bent forward, and the locket fell free.

“What do you wear, girl?” said Witherington, lifting the ornament. He ran his good finger over the filigree, then opened the case. The miniatures of the queen and her daughter were still fine, and Catherine sat quietly while he examined the likenesses. “How do you come by this token?”

“It was a gift from the queen herself,” said Christina, elbowing her way in. “As you see, Catherine is expected at court.”

“These are a penny a peck,” said Witherington. The men now stood around him, and someone said, “We will ride. Now, Bartlemy.”

“You men take a walk about the village and see what you can see. I will stay with the prodigy and appraise her for myself.” They shifted and muttered, and he shouted at them. “Go, I say. Get you gone and I will tend to this. You women, too. Leave me to judge of this girl.”

Catherine lowered her eyes to her work as the inn emptied. The open grave, with its heap of putrid bodies, would be discovered. They would walk into Alise’s cottage and find her already rigid and cold. They would open the abandoned cottages, and someone would tell the tale. People had fallen dead in their bedchambers, dead over their suppers, dead in the open streets. Open kettles of concoctions made from boiled blind puppies and smelly oils still stood

behind empty hovels, where the inhabitants had hoped to drown whatever seeds of the sweat they carried.

The room, even with its shutters all opened, was searing, and the sweat trickled into Catherine's eyebrows. She brushed the back of her hand across her forehead, leaving a smear of white powder on her knuckles. The quill shook, but she took a breath and formed the letters. The pleasure of the words, coming into being under her fingers, overtook her and she closed her ears to whatever curses might come through the door to undo her.

"Your script is right nice," said Witherington. He scooted close, and Catherine breathed through her mouth, but the smell made her gag. She swallowed and dipped her point into the ink pot.

"You may halt your efforts there," the man said, laying his hand over hers. They sat together in silence, Catherine fearing any movement would decide the matter against her. Witherington finally pushed his chair back and went to the door. Catherine remained perched on her stool, awaiting his verdict.

"The village has the sickness, does it not?" he said finally. "Tell me truth, girl, and it will not go against you."

Catherine laid the quill down and swiveled on her seat. They were alone, and he leaned against the jamb as though at ease with her. With his back turned, she could imagine him a handsome young courtier, gallant even. Perhaps he would be her friend.

"You seem unafraid of infection," she said at last. "I wonder at your courage."

He burbled out a laugh but did not turn. "Courage. It takes little liver to face death when it knocks at my very heart." He ran a hand down his cheek. "You are a healer. You see what

ails me plain enough. This sweat burns England from Dover to the moors. It respects no person, whatever his station.”

This pricked Catherine’s mind and she stood. “I have been studying the signs. An infusion of willow bark has saved more than one. And you will note that many fall ill who indulge in rich diets. And those who drink water when the fever is upon them die. Every one. I believe that bathing in the infusion might bring a cure. Do you note that the ones who isolate them and drink nothing come through? Sleeping is sure death, of that I am convinced. Anyone who closes his eyes has handed his soul away. But the cure must be given when the first apprehensions of mind appear. You have heard of this, that a great fear comes on before the first pains in the head.” She stopped to breathe. Witherington had come back inside and stood staring at her.

“Is this all? Have you perhaps penned a volume on cures?” He was smiling, and Catherine felt her face flame.

“No.” She dropped her head.

“And how many have died this spring?” He put a finger under her chin. “Tell me.”

Catherine considered a moment. “I have counted fifty.”

“God’s blood,” he murmured. “That is half the village.”

“But a quarter,” she corrected. “I myself am well, as you see.” She lifted her face. “I believe God has blessed me with an immunity.”

“You are clean and fresh. No man would say otherwise.” He sat again and pulled Catherine closer to him. She was almost between his knees. “You know what the men will find. They may be at your graveyard as I speak. And then your hopes are at an end.”

“I may continue to hope as long as there is breath in my body.”

“And a tidy little body it is.” He sat back. “The prioress is most anxious to get you off her hands, that is plain as day. You are a burden to her, no doubt.”

“I . . . I have never thought of myself as a burden.”

“A trial to her soul. Keeping you. Educating you. It cannot be a simple task.”

