

The Quickening

ELIZABETH (40S-50S): SEASONED MIDWIFE IN WHITE CHAPEL. STRONG-
WILLED AND MOSTLY SOFT-SPOKEN. WHEN SHE LOSES HER TEMPER, YOU
CAN SEE HER LOSE THE RESTRAINT THAT IS HOLDING HER BACK FROM
UNLEASHING ON EVERYONE. HAS LOTS TO SAY, BUT NOT ALWAYS
WILLING TO SAY IT.

SARAH (40S-50S): KNOWLEDGEABLE, A BIT BITTER, BUT A FIERCE
FRIEND. WORKS ALONGSIDE ELIZABETH AS A MIDWIFE.

MATILDA (LATE 30S EARLY 40S): JOLLY, SWEET, ENERGETIC GOSSIP.
NAÏVE, BUT ALSO AWARE OF HAPPENING AROUND HER. HELPS THE
MIDWIVES WITH THEIR WORK.

GINNY (LATE TEENS EARLY 20S): YOUNG AND NERVOUS. ALSO EAGER
TO LEARN AND PLEASE OTHERS, BUT SHE ISN'T STUPID. SHE'S HAD
TO GROW UP FAST AND LEARN BY HER WITS. ASSISTS AND LEARNS
FROM THE MIDWIVES.

HEDDRICK: ELIZABETH'S HUSBAND. COLD AND SECRETIVE. DOESN'T
LIKE HIS WIFE'S BUSINESS BUT DOESN'T HAVE THE CONSTERNATION
TO MAKE HER STOP. HE IS A BIT AFRAID OF HER AND AT THE SAME
TIME IS WORKING TO PASS LAWS REGULATING MIDWIFERY AND
PROSTITUTION.

PROLOGUE VOICES: TWO WOMEN OFFSTAGE.

PROLOGUE: HEARD IN THE PARTIAL DARKNESS. POSSIBLY SOME
SHADOWS.

VOICE 1

Did you hear ?

VOICE 2

What?

VOICE 1

It happened again. Last night. Third one. Oh... I don't like the looks of all this violence.

VOICE 2

It isn't close your house.

VOICE 1

But it could be. It could come close. To yours as well. Aren't you frightened?

VOICE 2

No. Why should I be?

VOICE 1

They say he's after only women. All of these murders are committed by the same man. Can you believe it? One man killing all those women.

VOICE 2

Yes, strange. To be angry at so many different people.

VOICE 1

Aren't you frightened?

VOICE 2

Of course not. I'm not in danger.

VOICE 1

You are! You're a woman.

VOICE 2

I'm not one of those women.

VOICE 1

Those women?

VOICE 2

You know what I mean. I'm not traipsing about at night. I'm a respectable lady, a married woman. I have protections. So do you... if you don't forget.

BLACKOUT.

ACT I SCENE 1 INT. A SIMPLE ENGLISH HOME DURING THE SUMMER OF 1888 ON THE SOUTHSIDE OF LONDON: WHITE CHAPEL. A SPARSE STAGE WITH A TABLE AND TWO CHAIRS AT CENTER, A SMALL DESK AND CHAIR WITH WRITING INSTRUMENTS IN THE CORNER, AND A WASH TABLE IN ANOTHER CORNER. WITH A ROCKING CHAIR.

ELIZABETH sits at the table at center. She is alone in the room, looking off with her hands gently placed on the table. Items of her midwifery profession lay outside a large basket and bloody towels are draped over the side. She sits in quiet contemplation, not revealing any particular emotion except for some fatigue. She is startled when SARAH enters the room suddenly and she puts a small notebook that has been laying on the table into the bag, gets up, and walks to the wash basin to wash her hands.

SARAH

(entering)

Not sure if this is hot enough, but I didn't want you to wait any longer.

Sarah crosses to the wash basin and slowly pours the water into the bowl.

ELIZABETH

It's fine.

Elizabeth washes her hands.

SARAH

I know how much blood stains bother you.

ELIZABETH

Certain blood stains, yes.

SARAH

..oh...yes...

ELIZABETH

I don't think it matters too much anymore. The stains are setting in, in the lines...in between each of my fingers and under the boundaries of my cuticles ..the stains get underneath. (Pause) and I can't tell the difference anymore anyway.

SARAH

Surely you can tell the...

ELIZABETH

The stains...only...

SARAH

Sorry, it has been a long night. Will you get some rest?

ELIZABETH

Mostly likely, unless someone else has an emergency. All my patients seem to be coming along smoothly. No one should be near confinement until the early fall, that I can reckon. Of course, nature always finds a way.

SARAH

That it does.

ELIZABETH

Can you wash my instruments, please, Sarah. I want to note a few things in my journal.

SARAH

Yes, ma'am.

Elizabeth removes the journal again from the bag and finds her pen and ink. She sits at the desk and begins to write.

SARAH

I was admiring your pen in the early morn, while we were resting alongside Katie's bedside. Is it new?

ELIZABETH

Yes. Heddrick bought it for me...as a gift, I suppose. He was acting especially thoughtful last month, though I don't know the occasion.

SARAH

Not an anniversary then?

ELIZABETH

No, we don't celebrate such nonsense. Not at our stage.

SARAH

Oh. then..why?

ELIZABETH

Hadn't much thought about it. We don't talk often.

SARAH

Oh?

Elizabeth nods. Sarah returns to washing the instruments. Elizabeth returns to writing in the journal. A long silence.

SARAH

Elizabeth? I'm hear to listen. You know that.

Elizabeth puts down the pen and looks around the room and at Sarah. Begins to write again and then stops.

ELIZABETH

Truly?

SARAH

Truly. You should know that by now.

Elizabeth takes a moment and looks around the room. Sarah seems to prod her on without being to forceful.

SARAH

It's okay. When did things begin to change?

ELIZABETH

I dunno, Sarah. It's been strange of late. Things between Heddrick and I. So quiet and strange.

SARAH

How so?

Elizabeth pauses and returns to the journal for a moment before closing and focusing her attention on Sarah again.

ELIZABETH

I trust this will not go further.

SARAH

You know me, Elizabeth, I'm always at your side. Not a word to anyone.

ELIZABETH

It's been several months, actually. He started coming home later. Work has kept him behind and he needs the light and warmth of the fire at the office to complete his work. His coat was torn one evening upon arriving home and I questioned what had happened. He scowled at me and stormed off to bed. Not a word after that. I stopped asking questions.

(pause)

We've always had a peaceful marriage, nothing unusual or disruptive. Well, you know that is until the pregnancy became..difficult. I know he blames me for the loss of the babe, said I wasn't careful enough, that I worked too hard for the lives of others and did not focus on the life inside of me, especially in the early months. I know that. I know that my response following the loss was not what he wanted. Not that I felt his response was anything that I needed.

SARAH

Such a difficult time for both of you. Don't worry yourself about what you did or what he thinks you did...or didn't do. You know better than anyone how difficult childbirth is, in all circumstances.

ELIZABETH

It just got harder each day, each month after that. I was hoping that we could try again, or at least find peace with each other.

I don't know exactly what I was hoping for, but...he never really talked about the child after that. He just assumed I was healed..physically and mentally...to close that chapter of our lives.

SARAH

No idea that pain, the physical pain you were in?

ELIZABETH

No, and I didn't bother to explain. He didn't want gory details. The light seemed to go out soon after that. I don't know, Sarah. I just... we never had much in the way of a deep conversation. How does one even do that? Between a man and a woman. I've never experienced that. You? Anyway, the years blended into each other and I just gave up on wondering.

Looks at the pen.

I'd rather not disturb such a simple gift.

(Pause and looks up horrified)

I'm dearly sorry. I shouldn't have rambled on like that. Forgive me.

SARAH

No, my fault. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry.

ELIZABETH

No matter...

SARAH

Please don't think that I judge in any way...

ELIZABETH

Sarah, you are my most trusted friend. You need not worry yourself over these things. I am honored that you chose to study with me and work by my side. God does know that I value your assistance. It's okay. We'll be fine. Even with the new laws, I think our work can continue.

SARAH

But Heddrick....

ELIZABETH

When it comes to my personal relationship with my husband, I am willing to provide a little context. Nothing more.

I don't believe any of this affects our work and I certainly don't want to burden you with my personal upheavals. Our friendship is strong enough to leave some things untouched. And... I believe we will be okay.

SARAH

I know we will be.

ELIZABETH

We all will. You'll see.

MATILDA, an older woman enters and drops a bag of bread and vegetables on the middle table. Sarah acknowledges her, but Elizabeth continues writing at the desk.

MATILDA

'ello, loves! Beautiful morn, isn't it? I got a great load today. Not much in meats, but bread and only slightly overripe turnips...not too bad for a Wednesday, eh? Sorry I'm a bit late. Had some of me own work to tend to and got off to a late start.

Sarah begins putting the vegetables and bread aside.

MATILDA

I plan on goin' by the blacksmith's again today. He was out again yesterday. Don't know what's been the trouble, but I hope to check on his dear wife and child later. Want to come along?

Matilda looks at the two women and walks over to Elizabeth at the desk. Elizabeth closes the journal quickly and stands up and startles Matilda.

MATILDA

Oh my!

ELIZABETH

Good to see you, Matilda. Yes, beautiful morning.

MATILDA

What's eatin' at ye, dear? Always so glum.

ELIZABETH

Not always.

MATILDA

Well...lately...

SARAH

It's been a long summer. Lots to do, many women need tending and we both feel a bit overwhelmed.

MATILDA

Not to mention all the new regulations placed upon ye...

SARAH

Don't even speak of that!

ELIZABETH

Sarah...

Sarah starts putting the dried utensils back in the bag.

MATILDA

I'm just point'n out that the powers that be, have been lookin' down at yer profession for quite some time. They will pass every rule they can 'till you can no longer catch a babe.

Matilda sighs and finishes unpacking ripe vegetables.

MATILDA

That will be a sad day, to be sure. I love helping and workin' alongside ya.

SARAH

I'll take the larger loaf with a few carrots. I just remembered I have a quick appointment this morning.

ELIZABETH

You were out all last night. Why don't you take a break this morning?

SARAH

I promised I would help you more. Besides, this lad is an easy one to check up on. Growing plump since his mum delivered. He's quite a happy baby. You rest yourself, Elizabeth. I have this one.

Matilda moves about the room, playing with various objects and looking about in a friendly, but inquisitive way.

MATILDA

I just love the wee ones! They are a treat. I remember my darling Charlie when his legs were so plump that he could hardly run down the street! Trying to sneak treats from the bakery, that one. Oh my...children are such a blessing. I wish I could have a dozen more, but this womb is all tuckered out!

Matilda laughs at her own joyfulness.

ELIZABETH

And how is your other boy, Tilly? Strong still?

MATILDA

Oh he's almost grown. Thinking about apprenticing soon and leaving us. We will be by ourselves with no mouths to feed soon. My William says he's lookin' to the that day, but I will miss the chatter. Always the clamoring about in the house with all the friends runnin' throughout. Such a joy.

SARAH

I can just imagine how that might change your life, seeing the lad leave the nest. I'm sure you will find something worthwhile to do, once he no longer needs tending. Hmm?

MATILDA

Of course! I will be here even more to help the two of you!

ELIZABETH

I'm delighted, of course, to have you help with us, Matilda. Just don't forget you still have William to tend to.

SARAH

And what could a grown man need at this point in his life? Can he wash and feed himself?

All laugh.

MATILDA

Oh of course! You know men. They always need something from us. I love my William. I'll be grateful to have some quiet time with him. When he is able to come home.

SARAH

Well, I'm grateful not to have that in my life, such as it is. I'm not very good at answering to anyone. I tried it once, and well, let's just say I can be a bit difficult.

ELIZABETH

All people can be difficult, not just husbands. Especially, when their work interests collide.

MATILDA

What is Heddrick to think of all this? You still going about working', probably even more than he does.

ELIZABETH

I'm perplexed, Tilly. You just stood there and told me what a shame it would be once the governor bans me from my profession, yet you turn your face and wonder how my husband handles a working wife? I think sometimes, Matilda, you like to stir up some trouble.

MATILDA

I'm sorry mum... I didn't mean to upset ye. Just a lit'l gossip. I hear he's been a bit surly and I assumed it had to do with all your work and such.

ELIZABETH

It is hard enough to have people whispering about me in the street, thinking I'm some kind of butcher when all I do is help women in their most vulnerable time. Yes, I lose a babe here and there. And God willing, the mothers live. Tis a dangerous thing to be giving birth, ya know. That does not mean...

MATILDA

I would never insinuate...

ELIZABETH

But you talk, Matilda. You talk and you must remember that any talk about a midwife, they immediately jump to the dark side of the profession.

MATILDA

Yes, Elizabeth...

ELIZABETH

And because there remains this...dunno... darkness and mysteriousness that surrounds our profession, men who profess to be experts are at a loss when their new techniques for birthing do not heed different results.

SARAH

Elizabeth...

ELIZABETH

Gossip...any talk...brings about more rumors.. I just don't want to hear.... I just don't want to have it affect my birthing mothers...my patients.... Ya hear? Many are frightened enough as it is.

MATILDA

Okay Elizabeth....

ELIZABETH

Does that make sense to you?

MATILDA

Aye. Just...

ELIZABETH

(Harshly)

What? ?

(softer)

What?

SARAH

Watch ye self, Elizabeth. I don't want your quick temper to cause you distress.

(Elizabeth begins to interrupt)

Now don't try to justify your anger. I've heard your voice cut through a room before. You can be quite...

ELIZABETH

Quick to anger?

MATILDA

Uppity. When needs be.

SARAH

You...we...all need to know our place. Be slow to anger, if you will.

Elizabeth moves to the desk and sits. She takes out her journal then puts it back.

ELIZABETH

Yes. I will. You have my promise, Sarah. You are a dear and thank you for calming my temper when the need arises. Matilda...

Goes to embrace Matilda.

My apologies my friend. I didn't mean to frighten you. I've been so tense lately.

MATILDA

I am always on your side, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

I hope so! I need you both. We need each other. We can't allow all this fear and uncertainty to break our bond, right?

MATILDA

You can count on me, as you count on the ringing of the church bell.

Elizabeth and Sarah look at each other quizzically. (a ringing church bell was a euphemism in the Victorian Era to mean an overly talkative woman).

MATILDA

(Clarifying) Steady and true.

All murmur, yes, of course.

ELIZABETH

All right, then. Get off. I'm sure you have much to do this morning. I don't want to hold you from your work. Did Sarah pay you?

MATILDA

Tis on me, Elizabeth. For your work. Take care.

Matilda exits and Elizabeth and Sarah give each other a look of relief before returning to their previous duties.

GINNY, a young girl about 18-years-old barges into the house and runs up to Elizabeth. Sarah closes the door behind her and pulls her back from Elizabeth who is still writing.

SARAH

Ginny! Are you mad? What are ye doin'?

GINNY

So sorry, misses, we need your help down the road.

SARAH

You can't just barge into someone's house like this.

ELIZABETH

Quiet yourself...both of you.

Elizabeth pauses and then quickly puts away the journal, pen and ink. The journal she sets down on the table.

ELIZABETH

Give me a moment, Ginny. I need to catch my breath.

Smooths out her skirt and removes a clean apron from the peg on the wall and ties it around her waist.

ELIZABETH

I'll walk with you. Is it...?

GINNY

Yes, Victoria. She's laboring. It's much too soon. The babe can't be ready yet.

ELIZABETH

Babies come not when we tell them to, but when they feel it is their time. And even nature is sometimes wrong.

SARAH

Even nature knows when something is amiss and must end it before the suffering continues.

ELIZABETH

Sarah! We won't know until we look, yes?

GINNY

What are you saying?

ELIZABETH

I'm saying... I'm saying .we have work to do. Come Ginny. Let's be off. Grab hold of that loaf. We will need some food to help if this is going to be a long day .

SARAH

I'll be but a moment, Elizabeth. I'll clean these last few tools and make my way down.

ELIZABETH

Thank you, Sarah. Please hurry, though. Victoria is a sickly creature. Not sure of her chances for this babe.

Elizabeth and Ginny exit and Sarah continues to clean the instruments and put them in a separate bag. She sees Elizabeth's journal and places that in the bag and goes to exit when Matilda re-enters.

MATILDA

Elizabeth! Dear Elizabeth!

SARAH

Back so soon with more gossip?

MATILDA

Look at the paper! Where is Elizabeth?

Matilda produces a newspaper and shows to Sarah.

SARAH

(Reading the headline and looking at the picture)

“A Whitechapel Horror!”

(pause)

A murder here...in Whitechapel?

MATILDA

What should we do?

SARAH

I don't know what you mean. Do what?

MATILDA

She was one of your patients, aye? Yours and Elizabeth's?

SARAH

Yes.....yes she was, poor woman. I told her several times to be careful. We both warned them all to be careful. Don't trust any one. So many bad elements out there at night.

MATILDA

Aren't ye afraid?

SARAH

There's nothing to be afraid of. Shall I make you a cup of tea?

Sarah exits to the other room while Matilda mutters to herself, pacing about and glancing about.

SARAH

(offstage)

Look, Tillie, I'm sure the police will find the man before tomorrow. You're just ...hysterical.

MATILDA

Of course I'm hysterical. Me thinks this could be a terrible thing for ya and Elizabeth. Why, everyone knows you tend to the women who serve the night. And now...

Matilda goes to kitchen doorway just as Sarah comes through with the kettle and pushes her back into the room.

...one of those same women, who has been in your care has been brutally murdered. Aren't you afraid they will come for you?

Sarah hands a cup of tea to Matilda.

SARAH

Who's coming for us? This monster?

MATILDA

We don't know who this monster is. Perhaps it's the authorities. They are brutal to these women when they are trying to round them up. I've seen it with my own eyes.

SARAH

Authorities are not happy with our work, but I sincerely don't believe they would stoop to murder to get me to stop my practice, or more, to have me snuffed out. Besides, it's been years since poor Mary has born a babe. No one knows how we care for those women who use their bodies for other....occupations.

MATILDA

Ya never know what those scoundrels are up to.

SARAH

Matilda, you can't be serious. Here, drink your tea. I added a touch of Valerian to help calm ye nerves.

MATILDA

I know Elizabeth's Heddrick t'will be worried.

SARAH

I'm sure Heddrick will be worried, but not about what you think.

MATILDA

How so?

SARAH

Elizabeth's husband worries far more about his position than what his wife is doing, especially to help these women.

He sees it as unnatural and worries our work will have a negative effect on how others will see his work or possible advancements he tries to make.

MATILDA

A man who can't control his wife cannot be in control, or so they say.

SARAH

Exactly. And yet, he continues to let her practice.

MATILDA

Quietly.. secretly, almost. Why, it's a shame that he doesn't stand up for Elizabeth, after all she has done for him.

SARAH

Husbands are a difficult lot. I had one myself for a bit of time, but they hinder more than necessary.

MATILDA

'Tis hard to live without one, though, isn't it?

SARAH

Slightly...

MATILDA

Ever think to marry again? Ya know, it makes life easier even if their demands are difficult. It's hard to be a single woman without the means of that support.

SARAH

True. Not much for a woman to do to make an honest living. Thankfully, mine left a small inheritance upon his untimely death. I can live without doing what poor Mary had to do to eat and sleep. Glad my training with Elizabeth has also gotten me by all these years. Can't imagine what would happen if I had children to feed.

Sarah finishes up the washing and puts the utensils in the bag.

Matilda jumps up.

MATILDA

What do ya mean, Sarah? You would toss away the morals that God gave ye?

SARAH

What? Now don't go judging these poor women for what they have to do.

MATILDA

How can ye not judge them. Such is disgusting way of life, that's what I say.

SARAH

You think they enjoy this way of life?

MATILDA

Maybe not after a while, but they be drinking and carousing about...taking away someone's husband when they should be home... and when they get older, they have to sell themselves because they don't..they refuse to have a husband to rightly support them.

SARAH

Mary did not deserve to die.

MATILDA

Maybe not, but these types of women need to turn from their ways or else... they have no one to blame when they get hurt. At least they aren't havin' babes. Women such as these shouldn't be child-rearing. And what they do to decent husbands. .. What they are doin' is taking a good man away from his family...

SARAH

Are you talking about your own husband, Matilda?

MATILDA

Certainly not! My William is an upstanding chap. Nothin' bad in his bones.

SARAH

Then why begrudge a few women a bit of change to get them by?

MATILDA

Because they make us look bad, ye see. How they live.

SARAH

This makes them ...what? Devious?

MATILDA

Dishonest.

SARAH

You should think before you speak, Matilda. I see the way you carry on and gossip. Doesn't make you less of a woman, but certainly not very trustworthy, I'll say that.

MATILDA

Me? Not trustworthy?

SARAH

That's what they say.

(Long pause)

SARAH

I hear you, Matilda.. and I hear about you.

MATILDA

What does that mean?

SARAH

You pretend to be a good woman, caring for people by giving them nuggets you think they might need. But that isn't it, is it? No. You gossip, spreading hurtful messages, truths.. yes possibly, but not always. You twist things so that it's more interesting, makes you look ...I dunno, like an important person, but really, you're lonely and you want the attention.

MATILDA

You're just being hurtful, Sarah. I never said anything mean about you.

SARAH

No?

(Pause)

Remember last May, I think it 'twas.. it was especially cold and I had used up all my winter wood. I didn't have too much left so I had to ask my neighbors to spare a few pieces to keep me goin' during that cold snap. You remember, don't ye? Came over with a few logs of your own and I was so grateful. Then the next day, I popped out to get a loaf of bread and heard you talking with the butcher. I was goin' to come over and thank you again and tell you to thank your husband for the extra coal that he dropped off the week before, but you were whispering with old Victoria. She was listening so closely so I couldn't make out what you were saying, but she told me later. On my way back she chastised me for getting food when I was out begging the day before. Said that you told her I was in all sorts of trouble and couldn't care for myself.

Said that if only I could keep a husband I wouldn't be in this condition.

(Pause)

Matilda turns to leave and stops at the door.

SARAH

Think about how you cast others, Matilda. Others might see something in you that they do not like. and it doesn't make us all bad...or all good. Ya know, how we treat each other, that's important.

Matilda exits. Sarah finishes packing the basket with utensils and begins to leave when HEDDRICK enters.

HEDDRICK

Morrow, Sarah. Where's my wife?

SARAH

Heddrick, good morning. Elizabeth has stepped out. Tending to a young mother. I'm on my way there myself. Can I take her a message?

HEDDRICK

No.

(Long pause)

SARAH

Fair enough. Did you hear the news about the murder?

HEDDRICK

Grisly business. Lots of unsavory fellows out there. You would do best to watch yourself, Sarah, especially in the eve. Not safe for anyone, particularly women, to be running about in the night. No matter what good work they are doing.

SARAH

Aye. And I appreciate that. Elizabeth and I are never far from each other. We watch out for each other, in case you are worried about her safety.

HEDDRICK

No, I don't worry about her safety. Maybe the safety of anyone who wishes to cross her.

(Heddrick laughs and Sarah joins in)

HEDDRICK

Would like a morning drink?

Heddrick exits to the kitchen and brings about a bottle and two glasses.