“No.”

“But my men will be upon me to leave you here among your diseased companions.”

“I am prepared to go. I am untouched by illness.”

“Untouched. Now there is a thought.” He placed a hand on Catherine’s arm and felt the muscles under the light cloth. “You have skills, girl. And I have some power among these men. But what could persuade me to force them to do as I say? Hmm? What skills have you to sway me?” The hand moved from Catherine’s arm to her hip, but when she stepped sideways, she was caught by his bony knee. “You want to go to court or do you not?”

Catherine glanced over her shoulder. The door was closed and barred. She could hear no one on the road outside. “I am clean. I am destined for the queen’s service.” Her voice fluttered and a wad of something had lodged itself in her throat. “Please.”

“Ah. Please. She begs so sweetly.” He pulled her down, wedging his knee between her legs. “Now what will be done to please me?”

She could not speak, and he began to tug at her bodice. The knee moved beneath her, and she leaned as far backward as she was allowed. The stench of him brought bile into her mouth, and she thought she would faint. She closed her eyes. He was untying his breeches, and his hand, around her waist, was pulling her in. He would take her to court. He would make the men take her. Perhaps a small touch would please him enough. Perhaps it would not undo her

entire. His hand was under her skirt, tearing the layers of cloth away. "Come, show me what you can do. You'll be a fine little thing for the lady Anne's train. We'll kennel you with her."

Catherine opened her eyes. The chancres on his face were engorged with pus, and they had begun to twist his nose. He looked like Hell-mouth itself. Death was on him already. The hand let loose as he worked his other leg under her, and Catherine bolted backward. She staggered but stood, and her hand found the little surgical knife she kept in her pocket. "I am no thing and you will not make me your bitch. I am for the queen or myself alone."

He started up, but his breeches were unbound and he sat again with a thump. Catherine waved the small blade at him. "I sharpen my own edges, as well," she said. "And I have knowledge of surgeries."

Witherington narrowed his eyes, then tucked himself together and stood. Catherine clutched the knife.

"Put your toy away, little girl," he said. "You will have need of it when you are yourself alone." He shoved her aside and opened the door, leaving it creaking in the wind as he walked into the road.

Catherine waited until the whistling in her ears quieted. She heard nothing. She tiptoed to the front door. No one. She ran to the crossroads and slipped down the willow path until she reached the graveyard. From here she could see over the river to the fields. The corn and grasses had lifted themselves into the hot air with riotous growth, then shriveled, then fell. Fields lay uncut, and kine wandered unmilked and unfed, bellowing their unhappiness.

A horse whinnied, and Catherine whipped around. The men were on the high road, already in their saddles, and Christina was at the stirrup of Witherington, in a beseeching posture. The girl made her way toward them, keeping close to the trees, but they were not looking

anywhere but South. “You must,” the prioress was saying, but the man kicked out with his boot and she dropped away. Catherine moved to the next tree, and Christina spied her out.

“You see,” she said, running to Catherine and dragging her into full view. “She has not a mark of disease upon her. She has an immunity. She carries nothing.”

“The child is not beautiful enough,” said Witherington. “Nor has she manners adequate for London. She was born for the sheepfold and there she will stay.”

“But the queen expects her.”

“The queen has troubles enough.” He spurred his horse and the prioress jumped out of his way.

“You will hear from me. The queen will hear of this. The Havenses are not a family to be thwarted.”

“I see no Havenses here but one woman whose father has gotten rid of her and one bastard child. And if you send for a queen, you may be surprised to whom you send. There are reforms coming to England, woman, and you had better accustom yourself to a man’s hand.”

Christina turned at this and fled toward the convent. Veronica caught up with her and Catherine could hear the prioress shrieking before the door slammed behind them.

Catherine stood alone in the high road, watching the men ride off. They were laughing, but before they had reached the village gate, she saw two of them fall back, cradling their foreheads. They were only five in number. It would spread quickly. She walked as far as the crest of the hill and leaned against the church gate. “I will find me at court before you, ride as hard as you may,” she said to the dust billowing from their hooves. Catherine put her hand into her pocket, thumbing the point of her blade, and a small smile lifted one corner of her mouth.