SARAH

No, thank you. I'm not one to take a drink in the morning. Doesn't set well in my stomach.

HEDDRICK

Suit yourself. Probably best. You are off to tend another birth?

SARAH

Checking in ...hopefully the babe doesn't come too soon.

Heddrick washes at the basin and notices the blood spatters.

HEDDRICK

Dammit women! This basin is soiled! Do you not know enough to clean up after yourselves?

SARAH

My apologies... I...

HEDDRICK

Bad enough my wife is rarely home. She has a house to take care of, not these... (disgusted) sorrowful women. There are proper doctors to take care of this business now...

SARAH

Most don't have the resources...

HEDDRICK

Then they shouldn't be having babies, now should they?

SARAH

It's not always that simple... many of these women have husbands who...

HEDDRICK

Who what? Who don't take care of their families? Who aren't present in the house?
What?

(Pause)

SARAH

I was going to say...who aren't financially able to pay for expensive treatment.

HEDDRICK

Arrrguh!...

Heddrick begins to storm about.

SARAH

You know very well, Heddrick, that families don't have money these expensive doctors are asking. It's not fair!

HEDDRICK

They have better treatment! Better resources! Those things need to be paid for!

SARAH

Are the treatments better? Do you know that or are you just assuming because these schools came up with them ...to push us out!

HEDDRICK

I've had enough of your insolence, woman! Get out of my house.

SARAH

I'm sorry, Heddrick, you know the odds. You cannot change what nature has intended.
(Long pause)

HEDDRICK

Tell my wife I expect her this afternoon. I have an important meeting that I cannot miss and I would like to see her before I leave for Parliament tomorrow. Will you, Sarah, please convey this?

SARAH

Of course. I'm sorry to disrupt you, Heddrick. Have a good morning.

Sarah exits and Heddrick leaves the room for a second with the second glass.

He comes back in, pours himself another drink then pulls out a journal from the desk, sits down and begins to write.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT I SCENE 2

Later that early evening. Elizabeth is seated in a rocking chair sewing. Heddrick is at the desk writing. They remain quiet for some time. Dishes from dinner are still on the table. Elizabeth gets up and begins to clear the table of the dirty dishes.

ELIZABETH

Another drink before I take the glass?

HEDDRICK

Leave it. I'm not done for this evening.

ELIZABETH

Very well.

Elizabeth clears the table of dishes and leaves the bottle and one glass.

HEDDRICK

Would you like to join me in a drink?

Elizabeth hesitates, then nods and brings out another glass from the kitchen. She pours two glasses from the bottle and hands it to Heddrick who stands and places his arm on her shoulder in a somewhat affectionate gesture.

HEDDRICK

Been a rough day for both us, I presume.

ELIZABETH

It's been a rough week. Summer is going by so quickly and I feel that we just aren't prepared for the coming winter.

HEDDRICK

We'll be fine.

ELIZABETH

Heddrick?

HEDDRICK

Yes Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

How...

(changes the topic)

..... Did you hear the horrible news?

HEDDRICK

I saw the paper, yes. Horrible. Gruesome, even. I hope the police find the bastard.

ELIZABETH

She was one of my patients.

HEDDRICK

Dear... I'm so sorry. Was she far along? I didn't read that she was with child.

ELIZABETH

She wasn't.

HEDDRICK

Oh?

ELIZABETH

Yes, it has been some time.

HEDDRICK

She is...was...no longer a patient then.

ELIZABETH

Always a patient. I tend to women in all sorts of stages of life.

HEDDRICK

You are a midwife, Elizabeth. You attend to the births of children. I don't understand why you have to continue to attend to women after or even long after a babe is born.

ELIZABETH

I helped her through childbirth in the past, yes, but I gave her frequent check-ups since then. Even when a woman isn't pregnant, we check in with them. To keep them healthy.

HEDDRICK

Healthy? To what end?

ELIZABETH

Hedrick, let's not get into this now.

HEDDRICK

No, let's. What exactly are you preventing, Elizabeth, with these check-ups your giving? Is this how your using your valuable time?

ELIZABETH

Are you insinuating that a women's health is only important when she is with child?

Hedrick turns away from her.

ELIZABETH

What about me, Hedrick? Does my health not count?

HEDDRICK

Elizabeth, I'll hear no more of this tonight. It's been quite a day.

ELIZABETH

(biting)

I'm sure it has, what with you working so hard to keep the people of London safe and healthy. With your new regulations over my profession and my patients. Yes, of course, the women of London need you thoughtful men to tirelessly address our medical needs.

Hedrick turns to leave.

ELIZABETH

You might be able to fool all those important people into thinking you have such a benevolent mind and soul, but I know you are rabidly trying to work yourself into a position of power.

HEDDRICK

For us, Elizabeth! For us! Why do you think I use the tools that God has given me? Every night supper is on the table and enough wood and coal to burn to keep us warm and clothing ...and shoes... You are not the only one working late nights for the good of the people...yes...the good of the people but also for our own sakes. Don't pretend that you are some benevolent thing yourself. You love the control you have over these women. It's almost pathological, even.

ELIZABETH

What did you wish to talk to me about tonight, Heddrick.

HEDDRICK

What do you mean?

ELIZABETH

The drink, Heddrick. You never ask me to sit with you and have an evening drink. What is it that you want?

Long pause.

ELIZABETH

Well, what is it?

HEDDRICK

I wish to speak with you about.....about some changes of which I'm sure you are aware, but...

ELIZABETH

About how my work will be crippled...

HEDDRICK

... changed...

ELIZABETH

If you are going to put it that way, then how am I to know if what you are telling me is the truth?

HEDDRICK

I don't lie, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

You don't truth-tell either. I think it's something in between.

(Pause)

I wish you would trust me....again....like you used to. Why don't you trust me with the truth?

HEDDRICK

Because you don't trust me.

Elizabeth turns away.

HEDDRICK

Do you? Anymore? You used to, Liza, where did it go?

ELIZABETH

I don't know.. I just...

HEDDRICK

You used to love me. What happened, Liza?

Elizabeth turns to him and looks at him for a moment.

ELIZABETH

I shouldn't have to tell you, Heddrick. It wasn't just the baby. It was what you did...or what you didn't do. I needed you and you abandoned me.

HEDDRICK

I had to keep the family...us going. What did you expect me to do? Break down in melancholy? I'm a man, Elizabeth. Your demands are too...

ELIZABETH

Too what? Human?

HEDDRICK

I will not have you mar my character anymore, Elizabeth. I expect you to live up to my expectations as my wife, nothing more.

ELIZABETH

And what will you do?

HEDDRICK

Same as I always have. Provide for you, as intended. Look, I know you think my position is secure and that my work means nothing...

ELIZABETH

I know it means everything to you.

HEDDRICK

And it should mean everything to you, as well. It provides for this house and for you. With my position and the work I do, you can continue to care for these women who have no other place to go. I care, Elizabeth...about what you do...for them.

ELIZABETH

I realize that...

HEDDRICK

In a sense, it provides for them, these women who find themselves in desperation. My pay cares for them...

ELIZABETH

They pay!

HEDDRICK

Not what they should! If they had any ability or sense they would go to a proper doctor or not get in these positions which require them to seek out your assistance!

ELIZABETH

How dare you!

HEDDRICK

How dare I what, Elizabeth? Recognize what is really going on? Recognize my complacency in these acts and still allow my wife to support prostitution that runs rampant through this city?

Elizabeth turns to leave.

HEDDRICK

You think I am harsh and cruel, Elizabeth, but I am trying to do what is best for us and sometimes that goes against what you think is best...especially when you're trying to save peoplenot worth saving.

ELIZABETH

Who decides, Heddrick?

HEDDRICK

What?

ELIZABETH

Who decides who is worth saving, who is worthwhile? Is it you? The rest of the borough council? The church?

HEDDRICK

Corruption is rampant. London is steeped in sickness. Lawlessness is everywhere. Dammit, Liza, there is a killer on the loose!

ELIZABETH

One murder!

HEDDRICK

One murder reported!

Silence.

ELIZABETH

What do you mean?

HEDDRICK

I mean, who knows how many others. I talked with the constable today. Bumped into him in the street. He recognized me from the borough meetings and let me know that this was not the first...and probably not the last.

ELIZABETH

That's...awful...

HEDDRICK

Yes it is.

ELIZABETH

Heddrick?

HEDDRICK

Do you understand now? If they don't protect themselves..get off the streets and take care of themselves in a proper manner... they...

ELIZABETH

They what?

HEDDRICK

They will cost the city more resources. They put themselves into these situations. We can only help so much. Creating laws for not only their profession, but yours as well, protects all of us. We all must sacrifice something and if that means they must find other employment, or you need to follow guidelines and get certifications, well it is for the good of London.

ELIZABETH

And you believe that?

HEDDRICK

I do.

ELIZABETH

I know you want to believe it. I know the man that I married was a man who looked down on no one and wished only to lift people up. You were an inspiration to me.

HEDDRICK

What has changed then?

ELIZABETH

You.. Or us. I'm not sure.

Heddrick moves in close and wraps his arms around Elizabeth. They are still for a moment.

HEDDRICK

We have gotten older...hopefully wiser. My love for you is still strong. That won't ever change. And I still admire your courage and your wisdom.

ELIZABETH

Do you now?

HEDDRICK

Of course! I still seek your counsel. Your advice and information about your work is an important part of my work . I take that information back to the counsel...to develop these laws so that your midwifery is safe and mothers are safe.

ELIZABETH

True. I appreciate that you still seek my counsel.

HEDDRICK

It is the other work you do...

ELIZABETH

But that is just it. You don't seem to understand, it isn't just about birthing children. It is so much more than that.

HEDDRICK

I'm not a doctor, Elizabeth. I don't pretend to know all about female anatomy, but it can't be all that different from men. Leave it alone and God will tend to it properly.

ELIZABETH

That's how all you men think! You don't realize all the implications of your meddling!

HEDDRICK

Our meddling?

ELIZABETH

How many midwives are on your committee? How many doctors? How many people with actual knowledge of the female anatomy?

Silence from Heddrick

ELIZABETH

Exactly! You are meddling in morality and what you think is right for women..for our own good. Not what we think, not our well-being, and definitely not autonomy.

HEDDRICK

Why in the good Lord's name would you need or want autonomy? Isn't that why we have marriage? Partnerships were created so that we could take care of you just as you take care of us. We are here to protect, Elizabeth. I don't understand how an intelligent woman like yourself doesn't understand that. I would get that from Matilda and even Sarah, but not you.

ELIZABETH

And what of the women who require my assistance?

HEDDRICK

What of them?

ELIZABETH

Do they not have a voice?

HEDDRICK

Why should they?

ELIZABETH

Heddrick!

HEDDRICK

Look, I don't mean to be flippant but some are worth saving and some aren't. It's simple. Seek out a decent life. We can help provide for you in the meantime, in times of danger such as now, but our resources are limited. Your resources, Elizabeth, are limited. You only have so much energy to give and right now not too much of it is being used for your primary duties right here in this home. Find someone...or train others to do those duties. Someone suited to that work...and quickly.

ELIZABETH

Do you support me and my work or not?

HEDDRICK

To a point. I'm a progressive man., Liza. I do what I can, but I'm only one man. Compromises have to be made and right now you and your charges are in the crosshairs. I can only do so much.

ELIZABETH

I understand. Ill try to be more thoughtful of that.

HEDDRICK

Appreciate that.

ELIZABETH

In the meantime, a little respect for what I do, especially in public can go along way. I need some respect for Sarah as well. She works hard and gets paid even less than I do. There's much dirty work.

HEDDRICK

I will try. But Sarah needs to know her place. An unmarried woman with little means can fall right back into the gutter with all the others. She needs to be wary of her words.

ELIZABETH

I still wonder where you stand. You straddle that line so carefully, my dear love. You want to be benevolent and yet are so careless with your stinging words. Not everyone can be as upstanding as you.

HEDDRICK

I do not understand your meaning, love.

ELIZABETH

I don't forget, Heddrick. I know sometimes your talk paints a picture of an upright, moral man, but your actions lend themselves to other motives. You might not have visited any of these women in recent months, but we both know your perchance for vulnerable women. You call them desperate and not worthy of saving, yet their services are still tempting you all the same.

Elizabeth leaves the house, leaving Herrick standing alone by the desk.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT 1 SCENE 3

Ginny is washing utensils while Sarah is entering and exiting through the kitchen to clear away the dishes from the table. Ginny is humming to herself quietly. And looking at jars on the shelves, inspecting them.

GINNY

Which one is this?

SARAH

That's wild pansy.

GINNY

Does it help with pain in childbirth?

SARAH

No, this not one for childbirth.

Takes the jar from Ginny and puts it back on the shelf.

GINNY

It's not like Pennyroyal, is it? It doesn't kill the baby?

SARAH

No, it's not like Pennyroyal.

Sarah absently straightens the jars and other things, while talking to Ginny.

You're getting old enough and learned enough to hear these things. Ginny, there are other treatments we provide....not just childbirth or assisting new mothers with child-rearing. We also help women when a sickness needs to be treated. A specific type of sickness ...that comes... that has been passed along through engagement with a man.

GINNY

I know what you speak. Mum said that my father had the French Disease and that's why he went mad and left us. She died soon after. Didn't much talk about it.

SARAH

Then you know that the treatments aren't very helpful. Some are just painful. We try to ease the symptoms with herbals, so that they don't pass it along to others.

Pause

SARAH

This is one of the laws Heddrick is working on. To help stop the spread.

GINNY

So that's good.

SARAH

To help the spread...yes. I don't think his focus is to help the unfortunates at all.

They continue to clean and organize. Ginny continues to hum a bit louder this time.

SARAH

What is that song your singing?

GINNY

'Tis nothin'. Just a wee little tune my mum used to sing to me to help calm my nerves. I was quite the nervous child.

SARAH

You don't say?

GINNY

No really! It took me quite a while to become as composed and calm as I am right now.

Sarah is amused and stops her work to give Ginny all her attention.

SARAH

Tell me.

GINNY

Ya know, it comes with time. Learned it from me mum before she passed. Tried using those ways on my wee brothers, but they could never be calmed.

SARAH

Didn't know you had brothers. Are they here in Whitechapel?

GINNY

No, one passed away as a child. Such a sickly boy. Couldn't keep any food in him. The other, he could never calm his feet or his hands. Got caught stealing one too many times. Mostly food because we was all a hungry lot, but sometimes trinkets. He's in the workhouse running off his sins.

SARAH

Who else is left? Father? Aunt?

GINNY

Nah, just me. Living by me wits, as my grandmum used to say. She's the one who sang to me mostly. Sometimes my mum, but she was melancholy and I didn't see her much before the sickness got her.

SARAH

That song... that your grandmum's song?

GINNY

Yes mum. Irish tune I believe. I don't remember the words, just the notes. Helps to calm me nerves, as you can tell. I'm almost calm now.

SARAH

I know the song.

GINNY

Ya do?

SARAH

Yes...

GINNY

Didn't expect an upstanding woman like you knowin' an Irish song like that!

SARAH

You would be surprised what I know, girl.

GINNY

I'm just sayin' that...

SARAH

Not admonishing you, child. I come from simple stock, too. don't ever need to apologize for it. Be who ya are, ya hear? Love those songs always but love where ya goin'. That's up to you.

GINNY

Yes mum.

SARAH

Ya don't remember any of the words?

GINNY

No mum.

SARAH

Let me see if I can...

Sarah sits by the basin and washes her hands
absentmindedly. Ginny watches her from across
the room while she sings.

SARAH

O woman, washing beside the river,
My woeful wail, do you pity never?
A year ago I was snatched for ever,
From my home to the hill where hawthorns quiver,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
Shoheen sho, ulolo,
Shoheen sho, strange baby O!
Shoheen sho, ulolo,
You're not my own sweet baby O!

How many are there of fairest faces,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
Bright-eyed boys with manly graces,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine.
Gold-haired girls with curling tresses,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
And mothers who nurse - with sad caresses,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
Shoheen sho, ulolo,
Shoheen sho, strange baby O!
Shoheen sho, ulolo,
You're not my own sweet baby O!

Say, pluck the herb where hawthorns quiver,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
And wish a wish that God may deliver,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,
If he come not now - he need come never,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine,

For I shall be Queen of these Fairies for ever,
Hush-a-by baby, babe not mine.
You're not my own sweet baby O!

Sarah is lost in the words of the song and during this, Ginny begins to open the journal on the table and glance inside. As soon as she opens it, her eyes grow wide with horror. Sarah finishes the song and turns to talk to Ginny, seeing her reading the journal and yells at her.

SARAH

What in the heavens, do ya think you're doin'? That there is a personal journal and thoughts!

GINNY

I'm sorry! I didn't know.

SARAH

Do you think you can just wander in and root through someone's private dealings?

GINNY

I didn't know... I didn't mean any harm!

Sarah grabs the journal and places it in the drawer in the desk and pulls Ginny away from the desk, tossing her to the floor.

SARAH

You small-minded ungrateful child!
Elizabeth trusts you and you betray her with your evilness!

GINNY

Please, Miss Sarah! I was only curious. I didn't see nothin'. I swear! I saw nothin'!

SARAH

Can you even read, fool?

GINNY

I only read a little, I dunno what it said. I was just looking...no harm!

SARAH

Enough. Get out. Come back when you are able to mind yourself.

GINNY

Yes, mum.

Ginny grabs her bag and Exits.

SARAH
(Under her breath)

Ridiculous child.

Sarah goes to the drawer. Pulls out the journals and puts it back on the desk. She begins to finish clearing the table of dishes when Elizabeth enters.

ELIZABETH
Oh Sarah, thank you so much for clearing everything away. I just don't seem to have the strength this afternoon.

SARAH
Why so tired? You ill?

ELIZABETH
No, just lack of sleep. My brain has been jumping around in my skull and I can seem to quiet it.

SARAH
You and Heddrick go around again?

Elizabeth gives her a scowl.

SARAH
I'm not prying! You brought it up before.

ELIZABETH
I suppose you're right and no, we didn't go 'round. Just thinking all sorts of things. Hearing so much about the dangers in the area and worrying for everyone.

SARAH
'tis a dangerous area. Ever think about leaving?

ELIZABETH
And goin' where? The new country?

SARAH

Why not?

ELIZABETH

I can't see Heddrick wanting to move, not with all his work trying to clean up this part of the city. He's invested too much.

SARAH

And what about you?

ELIZABETH

Me too, I guess.

SARAH

There are pregnant women in America, too.

ELIZABETH

But London will always be home. It'll be fine. It isn't nearly as bad as the papers keep saying.

SARAH

Look around, Liza! Children are choking on the soot in the air, families are starving for lack of fresh foods, the land around seems to be dying. And now this new evil? I am by no means a religious woman, Liza, but Satan has infiltrated our streets and now I fear god has no place.

ELIZABETH

This is a strange turn of topic for you, Sarah. What 's eating at you?

SARAH

Maybe it's these women who turn up dead. Or maybe it's the work we do, or if there might be any connection. I don't know but I'm feeling very uneasy.

ELIZABETH

You speak of our irregular work...before the quickening.

SARAH

I'm not ungodly either. I wonder if we are damned as these women are damning themselves.

ELIZABETH

That's all nonsense. We provide an herbal remedy to expel an unwanted babe...before it has time to become. No breath yet.

SARAH

and I know that. But I'm struggling here. With my own ghosts.

ELIZABETH

Always remember that practicality is most important. What would you have these women do? Give the babe to someone else to raise? Who would have these children? There is no room in the orphanages. You of all people should know that.

SARAH

(softly)

A terrible place...

ELIZABETH

Have her keep the child?

SARAH

Heavens no. They are not fit to be mothers!

ELIZABETH

What makes you say that?

SARAH

That's not a world for a child...

ELIZABETH

...they do these things..just like we all do things, to stay alive. You work to keep your house heated and food on the table, just as I.

SARAH

You have other means of support...

ELIZABETH

Exactly. I am reliant on my husband, but what of those whose husbands and fathers have abandoned them or turned from them or went to an early grave. I also have you...and you have me. The support we give each other goes beyond financial security. But what of those women?

SARAH

So...

ELIZABETH

So if they should find themselves with child, don't they deserve the right to determine if they could be the mothering type? Don't we all deserve that, Sarah?

SARAH

Of course they do.

ELIZABETH

And should society deem them unfit as a parent just because they must sell the only thing available to them?

SARAH

It is a complex question.

ELIZABETH

That it is. One that is probably the most personal and yet so many are unable to make that decision because others do it for them. What mother knows if they are a good mother or not until it actually comes about? None of us have any idea what we are fully capable of. But...we should all be afforded our options. I say, leave those decisions to the women and leave us to tend to our services, whatever they may be. Quickening or not.

Matilda bursts in with a copy of the paper.

MATILDA

Dear me, Elizabeth!

ELIZABETH

For the Lord's sake, Matilda, how many times have I asked you...

SARAH

You really need to stop all this foolishness, Matilda!

ELIZABETH

I can't have you running in anytime you are upset about anything? What will the neighbors think? You might scare poor Ginny and you know how easy it is to frighten that poor girl .

SARAH

I can't understand what could possibly get you all upset? I wouldn't worry about the neighbors, Elizabeth, they have enough on their mind. Oh..Ginny, I forgot to tell you..

BOTH OF YE...STOP!
MATILDA

Matilda hands the paper to the two women and walks to sit down in a chair, fanning herself.

Another murder...
SARAH

Seems so...
ELIZABETH

What are we to do?
MATILDA

What in God's name do you mean...
ELIZABETH

Elizabeth...
SARAH

No! I'm sorry, but I'm tired of the burden of women to fix the problem of our cities and towns! Taking the Lord's name is the least of our worries.
ELIZABETH

I don't mind ye cursing, but you are so quick to temper. Tilly didn't mean..
SARAH

I didn't mean..
MATILDA

I know you didn't mean anything, Tilly, and I don't mean to startle you. I'm.. I'm tired. Show me the paper.
ELIZABETH

They all take a second and read through the story silently.

She wasn't one of yours.
SARAH

ELIZABETH

Does she have to be?

SARAH

No...

ELIZABETH

Don't have to have a personal connection with people to feel sympathy, do I? Do you?
Why don't we have more compassion for those in need than those who we cherish most?

All women are silent for a bit. Matilda picks up
the paper and Elizabeth goes and blocks the
door.

MATILDA

Please let me leave, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

I will.. I just.

Elizabeth sits down and begins to sob quietly.
Sarah and Matilda go to her and comfort her.

MATILDA

What is it?

SARAH

She's been through so much.. We all have.

ELIZABETH

No, it's just.... I'm not feeling myself. I'm uncertain of... who I am.

SARAH

Oh Elizabeth...Liza, you are who you've always been. A healer. A friend. To everyone.

MATILDA

Even me!

SARAH

(Laughs)

Yes, even you.

MATILDA

No, I mean it. I know I can be difficult to deal with sometimes. My William tells me all the time. Always shooing me away from him so that he can get some peace.

(Pause)

I 'preciate all that you've allowed me to do, Elizabeth. You give me purpose.

ELIZABETH

And what of mine? Hmm? My ability to do my work is whittled away by these foolish politicians and charlatan doctors who don't know from which end a baby emerges! Will my husband get his wish and have his wife only at home to care for his meals and clean empty rooms?

All are silent for a bit.

ELIZABETH

(Standing)

Excuse me for a few moments....please...'m going to get a bit of fresh air. Please stay. Will you?

SARAH

Of course. Take a bit of time to yourself. Go get some fresh flowers at the market, if you wish.

Elizabeth looks at both of them and exists. Sarah and Matilda look to each other and begin to putter about the room.

MATILDA

What do you suppose is eatin' at her?

SARAH

Matilda...

MATILDA

It's not like her, ya know. She's always so pulled together. Now she doesn't know her purpose? What in the heavens does that mean?

SARAH

I imagine she is still struggling with the loss of the babe.

MATILDA

It has been some time.

SARAH

And how long, do you suppose it would take you to recover from the loss of one of your boys? Hmm.

MATILDA

Suppose that would be never. Not that she saw her babe grown, but yes, I guess that would take some time.

SARAH

Don't look at me like I have all the answers. Who knows what goes through her mind most of the time and with the added pressure of that horrible husband...

MATILDA

Sarah...

SARAH

I mean, what ever draws a woman to a man like that? I wonder.

MATILDA

People change over time. You know that, especially men. Men with a bit of power tucked into their belt. Suppose it might be the same with women. They get some power, a taste of that, things change.

SARAH

Not our Elizabeth.

Significant pause.

MATILDA

We should hope to pass along some of that wisdom to Ginny, yes?

SARAH

Oh yes..the girl. I had forgotten.

MATILDA

Forgotten what?

Sarah looks at her a bit sideways.

SARAH

Well, I caught her snooping in the journal. Elizabeth's journal.

MATILDA

That journal?

SARAH

Yes, the one right on the ...

Sarah goes over to the desk and opens the journal. She opens the drawer and sees the other journal .

SARAH

Ah yes, this must be Heddrick's. They look a lot alike. In any case, I caught Ginny snooping and reading...

MATILDA

That little waif can read?!?

SARAH

Guess so. I figured she would be one to start usin' her other gifts to find a husband. Who knew she could do other things. Anyhow, I chased her out. I hope she comes back later. I have some work for her to do.

MATILDA

I best be gettin' along. Please send me love to Elizabeth. I hope she feels better.

SARAH

You're not staying?

MATILDA

Nah. She's fine. I'll see you both tomorrow.

SARAH

Elizabeth could really use us both here.

MATILDA

My William will be worried. Take good care.

Matilda leaves and Ginny enters a few moments after.

SARAH

What are you doing back here?

GINNY

Wanted to apologize, Miss Sarah. I never mean to pry. I just...

SARAH

You just what?

GINNY

I just want to learn more and I had hoped that Miss Elizabeth's notes might...you know... and I sometimes forget myself. Won't happen again.

SARAH

Should hope not. Well then, help me organize these instruments. Seem to be missing one and I would rather not search for it when we need it in a pinch.

GINNY

It's just...

SARAH

What is it, Ginny?

GINNY

I did read a few words. I lied. I did, but I think...

SARAH

And what did you make of those few words?

Long pause

GINNY

I think he might be the one...he might be the killer.

SARAH

Who? Mr. Heddrick? Are you mad? What makes you think a ridiculous idea like that?

GINNY

T'wasn't a confession, mind you, but some talk about those butchered ones.

SARAH

He works in the legislature. Perhaps Elizabeth has been able to persuade him to take up the case that our work with these women has meaning?

GINNY

I didn't get that sense.

SARAH

Of course you didn't Ginny, you got a few hints of words and think you now know the meaning in someone's head? Run along and get some sleep. I don't want to hear anymore of these stories. You hear me?

GINNY

Yes mum.

SARAH

And don't be tellin' anyone else what you think you read. Elizabeth has enough trouble without a young thing like yourself telling stories about her husband. Get along now.

Ginny exists and Sarah goes to the desk to pull out the journal. Both are in the drawer as she put them out. Finally, puts them both away without reading.

END ACT ONE.

ACT 2 SCENE 1

MORNING. SARA AND ELIZABETH ARE SITTING BY THE FIRE

SARAH

It'll be getting colder soon.

ELIZABETH

That it will.

SARAH

Ever going to tell me?

ELIZABETH

Tell you what?

SARAH

What's been eatin; at ya. You've been jumpy these past few weeks and cranky to boot.

ELIZABETH

Actually, I've been sensing a calm that I haven't felt in years.

SARAH

What is it then?

ELIZABETH

Uh uh. Nothing to tell as of yet. Soon maybe.

SARAH

Very well then. We better be preparing for our rounds. Anyone in particular you wish me to visit?

ELIZABETH

I'm sensing Victoria might need a friendly face today.

SARAH

Again?

ELIZABETH

Again. I have to gather a few supplies today from the apothecary.

Sarah puts up her hand to stop Elizabeth from offering to help.

Nothing too taxing, I'm sure. I'll meet up with you around 1 o'clock to see where we need to make calls.

SARAH

As you wish.

Matilda comes in a little out of breath.

ELIZABETH

For the love of all things holy, why must you always been startling me like that, Matilda!

MATILDA

Just let me.....

Sits and fans herself trying to catch her breath.

...catch me breath...I saw...I think Isaw...

SARAH

What?

ELIZABETH

What?

MATILDA

...the killer!

ELIZABETH

Don't be ridiculous, Matilda. It's still daylight. He doesn't come around until dark.

SARAH

I'll have you not upsetting everyone, Tilly. Elizabeth is right. You are just being silly.

MATILDA

Are you sure?

SARAH

Tilly, here....drink Some tea.

Sarah hands her the cup of tea in her hand and goes to the kitchen to put the kettle on Elizabeth places a blanket around Matilda's shoulders and holds her hand.

MATILDA

I'm sorry, I don't know what has come over me. I see shadows behind every corner.

ELIZABETH

You have quite the imagination.

SARAH

Elizabeth!

ELIZABETH

It's a gift!

SARAH

Not when you say it like that.

ELIZABETH

Fine. I'm sorry, . I'm sure it was nothing.

Sarah shoots her a look.

ELIZABETH

Was that not comforting?

SARAH

How you can have so much patience and love for the women you treat and none left over for your friends is completely foreign to me.

ELIZABETH

Maybe I used it all up today.

SARAH

Hardly. You've been short for weeks.

MATILDA

Please! Stop bickering! I've had a terrible fright!

SARAH

We both know you're fine, Tilly. Now, drink your tea and let us unwind our nerves.

Sarah and Elizabeth step aside as Matilda drinks her tea and pay little attention to them.

SARAH

So? What do you think?

ELIZABETH

I don't think anything. Nothing happened. She startled herself.

SARAH

But what if she's right? Anyone one of us could be attacked at any time.

ELIZABETH

That has always been the case, Sarah. Don't be blind. You know the odds. But, I hardly think the three of us have anything to worry about.

MATILDA

How can you be sure?

SARAH

She can't....

ELIZABETH

No! No... I can't be sure. Of course. But look.... we are three upstanding women! We don't dawdle about at night...okay... a bit when we are coming back from a birthing, but I don't think anyone means us harm.

SARAH

And what harm did they mean to Martha or Emma..or..any of them? What did they ever do besides get themselves into bad situations. They never hurt anyone.

MATILDA

Well, perhaps the wives...you know...

SARAH

Oh please, everyone knows that if a husband is off with a harlot that it's because something is stale at home!

(Long silence)

Matilda gets up the leave and puts the tea cup on the table.

ELIZABETH

She didn't mean...

MATILDA

I know exactly what she meant! You think I didn't do everything in my power to make sure my William was happy at home? I did all that I could!

SARAH

Matilda... you don't have to...

MATILDA

I DO have to! ... have to explain because people think I'm a dreadful wife... that I...cannot handleTis not so! I am a good wife...AND a good mother to my darling boys. Can either of you say that?

SARAH

I'm so sorry, Tilly...

MATILDA

No you're not! It's not the first time and...and...I know it won't be the last. Think you're so pure, so noble, but you can't have your heart broken or make any mistakes if you refuse to even try!

SARAH

Wait...

MATILDA

No, I am done with this....done trying to work into your good graces. You don't take any chances, Sarah.... never will. Because of that, you will die alone, just like Mary!

ELIZABETH

Enough! I mean it. Both of you need to stop the bickering. It's just making matters worse and getting us all worked up over nothing. This man out there is targeting women, but that is all the more reason why we need to stay and protect one another. Physically and each other's hearts.

Matilda and Sarah quiet down and sit.

ELIZABETH

You'd think that this level of fear and these tragedies...no matter the reason or who these women are...were... would bring us together. White Chapel is small and we have to fight to get a bone from London, right?

Still silence.

ELIZABETH

But that's not happening. At all. People bickering in the shops, just like the two of you. Arguing over things that don't even matter. Children are hearing all of this. Our young people are scared and we do nothing to quiet any of their fears. How about your boys, Matilda? What have you told them?

MATILDA

What do you mean? I've told them nothing. They don't need to hear these horrors.

ELIZABETH

But they do. What do you think goes on in the school yard?

SARAH

True. Boys will be boys.

MATILDA

That's not so! My boys are polite and kind, they don't talk about such matters! They would tell me if they heard about all of this. They would!

SARAH

I've seen your boys...yes...those darlings that can do no wrong. Seen how they treat some of the boys from the orphanage. They are not so sweet. Brutal and mean...

MATILDA

How dare you talk about my children that way!

SARAH

I think you don't know them so well!

MATILDA

You have no idea how difficult it is to raise children...practically by yourself! Rarely does their father do anything or teach them anything!

SARAH

And there it is. No role model! And you attack me for not having children when I knew that was going to be the case. I knew my husband was not up for the challenge of being a father. So I made that choice to not make him one.

Awkward pause.

SARAH

You heard me. I made that choice. I found out he was not the man I expected. You're not surprised. Is anyone? I really did try to make a good wife, but I just.... Glad I prevented any pregnancy. Who knows, they could have turned into horrible monsters or worse. His early death was a blessing.

ELIZABETH

Sarah...

MATILDA

You still should have tried. That's a woman's lot!

ELIZABETH

You think any of this is helping? Come on...attacks on our role?....is that how you really want this to end?

(pause)

Find some way to trust one another, even if our fear gets the better of us.

(Pause)

We are all that we have. Together. Right?

SARAH

How are we supposed to protect these women? Or any women? I don't see any of the men in this town doing anything about it.

MATILDA

Many have been out each night trying to help the police find information.

SARAH

Vigilante justice is what they are after. They don't have the first idea of what they are looking for. The police... completely without clues.

ELIZABETH

Is this what you heard? They have nothing?

MATILDA

William says so. They just don't know where to look.

SARAH

Still...

(Interrupting)

ELIZABETH

Still what? You think we need to do somethin' about a killer we know nothin' about? What do we know?

MATILDA

We know he's a man who isn't fond of street women.

ELIZABETH

Very thoughtful, Matilda, but these working women have always been ostracized, damned by the general population, men and women. What makes this any different?

All are silent.

ELIZABETH

See? It is nearly impossible to figure out the mystery on our own, therefore, there is nothing to worry ourselves about. It is what it ever was. Just watch our for each other.

Elizabeth gets up and pours more tea for everyone, but herself then begins to straighten the room.

ELIZABETH

Shall we get back to work, then?

MATILDA

Guessing you're right. I'm so sorry I bothered..

SARAH

There is no reason to be sorry, and you are not bothering us in the slightest. I'm ...sorry, Tilly. We want you to be safe.

MATILDA

I guess. Thank you.

SARAH

Let me walk you home then.

MATILDA

Aren't you concerned to walk alone? Should we wait for Heddrick to return so that we might have some protection?

SARAH

I don't think that's necessary. Besides, there is light enough on the main streets. We will just take the long way and hopefully your nerves will calm before we make it to your William.

Pause

SARAH

How does that sound?

ELIZABETH

You don't want to sit in my kitchen all evening do you? Come now, Tilly All will be fine

Sarah guides Matilda out the door and exits.
Elizabeth continues to shift things around in the kitchen without any real purpose.

Heddrick enters after a few moments and is startled to see Elizabeth standing there.

HEDDRICK

Oh! Evening my dear. Everything okay?

ELIZABETH

What do you mean, Heddrick?

HEDDRICK

Nothing. Just this isn't your usual pattern in the evening. You also have that stern look on your face. What is it?

ELIZABETH

You're just going to be angered, but it's Matilda. She thought someone was chasing her and she's having wild visions of the killer attacking all the women in the city. The usual, with her anyway.

HEDDRICK

Tilly is prone to hysterics.

ELIZABETH

Yes, but this time it was different. She's right, you know. All the women are on the edge right now, not knowing who he's coming for next or why he's killing these women in this...way. It's unnatural.

HEDDRICK

Murder often is...

ELIZABETH

You know what I speak of. Do any of your associates have any guidance?

HEDDRICK

They are reasonably concerned, as everyone, but no clues. No idea what is prompting this man or why his target is..well who they are.

ELIZABETH

That's concerning...

HEDDRICK

Which is why I am asking you again to pay attention to what you are doing. I understand your drive and certainly your empathy toward those women...

ELIZABETH

(under her breath with a deep sigh)

Those women...

HEDDRICK

But if you want to remain in your employment, you must show some level of...decorum...responsibility even.

ELIZABETH

Been over this a thousand times...

HEDDRICK

And apparently we must again, Elizabeth...

ELIZABETH

Must we always fight?

HEDDRICK

I am not fighting, I am trying to get you to behave...

ELIZABETH

Behave.

HEDDRICK

And understand the predicament that you are in. For God's sake, Elizabeth. Just being around these women puts you in harm's way. I have no interest in worrying about you every night as you tend to the downtrodden. You are my wife and my devotion to you..

Elizabeth scoffs

HEDDRICK

Has never waned!

ELIZABETH

I will take your concerns under advisement. As always. But don't believe for a second that your behavior is not hidden from me. I know you are a devoted husband, but those words mean different things to you and I, and I know what men do when they are out of sight of their wives. We all see it and I have much evidence of all of this.

Heddrick looks visibly startled.

ELIZABETH

Take heed, Heddrick. Make sure your devotion is what you think it is.

Elizabeth puts on a wrap and gets prepared to leave.

HEDDRICK

Where do you think you're going now? It's beginning to get dark.

ELIZABETH

I need some fresh air.

HEDDRICK

Elizabeth, it isn't safe out there by yourself. I'll go with you.

ELIZABETH

Grabs the lantern near the door.

No, I'm fine. I'll be in a few. Just a brisk walk on the main road with a lantern.

Elizabeth exits. Heddrick pours himself a drink and sits. He pulls out a notebook from his jacket pocket and begins to read. A few minutes pass and Ginny wanders in.

Ginny sees Heddrick sitting and reading the journal, but he doesn't see her right away. She waits, not sure what to do, and then decides to leave. As she moves toward the door, Heddrick sees her and stops her.

HEDDRICK

Ginny? Ginny, is it?

GINNY

Yes...sir.

HEDDRICK

I am not a sir, Ginny, you may call me Heddrick. Won't you sit down?

Ginny sits cautiously.

HEDDRICK

I am assuming you are looking for Elizabeth? It's getting late.

GINNY

It is... I am so sorry for comin' this late, but I needed the Misses advice and I didn't think it could wait until morn. Is she home?

HEDDRICK

No, she just stepped out to see that Sarah got home okay.

GINNY

Well, then... thank you, I'll just...

HEDDRICK

It's getting dark. No place for a young lady. Please stay until she gets home. I'd feel horrible if anything happened to you.

GINNY

That's very kind of you, sir.

HEDDRICK

What is it that you do, Ginny?

GINNY

I'm not sure I understand...

HEDDRICK

(Becoming a bit imposing)

What do you do, young lady? You spend many hours with my wife. Are you learning the trade? Are you a patient perhaps? Why don't you spend as much time with your own family or even young women like yourself?

Ginny becomes visibly nervous.

GINNY

Sorry if my presence is a burden, sir. I only wish to make myself useful and Miss Elizabeth and Miss Sarah are wonderful teachers. I only wish to make myself useful...

Heddrick stands up and it is uncertain whether he is angry or intrigued. He walks over to Ginny, who is more and more shaken and stands in the corner not certain what to do.

After a moment, the tone relaxes and Heddrick talks in a more measured and friendly voice.

HEDDRICK

That's wonderful that a young person takes an interest in a trade without being told. Especially a young woman. Everyone should have a skill, don't you think?

GINNY

(hesitantly)

Yes...

HEDDRICK

What does your father do, Ginny?

GINNY

Don't have parents, sir, they passed some time ago.

HEDDRICK

I see...

GINNY

I spend time at the girl's home. Been there for a while. (Pauses) I work for my room and such, sir. I don't drift.

HEDDRICK

I'm sure you do.

GINNY

And I don't make Miss Elizabeth give me anything either, if that's what ye be thinkin'.

HEDDRICK

I know my wife. I'm sure she makes you work plenty hard.

Pause

HEDDRICK

Did I hear the Irish in your voice?

GINNY

Aye....yes, From me mother. It only comes out when I get nervous.

HEDDRICK

Why are you nervous, Ginny?

GINNY

I can come back another time. I just wanted to talk with Miss Elizabeth and ...return her instrument...

Ginny pulls out a scalpel from her pocket.
Heddrick takes it and inspects it.

HEDDRICK

Where did you get this?

GINNY

She must have left it behind. Anyway, I know it's important to take care of these things and I didn't want her to lose it.

Awkward pause.

GINNY

Would you like me to put it in her bag? I know which compartment it goes.

HEDDRICK

Why does Elizabeth need a scalpel?

GINNY

Sometimes, sir, the babe can't make it...out...properly. The mother needs help

HEDDRICK

That doesn't sound natural. Seems like nature would provide in those cases.

GINNY

Some women are small, sir, or they aren't strong enough to birth the babe. That's where Miss Elizabeth assists.

HEDDRICK

And where do you suppose a woman gets such an instrument, such as this?

GINNY

Sir?

HEDDRICK

This is a doctor's instrument. Something that a trained man might have. Where do you suppose a woman would get such an instrument?

GINNY

Miss Elizabeth doesn't tell me these things, Sir. I just know she takes good care of them.

HEDDRICK

Enough to leave them behind?

GINNY

I'm sure it was a mistake...

HEDDRICK

I'm sure. By whom, do you suppose?

GINNY

I don't know, sir.

HEDDRICK

Maybe some profit in stealing instruments from someone who shouldn't have them in the first place?

GINNY

My apologies, sir, I don't know what you speak of!

HEDDRICK

Did you think to steal this instrument and then have a second thought?

GINNY

Sir..no sir.. I'm just returning..

Heddrick stops and backs down. It is obvious he enjoys tormenting her. He then softens his stance.

HEDDRICK

I'm just checking your loyalty, young girl. Ginny...you can never be too careful. I work within the borough council and the legislature in town, did you know that?

Ginny nods and begins to move toward the door.

HEDDRICK

Then you know that I work with some vile and corrupt people. We all need to be aware of who we can trust and who we cannot, yes?

Ginny nods again.

HEDDRICK

Maybe I could teach you sometime, help instruct you through the thicket of lies that the world presents. To understand how to navigate, such as it were, the world of tricky people, both men and women, so that you can protect yourself. Would you like that, Ginny?

GINNY

Must be getting back, sir...

HEDDRICK

You can use my name, Ginny, we 're friends now.

GINNY

Sir, I don't feel it is my position to call you by your Christian name.

HEDDRICK

Say my name, Ginny...

GINNY

Doesn't feel proper, sir...

HEDDRICK

Shhh...its okay, I'll allow it. You are like family to my wife, you might as well be like family to me..

Heddrick tries to take Ginny's arm and pull her into him. She fights a bit, but he restrains her and pulls her in, kissing her forehead. She begins to cry.

BLACKOUT. END
SCENE.

Act II SCENE 2

Ginny is in corner of room, sitting on floor crying. Matilda comes rushing in to get packages she left behind and sees her.

MATILDA

Lass? What are you doing here? I just saw Mr. Heddrick leave. If Elizabeth knew you were hanging about...

Ginny looks up at her still crying.

MATILDA

What's wrong?

Ginny just grabs onto her and hugs her.

MATILDA

Are you sick?

GINNY

No...

MATILDA

What is the fuss about? Are you hurt?

GINNY

I want to go home.

MATILDA

I'll take you there.

GINNY

Thank ye...

MATILDA

Why are ye hiding on Miss Elizabeth's floor?

Ginny pulls herself together and begins to explain.

GINNY

I came in, to return the knife. I wasn't sure where to put it so I asked Mr. Heddrick if he would allow me to put it in her bag

MATILDA

Was he arrogant? He's such a cross man.

GINNY

He was helpful... even talked to me for a while.

MATILDA

What did such a man talk to you about?

GINNY

Miss Tilly, m trying to tell you!

MATILDA

I'm listening!

GINNY

He was nice...at first. He asked me such strange things...like what I do to help and things about my family. Didn't expect him to be so nice, especially after all that Miss Elizabeth has said.

MATILDA

Well, you can't always believe the wife, child. Sometimes they are so filled with anger and resentment that they will say anything to get people to turn away from their beloved. I have seen that.

GINNY

But he wasn't nice.

MATILDA

You just said he was.

GINNY

I said I thought he was being nice, but I was wrong.

MATILDA

What happened? Ginny?

GINNY

He grabbed at me....kissed me.

MATILDA

Heavens!

GINNY

I tried to pull away but he was too strong. He never looked that strong.

MATILDA

What did you do? Did you yell for help?

GINNY

I tried. Had his hand on my throat and I didn't know what to do. I just kept trying to pull away.

MATILDA

You should have yelled. If someone down the street heard you, they might have helped you.

GINNY

I told you, I tried but I was scared, Miss Mattie.

MATILDA

What are you going to do now?

GINNY

Nothin. I'm gonna go home and tryna figure out what to tell Miss Elizabeth.

MATILDA

You gonna tell Elizabeth?

GINNY

You think I shouldn't?

MATILDA

She might not believe ye, child.

GINNY

Why?

MATILDA

Ye youngin'... Sweet... She might just think you made him kiss you. Maybe you the one who led him to grab you.

GINNY

She wouldn't?

MATILDA

Well...she just might.

GINNY

You believe me, Miss Tilly?

MATILDA

Well...It's obvious something happened .

GINNY

What do ye think happened here?

MATILDA

I dunno, Ginny . Did you start something you couldn't finish? Maybe ... thinkin' it might be fun to seduce an older man. Then, realize that it was much scarier when he actually thought it might be a good thing, too?

GINNY

You don't believe me.

MATILDA

It's not a question of whether I believe. It's a matter of what Elizabeth will believe. And I don't think she's much of a trusting woman.

GINNY

Ginny stands up slowly, smooths her dress, and straightens herself out. She is hesitant, but also intentional in her moments, as if trying to decide how to approach Mattie's comments.

(deliberately)

I don't understand you.

MATILDA

What do you mean?

GINNY

I think you just want to stir up gossip. You know how Miss Elizabeth would react and you even question me, even though you see somethin' ...upsetting has happened. I dunno...just don't understand you. I thought we was supposed to be supportin' one another. Instead, you questioning what I did.

MATILDA

Look, Ginny, doesn't really matter what happened. Just go home. Go home, wash yer face and keep things to yourself. Think about what you might do differently when alone in a room with a man. I'm just trying to be helpful. That's why I'm here.

GINNY

You always say that. I'm only trying to be helpful. Are you really?

MATILDA

Of course I am!

GINNY

No, I mean, are you really helpful, sometimes.... (pause) and sometimes, I wonder whose side you are really on. We all wonder that, Miss Matilda, not just me.

MATILDA

You watch your mouth, you little git!

GINNY

I'm the one hurt and you're questionin' me and telling me to just hide it? Let him get away with it?

MATILDA

I am not! I'm just trying to find out what really happened here.

GINNY

(Yelling)

Do you care? Do you even care if I tell Elizabeth or hide from her that her husband attacked me.

Matilda grabs Ginny's arm and moves her away from the doorway.

MATILDA

You need to quiet yourself, Ginny.

GINNY

You are a woman, Miss Matilda. You know what happens when we just allow things like this to happen. Continue to happen and nothing ever stops. Do you think he will let me come around 'n help anymore? Or maybe he will... suggest it even. What am I to do then? Say no? Not take the work? We see things. We see women cast aside. You especially.

Matilda starts to walk away.

GINNY

Really want to know what happened? Then you can tell me whether or not I should tell any of this to Elizabeth?

(Pause)

I did nothin' to seduce him. That's what you're thinking, right? I did nothin', but act properly, like I was taught to do. I tried to scream when he wouldn't let me go...tried to push him aside when his arms were wrapped around me. His hand, around my throat, but... I couldn't get free. He came at me, Matilda and I did nothing to provoke him. You know that deep within your soul and you're jealous. You think that anyone who is younger or prettier or smaller than you should get whatever you think is coming to them. Well, I ...I didn't ask for it.

Matilda pauses and then faces Ginny. Deep sigh.

MATILDA

I stand by what I said. Don't tell Elizabeth...

Ginny begins to interrupt and Matilda stops her.

Ginny, I know you think I'm an awful gossip and you're mostly right, but sometimes I hold things close to my chest. I don't reveal everything. There are things that are right and things that are just...careful. Sometimes in this life it is more painful to be right.

GINNY

Why?

MATILDA

It just...is. That's all. You want to get through all this living...this life with as much as you can. Don't be draggin' yourself through the mud if you can't wash on the other side.

GINNY

Why? Why are we so silent? You don't.

MATILDA

This..this is a different kind of story. I'm not always the gossip, not always the horrible woman cluckin' about.

GINNY

Miss Matilda, I don't think you terrible, just spreading stories that get people goin'. Why do you do that?

MATILDA

Ginny, I don't know why I tell tales, but I'll tell you this. Others will see you doin the same if you tell them what happened here.

GINNY

But it is true!

MATILDA

Of course it is..in your eyes. But others won't see you that, dear.

GINNY

I'm telling the truth, Miss Matilda.

MATILDA

And who will believe you? The more you tell, the more people you tell, the more they will see you like they see me.

GINNY

I don't understand.

MATILDA

A few years ago, I confided in Elizabeth, telling her about the alley cat her Heddrick has been. Now, don't get me wrong, I understand men have their needs, but I didn't want to see her find out another way, especially after losing the baby so far along. She didn't want to hear what I was saying and she lashed out at me, as she often does at people who cross her, and she told me about my dear William and how he is often finding comfort in a whore's bed.

GINNY

Miss Matilda!

MATILDA

Don't think I don't know this. My husband stopped finding pleasure with me long before I discovered it, but at least he is more quiet about his conquests and he still comes home to me and holds me on dreary nights. Not like Heddrick. He isn't cold and mean.

GINNY

Why are you telling me this?

MATILDA

Because, I too, told Elizabeth. I heard one of her patients talking about her sickness and receiving help from her and in the same breath brag about bedding her husband.

GINNY

What did she say?

MATILDA

(Calmly)

Who?

GINNY

Miss Elizabeth! What did she say when you told her?

MATILDA

See? Do you see the power of the story?

Ginny struggles with the revelation a bit.

GINNY

I didn't see it happening..

MATILDA

We never do. It all comes on so quick. None of us set out to be wicked gossips.

GINNY

Oh... I'm so sorry...

MATILDA

Don't be, Ginny. We must squeeze out any possibility of happiness in this place. These stories bring us some life, even when they hurt others.

GINNY

Was Miss Elizabeth upset?

MATILDA

Beyond upset. At me, mostly, but I saw so much more behind her eyes. Disappointment... sorrow..

GINNY

For losing Heddrick.

MATILDA

No. For the loss of trust. Not of Heddrick. She knew he was lost to her. She thought she could trust these women. And they turned on her, mocked her even. After all she had done for them.

GINNY

But they could no more turn him down than any other man. Could they?

MATILDA

Elizabeth thought differently. She thought that bond was stronger. Anyway, be careful how you address our Elizabeth. A beautiful and giving woman indeed, but with a temper and a gift for grudge-holding. She might not take too kindly to your news.

Takes up packages and wraps her shawl around her shoulders.

You should run along home Get cleaned up. I would not tell her. Not because I want to create anything bad feelings, just... I think with everything she has been through, her trust is broken, Ginny. Not sure if telling her more would bring it back.

GINNY

I'll think on it. Thank you for Thank you.

Ginny exits. Matilda sits in chair and begins to cry.

FADE TO BLACK

ACT II SCENE 3: THE NEXT MORNING

Heddrick enters and sees Elizabeth writing in journal.

HEDDRICK

You are always writing in that thing. What's so bloody important?

ELIZABETH

I keep my notes.

HEDDRICK

Notes for what?

ELIZABETH

The house, my patients. Everything. Don't you have notes?

HEDDRICK

Of course I do, but I don't leave them lying about for anyone to see.

ELIZABETH

Very well. I'll make sure they are out of sight so they don't disturb you.

Elizabeth puts the journal away.

HEDDRICK

Come to me.

ELIZABETH

Why? I don't underst...

HEDDRICK

Liza.....please...

She does. Slight awkward embrace.

HEDDRICK

I miss this.

ELIZABETH

I do too.

HEDDRICK

Why don't you let me hold you anymore?

ELIZABETH

Me?

HEDDRICK

Yes.

ELIZABETH

You never ask.

HEDDRICK

I didn't think I needed to,

ELIZABETH

I didn't think you wanted to anymore

HEDDRICK

It's been so long.

ELIZABETH

It certainly has. I miss this... I miss this so much.

Elizabeth begins to cry and embrace him back earnestly.

HEDDRICK

Please don't be sad, Liza We are ...we are fine.

ELIZABETH

Are we?

HEDDRICK

Sure, my work is going well, house is solid, plenty of food and fuel. What more is it that you need?

ELIZABETH

I needed you.

HEDDRICK

(Taken aback)

And now?

ELIZABETH

I still... I need you, Heddrick. You are so far away, though. Sometimes I can't find you.

HEDDRICK

I'm still here.

ELIZABETH

Is it you, though? Is it really you or is it..something or someone else?

HEDDRICK

Like what?

ELIZABETH

I don't know...you are always so angry all the time. At me, and my work...even still at the loss of the baby.

HEDDRICK

I never blamed you for that! Other men might have cast you aside, but I stood by you...I left you alone when you needed space to grieve.

ELIZABETH

I never said that you didn't, but why did you pull away? What was I to think?

HEDDRICK

(Holds her again)

Elizabeth, I ...I don't know why I pulled away. Then or now. Sometimes I just don't feel like myself. I can't explain it...it just is.

Pause

I still love you, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

I know.

HEDDRICK

Please do.

Elizabeth breaks the hold and begins to tidy the room. Heddrick exits. Elizabeth stops and sits at the desk. Begins to write in her journal.

Heddrick returns with glasses and a bottle and she quickly returns the journal to the drawer.

HEDDRICK

What is so damn important that you need to write now?

ELIZABETH

Just my thoughts, is all.

HEDDRICK

Your thoughts?

ELIZABETH

Yes...

HEDDRICK

I don't understand, you're thinking about your patients now? Those women not as I'm speaking with you?

ELIZABETH

I write down all sorts of things...not just about my patients.

HEDDRICK

About us?

ELIZABETH

Not necessarily. Just my thoughts. What about your journals, your notes?? Tucked away. Hidden. Are they all about work? Aren't some part of your grand ideas about the world?

HEDDRICK

You're ridiculous, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

We were just having a nice moment? Why do you wish to ruin that?

(Pause)

HEDDRICK

I'm leaving for the office again this afternoon. Is it too much to ask for you to be here before I leave?

ELIZABETH

I'll be here.

Heddrick softens and walks to her. Pours a drink to hand to her.

HEDDRICK

Why don't you come with me next time I go into town? Take your notes, maybe prepare something. They might let you speak to someone and... have your voice heard. Have their voices heard.

ELIZABETH

Are you serious?

HEDDRICK

I cannot guarantee anything. It's worth a discussion. What do you say?

ELIZABETH

Thank you. Thank you Heddrick. That would mean...a lot.

Heddrick nods, drinks from his glass and hands it to her, gives a perfunctory kiss on her cheek then exits. Elizabeth sits down at desk and begins to cry.

FADE TO BLACK

ACT II SCENE 4: A WEEK LATER

Sarah and Matilda are sitting at the table going over notes and instruments.

MATILDA

Thank you for helping again.

SARAH

You don't have to keep thanking me, Tilly. Happy to do it. Elizabeth needs some rest and we should really get some things in order. New laws are coming down. We need to be prepared and that means have our business in order. Can't have people thinking that we don't keep records or clean instruments!

MATILDA

I'm sorry....for before.

SARAH

Yeah...I ...

MATILDA

I admire you, ya know?

SARAH

What for?

MATILDA

Standing your ground. Making... making your own choices. I never even thought to do that. And now..

SARAH

And now what?

MATILDA

Well...

SARAH

Well....Matilda?

MATILDA

There's no goin' back. It is what it is. That's allall that's really to say.

SARAH

I'm not sure you mean that.

MATILDA

It's ...that I only have you and Elizabeth. I believe what she said before. We are all we got.

SARAH

You have William. And the boys.

MATILDA

Sometimes. Sometimes I think they have me, but I don't have them. Does that make sense?

SARAH

Yeah. It does.

MATILDA

He's a good man, Sarah.

SARAH

I know that.

MATILDA

And the boys, there are good boys.

SARAH

I am sure they are. They have a strong loving mother.

MATILDA

You think so?

SARAH

I do.

They continue to work on the utensils and business. Matilda goes to the desk and takes out one of the journals.

SARAH

Here, bring it over and we can check records.

Matilda hands it to her.

MATILDA

Wait...is that.... I don't think this is Elizabeth's work journal.

Sarah looks through it briefly.

SARAH

There are a few over there. I think this might be Heddrick's journal.

MATILDA

Speaking of Heddrick...

SARAH

You didn't have a run in with him, did you?

MATILDA

No...I did have a talk with Ginny. She had anan encounter with him,

Sarah goes to the desk and starts looking through the various books and journals.

SARAH

What kind... oh.

MATILDA

Yes...

SARAH

How bad?

MATILDA

She's pretty shaken. I told her not to tell Elizabeth.

SARAH

What reason did you give?

MATILDA

A couple of reasons, but I think I convinced her that it would not turn out well. I dunno, Sarah... she also thinks that Heddrick is the Ripper.

SARAH

Oh goodness!

MATILDA

She's young and has fanciful ideas. She doesn't think too clearly. She gets excited easily.

Sarah gives her a look. Elizabeth and Ginny enter.

ELIZABETH

I so appreciate all the time you are putting into all of this. Heddrick would be pleased.

MATILDA

We aren't doing it for Heddrick.

SARAH

It's for us. We want to be prepared. For whatever comes.

MATILDA

Speaking of prepared, what do you use this for, Elizabeth? I don't recall this one.
(holding up a jar of dried herbs)

ELIZABETH

You know, Matilda, that there are sometimes that a babe is....not the best idea at the time. It helps cease the growing and allows the uterus to expel the remains.

MATILDA

I still get all upset when I think of that. Imagine anyone, besides a woman of the night, wishing to expel a child! So horrible! I hope you don't have to use it that much.

ELIZABETH

Probably more than you think. There are many reasons why we keep this herb quietly in our bag. For such occasions. Depending on if the quickening has started or not, it can be a painful ordeal.

Sarah makes a noise and shutters a bit.

GINNY

You've seen it at work, Sarah? Seen her use this on women?

Uncomfortable silence. Sarah looks at Elizabeth.

SARAH

I have. ...on me.

General surprised and horrified exclamations by Ginny and Matilda.

SARAH

I told you, I didn't want children. My husband was not the man I thought he was. I believed it was in everyone's best interest not to bring a babe into the world.

GINNY

I thought only harlots could abort their babies.

ELIZABETH

Ginny...

GINNY

On account of their immorality. Ya know, because they would be horrible mothers and on account of them burnin' in...well....

ELIZABETH

Ginny....stop...

GINNY

Doesn't the unborn go to...to hell....as well? Cause they're unbaptized?

ELIZABETH

There are many reasons for a woman to follow this path. It isn't up for me to decide otherwise.

GINNY

But Miss Sarah... you're not an immoral woman! Why would you do that to a babe?

MATILDA

Sarah is an upstanding woman. And a moral one, Ginny. She knows a good mother when she sees one. I think...in this act...she showed what a good woman is.

SARAH

(thankfully looking at Matilda, perhaps a bit weepy)

Thank you...Tilly. That means...so much...coming from a trusted friend.

They continue busying themselves with packing the bags and washing cloths and items in relative silence, except for an occasional thank you or handing someone else something.

ELIZABETH

I think that is it, ladies. Once Heddrick goes off to make the case at parliament, I can be called upon with the others in London to prove our case...if we can.

MATILDA

You think it will work?

ELIZABETH

Probably not. I suspect they won't let me speak. I have to try, though. We do important work and I can't let it go without at least a little resistance.

SARAH

You'll need your notes...

Goes over to the desk to take the journal and opens them up to see which one is Sarah's.

ELIZABETH

The one with the blue cover, Sarah. The black one is Heddrick's.

SARAH

Oh...sorry. I guess I don't see the difference in color that well. Here you are.

Hands blue covered journal to Sarah while looking in her eyes. Elizabeth smiles.

GINNY

Is that everything?

ELIZABETH

I believe so.

SARAH

Will you be traveling with Heddrick?

ELIZABETH

To parliament yes. but I'll be traveling home alone. Heddrick has more business to attend to. I as well, back here.

MATILDA

Well, make sure you take care of yourself. Traveling can be so tiring and you need to keep your strength up.

ELIZABETH

(Laughs)

Of course.

MATILDA

I mean it! My William travels off and on and he's so tired and drained upon return. I have to feed him his favorite stew and many beers to get him back to his jolly self.

They all laugh.

ELIZABETH

Yes, I will make sure to eat and drink properly while I travel. And it's only a day or two.

GINNY

Is there anything we can do while you are gone?

SARAH

You heard her, Ginny. It's only a few days. I'm sure everything will be fine until she returns. Right, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

I expect a relatively boring few days for all of you. Enjoy it while you can.

General hugs and laughter and improvised talking.

LIGHTS FADE TO
BLACK.

ACT II SCENE 5: A FEW DAYS LATER

Sarah is found sitting near wash bin alone.
Elizabeth enters and is startled to see her there.

ELIZABETH

Sarah! What brings you here? What's wrong?

SARAH

Elizabeth, I...

ELIZABETH

I don't recall any appointments this evening? Is someone hurt?

SARAH

Yes, Elizabeth...

ELIZABETH

Dear me. Not another murder? This town... I'm shocked that the police haven't found this man. Such a grisly business. I wouldn't worry yourself, though.

SARAH

No, not another murder. Just a lot of questions. I saw some of your notes the other day while we were packing things up for you. Your treatments for the French Disease in particular. I didn't think you did as much with that.

ELIZABETH

I did for a while, but it coils itself around the soul and doesn't let go. Don't know of any treatment that would rip that infection from a person. We know the Wild Pansy helps with symptoms, but nothing long-term. I guess that's where these doctors might serve a purpose. They have tools to do more research than we do. Maybe find a cure, even.

SARAH

Why didn't you tell me?

ELIZABETH

Tell you what?

SARAH

Why didn't you tell me you were hurting so much?

ELIZABETH

I really have no idea what you're going on about, Sarah.

SARAH

Why didn't you tell me about this?

Sarah takes Elizabeth's journal from her apron pocket and shows it to Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

I wondered when you would approach me. I figured you had read it weeks ago, but decided that what I was doing was fine with you or that you couldn't understand my cryptic thoughts... course I know you're much smarter than that.

SARAH

I did read it...when Ginny found it. We both thought it was Heddrick's. Ginny wanted to tell you...about other things as well...

Exchange of knowing glances.

ELIZABETH

I'm aware of Heddrick's propensities toward other women. He's mostly harmless. I hope Ginny wasn't too startled by his advances.

SARAH

Elizabeth...

(Pausing, taking a moment to collect her words)

I have always trusted you, listened to you, as my mentor and friend. I have stood by your side through all the problems of your marriage, your dealings with the police as we tended...together...the poor women of this forgotten side of London. I learned from you, but I thought you had learned from me. Some temperance, some humility to calm your storm that always seems to be raging inside of you. I thought you were settled with your position as caretaker of this house and not necessarily the happiest of marriages, but one that is, at the least, calm and settled.

ELIZABETH

How much did you read?

SARAH

The last few pages. Even I have some measure of restraint.

ELIZABETH

Restraint...

SARAH

Enough to know that you are responsible... for these deaths....Liza why...how could you?

ELIZABETH

Why? Perhaps you should have read a bit deeper, Sarah. That has always been your issue. You never want to go deeper into knowing why things are. Your shallowness...

SARAH

What you mistake for shallowness is allowing the natural order of things to take its course and not force what is not to be!

ELIZABETH

Natural order of things? Husbands turning from their wives is unnatural enough, sometimes even necessary, but when they take that sickness home, then other people are hurt.

SARAH

It took me a while to figure this out. The wild pansy you had been using, the cryptic notes in your personal journal, when all along your notes always seem factual and direct. You are actively treating these women, yet you kill them off, why?

ELIZABETH

It's actually pretty logical. Killing off the source of the monster prevents the sickness from spreading. These treatments weren't working... some of them worse than the disease itself! We cannot legislate this problem away. Parliament thinks the whores of London are at fault, well, let's remove it, not with a clumsy broad stroke that would punish them all, but with a scalpel and remove the insidious infection within their community.

SARAH

Elizabeth...

ELIZABETH

I'm protecting these women from spreading it further! I'm protecting the husbands from passing it along to their wives, to their unborn children...

SARAH

Ah, the babe. It wasn't you. It was him. Does he know?

ELIZABETH

No. Quiet symptoms. He has no idea.

SARAH

So, you are butchering whores to pay back whoever infected your husband...and you.

ELIZABETH

At first, yes. It was that simple. Afterwards.. I saw a way to make it right...to make the worka moral calling. I even tried to leave clues for the police, but they are just blithering dolts, not a clue to their name.

SARAH

Why not Heddrick? Why is he not punished for this?

ELIZABETH

Heddrick's disappearance would be noticed, but their untimely deaths? I didn't think anyone would pay much mind. And I expected this from him. Not from them. I was their confidante, their nurse, their friend. For all these years. Then they turned on me..

Mary did. Annie...all of them. As I tended to their needs, they mocked me and my marriage. Talked about my inability to carry a child to term as they had me rip theirs from their wombs so that they could continue their work or poison the waters of London. They mocked me and all I ever wanted to do was help them.

SARAH

Heddrick is the one who killed the baby. Not you. Not them. They had no knowledge of this. Blame him.

ELIZABETH

I wish I could! I wish I could have just ended our marriage, ended what I thought we had, ended his very last breath....

SARAH

You were their midwife, their caretaker You swore an oath...

ELIZABETH

And he swore an oath to me! (quieter) What good is an oath!

SARAH

Are you done?

(silence)

SARAH

Are you done with this, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

There are still more out there, infection continues to spread... you and I, Sarah. We can fix this.

SARAH

We need to get you help, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

Why?

SARAH

You have had everyone running in fear for the past 3 months!

ELIZABETH

FEAR? MY LIFE HAS BEEN FEAR!

(Pause)

Do you know what's been like, living day to day, knowing that he might cast me aside? That I might not be able to live without his support? That I might have to turn to the same profession, at my age and in my condition?

SARAH

You've seen me live on my own...and I'm just fine.

ELIZABETH

You have lived in my shadow, Sarah, I made you. Whose going to make me?

(Pause)

And now those women live in fear. For what they did to me...and what they spread. After everything I did for them. I'm cleaning up the city, Sarah. I'm protecting the rest of them.

SARAH

And it is you who is in control of their protection? How...when will this end, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

I don't know.

Elizabeth walks to Sarah and takes her hands.

ELIZABETH

You cannot tell a soul, Sarah.

SARAH

How do you expect me to keep something like this a secret?

ELIZABETH

No one would believe you.

SARAH

Because of who I am?

ELIZABETH

Because we are women. This is a madman, not a woman who helps unfortunates. This is someone to be feared. No one would believe you, Sarah. Especially with your reputation.

SARAH

I cannot believe you are saying this? Liza! Please, we need to get you to the police! We need to get you help!

Elizabeth goes to her work bag and starts going through her instruments. Sarah pauses and waits impatiently.

ELIZABETH

You are correct.

SARAH

You agree then?

ELIZABETH

I need your help.

SARAH

Elizabeth, I meant the police, a doctor, someone to help with this...

ELIZABETH

I need your help, Sarah. I need to end this. Make it all go away.

SARAH

You know I can't.

ELIZABETH

You will. You are my sister and my friend. You talk of supporting one another, especially during these times. You are the only one who can help me, Sarah.

SARAH

And what if I don't?

ELIZABETH

You have no proof. You will be seen as a deranged woman, sent to live in one of those horrible places where no one leaves. Left to die alone, in a pile of your own filth while doctors pretend to practice. We all hear about those stories of those places, Sarah. You will go to that place because they won't believe you. The place that you want me to go. You know I'm not mentally unwell, Sarah. I'm right about this. I need your help to finish this. Will you help me?

Sarah pauses for a bit and looks around the room, realizing that Elizabeth is right.

SARAH

I told you before. I will always stand by you.

ELIZABETH

My dear friend...

Elizabeth hugs Sarah and at first Sarah hesitates.

ELIZABETH

We can fix this problem together; no one else needs to be involved. Please help me.

SARAH

Elizabeth....Liza...

ELIZABETH

Others will always betray us. Ginny, Matilda, they don't understand the bond that we have because they've turned on others Not us..

SARAH

We all need to stand together.

ELIZABETH

Yes...

SARAH

Yes...

Elizabeth takes the bag of instruments and Sarah grabs her shawl. They both go to leave the room, Elizabeth first. Sarah pauses at the doorway and walks out. Light falls on open notebook on the table. After a minute, Sarah comes back into the room, spends some time looking through the journal. After a few minutes makes the decision to take it and hide it under her apron before leaving the room.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY