

In Which Lucy Jones Falls Through Time

She landed in something that smelled faintly like pine, but was too small and stunted to count as a tree. The branches broke under her weight, and Lucy Jones felt something penetrate her left palm, making her inhale.

She sat up. Her head was still whirling, there was an unpleasant smell of burnt flesh, and the shrub she had landed in had to be a juniper bush, with one very large splinter now lodged in her hand. With a decisive movement, she pulled it out, staring at the blood that welled from the wound.

Lucy closed her eyes, shuddering as she recalled the horrifying drop through time, endless moments suspended in a funnel of bright colours and too much dazzling light. And the faces... the unformed features of infants, the fading images of men and women in strange clothes – faces contorted in pain or fear, eyes that wept blood, hands that stretched out as if to arrest her fall, ancient fingernails scraping her skin.

A shadow moved over her face, and Lucy opened her eyes. Above her, a large bird was circling. She got to her feet and the bird soared upwards. Lucy shielded her face with her unharmed hand. Before her extended an endless landscape of jumbled rocks and stands of juniper, patches of grass burnt brittle by the sun. Here and there, a tree – an oak of sorts – offered shade, but the air quivered with heat.

In the far distance, she thought she could make out something that resembled houses, squat little buildings surrounded by a somewhat greener landscape than the one Lucy was presently standing in. Lucy shook out her blue skirts, smoothed at her tattered bodice and frowned at the streaks of blood her injured hand left behind. She'd lost her shoes in the funnel, and one of her stockings was burnt and frayed, as were her sleeves. Well, she was not about to find a new pair of shoes here, in the wilderness, and so Lucy Jones set off barefoot.

She'd never experienced such heat. The ground was mostly covered in rocks and pebbles, and it didn't take long before her feet protested with each step. And no matter how many steps she took, it was as if that distant, beckoning collection of houses retreated before her, a tantalizing promise always out of reach.

Lucy walked from tree to tree, sinking down to rest in the shade afforded by the dusty foliage. As the sun rose, the patches of shadow shrank. Lucy was violently thirsty. Her feet bled. At one point she stumbled and fell, scraping her right hand badly. Her skirts felt unbearably heavy, and she wished she'd not lost her cap in the funnel, because at present the heat and glaring sun was causing her head to throb.

The single bird that had soared above her when she stepped out from the juniper bush had been joined by three others, their lazy circles high above making her distinctly aware of how empty the surrounding landscape was – only her and the carrion eaters. I will not be carrion, she thought fiercely. She laughed silently – well, she did everything silently, or so it seemed to her, as she'd never heard herself make a sound. To be quite correct she'd never heard anyone make a sound, and Lucy's hopes that maybe falling through time would also heal her deafness had proven futile. So far, things had been as silent as they always were.

Lucy straightened up: she had on purpose allowed herself to be pulled into the magic little painting, leaving behind the life she knew, her children – of, dear God! Her children! Little Frances, her twins! Lucy's innards twisted together into knots so painful she could not breathe – and the shadow of the noose. Her hands flew up to her neck. Had she stayed, she'd been well on her way to the gallows by now.

But she hadn't wanted to die, which was why she was here now. Lucy craned her head back and raised her fist to the skies, shaking it at the taunting birds. I will not die! She shook her head and her hair spilled from what little remained of the carefully braided arrangements. No, she vowed, she would not die. At least not today. Wearily, she set one foot before the other, eyes fixed on the horizon and the white square shapes.

The first living creature Lucy encountered face to face in this her new existence was a pig. A very big pig, and Lucy was not overly fond of animals, having slipped away to hide whenever Aunt Alex asked her to help with the cows – or the pigs.

The second living creature was a boy. He came running from behind a bush, stick in one hand, and made for the pig. When he saw Lucy, he skidded to a stop, his mouth falling wide open. Dark eyes, dark hair, dirty skin and ragged clothes – the urchin looked as if he lived with the pigs. Lucy tried out a smile. The boy's eyes widened, he threw down the stick and fled.

With a sinking feeling in her belly Lucy continued her walk. What had made the boy run? Was she ugly in his eyes? Now that would be a novel experience, she thought wryly, more than aware of just how beautiful she was. Lucy extended her hands before her and grimaced. Not so beautiful at present, with dirt and blood streaking her extremities, an unbecoming hue of pink on her sunburnt skin. Her hair felt heavy with sweat and dust, and her clothes looked as if she'd rolled about on the ground in them.

The closer she got to the village, the more trees she saw – and pigs. But she saw no more swineherds, and when at last she reached the open fields, Lucy came to a halt. The fields were deserted. Here and there, she saw a discarded hoe, an upended basket. Birds converged on the spilled contents, and Lucy walked carefully between the rows of plants. Where were all the people? She wiped her hands on her skirts, causing her left palm to bleed again.

This close, she could make out tiled roofs atop the houses. Towering above all the others was a two-towered building, and when Lucy squinted she could make out the shapes of bells. A dull vibration shook the ground below her, the ground vibrated again, and when Lucy glanced at the towers, the bells were swinging wildly.

Lucy came to a halt. The sun was at her back, throwing her shadow before her. From the village in front of her came a procession, headed by a man dressed in black. A priest. Lucy clasped her hands before her and tried to stop them from trembling. How was she to explain why she was here?

"The Virgin!" Luís gasped and fell to his knees before Father Gonzalo. "She is here, the Virgin is here!"

The priest rapped him hard with his cane. "What foolishness is this?"

"No, *Padre*, no foolishness! I saw her, and she's beautiful and bleeding, and..."

"Quiet!" Father Gonzalo frowned down at Luís, but couldn't quite control the slight twitch to his mouth. Little Luís was somewhat simple, but he was by far the most devout of Gonzalo's entire flock – so devout that a blue rag fluttering on the wind would be enough to have him come screaming he'd seen the Virgin.

Apparently, Luís had shared his momentous news with whoever he'd passed on his way to church, because the villagers were converging on them, more out of boredom than any genuine belief in Luís, of that Father Gonzalo was quite certain. Ever since Luís' mother died some years ago, the boy lived on the outskirts, ostracized for being a bastard, the son of the village whore. Gonzalo sighed and scratched at his chest: Carmela had been dealt a bad hand of cards in this life, and

Gonzalo could only hope God would treat the poor woman with more mercy than her neighbours had.

He scratched himself again and slid a look at Luís. At times, he worried the boy might be his, the fruit of his single transgression with Carmela, one night very long ago when he'd been far too drunk and far too hot. Since then, he did constant penance – so much so that last time he'd been to his confessor he'd been told off for the sin of vanity, for assuming his sin was so much worse than anyone else's. It made Gonzalo want to laugh: shouldn't a priest strive to be as free of sin as possible?

"Fool!" his confessor had said. "We are all fallible – and a priest is no better or worse than any other man."

That was not why Gonzalo had become a priest. He had hoped to be better, closer to God, than his lay brothers and sisters. Now, of course, he knew better: Luís, even Carmela, were in some ways closer to God than he was, approaching the Divine with a sense of certainty he no longer felt.

"Why wouldn't the Virgin show herself here?" one of the older women asked, recalling Gonzalo to the present and the eager eyes of his assembled flock. "Why in Fátima and not here?"

Father Gonzalo made a depreciating sound. Why, indeed? Three little shepherds in Portugal had recently claimed to see the Virgin, and their visions had thrown the entire village into a frenzy. If Our Lady showed herself there, in Fátima, why not here, in Godforsaken Extremadura? Gonzalo removed his hat and wiped at his face, his neck, with a handkerchief before carefully folding it together and returning it to his pocket. He rose, brushed his cassock into place, and turned to look at Luís. "Well then *hijo*. Show me your virgin."

Ay, *Diós!* Father Gonzalo's heart stuttered in his chest. A woman, standing in the midst of Señora Rosario's tomato plants. The most beautiful woman Gonzalo had ever seen, with hair the colour of sunlight filtered through a jar of pickled red tomatoes – long hair that hung all the way down to her waist. She was dressed in blue, with skirts that grazed the ground. Most unfashionable, Gonzalo reflected, as was her strange, tailored blouse in some heavy material. Wool? In this heat, Gonzalo could but commiserate.

The woman stood perfectly still. And then she smiled, holding out her hands to them. In dirty, torn clothes, barefoot and somewhat dishevelled, that smile transformed her from beautiful to radiant. All around, there were gasps. Her palms were bloodied, and on her left hand a circular wound still welled blood. People fell to their knees, Luís rushed forward to prostrate himself at her feet.

"Look, she bleeds here as well!" he yelled, and there were more moans, more gasps.

"*Padre, protéjame,*" Father Gonzalo murmured, crossing himself. His rational mind was telling him this was a mortal woman – inexplicably dressed and appearing out of nowhere. His faith was telling him she might be Our Lady – after all, they'd seen her in Fátima, hadn't they? So why not here, a couple of miles from San Vicente de Alcántara? Close enough to Fátima that she could have walked here – in fact, maybe that was why she looked so bedraggled, although Gonzalo found that something of a stretch. Surely, the Holy Virgin didn't need to walk as us mere mortals, did she?

The unknown woman took a hesitant step towards them, still smiling. The sun behind her set her hair on fire, it caressed the silhouette of her shapely figure. The men were gazing at her with open desire, but with their hands clasped in prayer. To these simple cork-makers she was a glorious apparition, and if the men were gaping, the women were weeping, hands extended towards her. Father Gonzalo decided it was time he took control over the situation.

"We must invite her to stay with us," he said loudly, nudging the village mayor in the ribs.

“Yes, yes, of course we must.” The mayor lowered his voice for Father Gonzalo’s benefit. “But where do we put her? And what will she eat? Does she eat?”

“Joaquín,” Gonzalo replied, just as softly, “she may just be a normal woman.”

“Normal?” The mayor shook his round head. “If she’s not the Virgin – or an angel – she must be mad. What sane woman wanders round barefoot here? And where did she come from if not from the heavens?”

“We’ll see. First we offer her hospitality, then we find out who she is.” Gonzalo tapped his nose. “You and I, Joaquín. We will investigate this together.”

The mayor beamed. “You and I, *Padre*.”

Lucy was somewhat taken aback when the people fell to their knees before her – as if she was a queen. And when she moved in their direction they clasped their hands together, staring at her as if she were the answer to their prayers. It made Lucy uncomfortable, but she maintained her serene smile and made for the priest, thinking that no matter who they thought she was, it was the priest she needed on her side.

She’d never been this close to a papist priest before, and she had to suppress a shudder when she took in his cassock and the prayer beads hanging from his belt. But a priest was probably not all that different from a minister, and so it followed the stranger who studied her with eyes the colour of brandy was a man inflated with his own importance. She widened her smile a fraction, and the priest went as red as a beet-root. Lucy suppressed the desire to roll her eyes: men were so predictable!

Gracefully, she inclined her head towards the man. The priest bowed so low she could see the threadbare cloth at the back of his cassock. Lucy studied the people around her. Other than the priest, they were all wearing very strange clothes, the women in skirts that left more than half their calves visible and with their heads uncovered, the men in shirts that buttoned closed and with breeches that ended a scant couple of inches from their feet – most of them shod in heavy sandals.

This close to the village, Lucy was less impressed. Whitewashed houses with heavy shutters lined the nearby street, a narrow cobbled thoroughfare adorned by the odd cart or two, a shallow gutter and a pack of dogs. She looked closer and was somewhat more impressed: every house had glass windows!

The crowd herded her towards the church. Lucy slowed her steps as she approached, the setting sun throwing her shadow before her, an elongated dark shape she tried to avoid stepping on. Silly, she berated herself, no one can avoid stepping on their own shadow! And yet she didn’t want to – no more than she wanted to enter the building at the end of the street. A papist church! Would she be smitten down if she entered it? Dear God, she prayed, don’t punish me for entering this place, I cannot help it. But deep inside, a dark voice cackled that Lucy Jones need not worry overmuch about churches and priests – she was meant for hell everlasting, what with that evil painting and the lasses she’d lured to look too deep and fall through time.

Halfway to the church, she saw him. Him. Of a height with her, she reckoned, with dark, curly hair, dark eyes and a dark shadow on his cheeks. He lounged against a wall, arms crossed, and she was aware of his eyes burning into her, disrobing her. But she didn’t mind. Not with him.

Pepe rested back against the wall of the bar and regarded the blonde woman, walking as gracefully as a thoroughbred mare towards the church. The Virgin? He sucked at his cigarette. He thought not; the woman was far too conscious of how beautiful she was, and Pepe had this idea that whatever

else the Virgin might be, she was no seductress. This woman, however, had hips that swayed as she walked, long, long hair that lifted in a sudden breeze, and when she glanced in his direction he met eyes as frankly appraising as his own. Pepe touched his fingers to his forehead in salutation, she gave him a slight smile.

No, definitely not the Virgin – not even a virgin, Pepe would wager, watching her stiffen her back in such a way as to raise her bosom an inch or two higher. For his sake? He laughed softly and caught her eyes again. Oh, yes; for his sake. Father Gonzalo gestured towards the church, and the woman came to a halt, looking quite uncertain. She raised a hand to her hair, and Pepe wondered if only he noted just how it trembled. Father Gonzalo's brows pulled together, his mouth tightening into a little spout, and Pepe was convinced the priest did not think this apparition anything else but an ordinary woman.

He straightened up from his slouch and ambled along after the babbling villagers. That woman... he wanted to run his hand through her hair, tighten his hold on it and hear her call his name. As if she'd heard him, she half turned, eyes seeking him. It made Pepe grin. He recognised the look of hunger in her face – hunger for him. Well, he would be more than happy to oblige. Without much conscious thought, he lengthened his stride, his eyes never leaving the woman who seemed to sway all that more alluringly as she moved away from him.

She was dragged along, threw one last look at the man. The crowd fell back when they reached the entrance to the church. The priest opened the heavy door, having to pull hard to make it swing open. A waft of dusty air mingled with the sweet scent of incense tickled Lucy's nose. The priest bowed and gestured for her to enter. Lucy inhaled, picked up her skirts and stepped inside into the dark interior. The oblong of sunshine in which she stood disappeared when the door swung shut behind her.

The church was agreeably cool, it's relative darkness a relief after the glare outside. It was also an orgy of colour and gold, and Lucy shuddered. A God's house to be so gaudily decorated, it made her cringe. The altar was covered in embroidered table cloths, there were gold cups, gold candlesticks and, hanging above the altar, a huge crucifix in dark wood upon which a crucified Jesus was depicted, blood running in garish rivulets from his nailed hands and feet.

The priest genuflected before the altar. Lucy chose to remain standing, but opened her arms and curtsied to the crucified Christ, incapable of tearing her eyes away from his tormented face. She was aware of movement behind her and spun on her toes, causing the fat little man who had followed them inside to scurry away like a beetle, eyes wide on her hands, on her feet. Lucy studied her bloody palms, the bloody footprints she'd left on the cool terracotta tiles. She needed to wash.

Lucy gestured at herself, mimed scrubbing her hands, and the priest nodded. There was a door to the side and he led her through into a small space crammed with vestments and old books. Out through another door, and they were standing in a narrow alley. The priest beckoned, and Lucy followed him into the adjacent house. It smelled of tobacco and mould, of cabbage and pork. Smells Lucy was familiar with, and for the first time since she'd landed in the juniper bush, her shoulders relaxed.

"She's deaf." Father Gonzalo looked at Joaquin.

"Deaf?" Joaquín blinked. "How do you know?"

"She hasn't said a word, has she? And when I dropped my cane, she didn't react." Gonzalo chewed at his lip. "Not the Virgin, then." It was inconceivable Our Lady would be so impaired.

“So where did she come from?” Joaquín lowered his voice, throwing a look at the woman, who was standing by the window, eyes on the darkness outside, one finger travelling up and down the glass – as if she’d never seen a pane of glass before.

“I don’t know.” Gonzalo stood, went over to his little desk and rummaged around in a drawer until he found a pencil stub. “Maybe we can ask her this way.”

The door opened and Luís came in, followed by Pepe. “We back-tracked her and found this,” Pepe said, holding up two woollen stockings. One of them was badly burnt around the toe and heel. Fire? This was becoming stranger by the minute. Gonzalo threw a glance at his guest. She had looked horrified when he’d held out some clean clothes to her, shaking her head in refusal at both the thin cotton blouse and the dark skirt. But she’d fingered the cloth, had spent a lot of time inspecting the zipper, as if she had no idea what it was.

“Maybe she has lived in seclusion somewhere,” Joaquín commented when Gonzalo shared this with them. “After all, zippers are quite the new-fangled thing, aren’t they?”

“Not that new.” Pepe held out his hand and mimed lowering the zipper down a female back.

“Pepe!” Gonzalo frowned, making the gypsy laugh.

“She’s the Virgin,” Luís said. “What would she know of zippers? Look at her, as beautiful as an angel, and dressed in blue – just like she is in that picture you have of her, *Padre*.”

They all turned to study the woman, standing perfectly still by the window. There was no denying she was beautiful – even from behind – and when she smiled, it was as if the sun shone out of her face.

“Father Gonzalo says she’s deaf,” Joaquín said.

“She is?” Pepe picked up one of Gonzalo’s books and brought it down hard on the table. The woman did not as much as flinch. Pepe walked towards her, and something alerted her to his presence, because suddenly she wheeled, facing them. Her mouth fell open at the sight of Pepe, her beautiful grey eyes slanting when she smiled at him. “*Hola, maja*,” Pepe said, and her smile faltered, eyes glued to his lips.

“She’s trying to lip-read.” Gonzalo moved closer. “*Buenas tardes, señora*,” he said with a smile. The woman frowned and held out her bandaged hands in a helpless gesture. Father Gonzalo wrote down his greeting and held out the paper to her. She could read, he could see that, but she didn’t understand, her shoulders lifting.

“Maybe she was abducted somewhere else and her kidnappers threw her out to die here,” Pepe offered. He produced tobacco and paper and rolled himself a cigarette. The woman followed his every moment, eyes widening when he struck a match against the sole of his shoe.

“Why would anyone do that?” Joaquín frowned. “And we’d have known if there’d been strangers in the area.”

“Really?” Pepe drawled. “In this wasteland? Try French,” he suggested.

“I don’t know any French,” Father Gonzalo replied.

“She’s the Virgin,” Luís said. He went to stand in front of the woman, scowling at the men.

“Or she’s a witch,” Pepe said.

“Pepe!” Father Gonzalo shook his head. Too late.

“A witch?” Luís mouth fell open. But he set his mouth and gave Pepe a mulish look. “You’re just jealous because I found her, not you.”

Pepe ruffled his hair. “*Claro*, Luís.” He smiled at the boy. “If she’s the Virgin, she’ll be familiar with rosaries and stuff, won’t she?” he asked, directing himself to Gonzalo.

"I'd imagine so," Gonzalo said. Pepe grabbed Gonzalo's beads and held them out to the woman. She retreated, clasping her hands behind her back, all the while shaking her head.

"Not the Virgin. Not even a Catholic, I'd guess." Pepe concluded. Joaquín gasped and backed away, crossing himself.

Father Gonzalo gave Pepe an irritated look. "Maybe not a Catholic, but she is a Christian. Why else would she have curtsied so deeply before Our Lord Jesus Christ?" He sighed. "What a mess. I'd best call the bishop." That would force him to walk all the way to the opposite side of the little village and borrow Doña Aurelia's phone.

"So she's not the Virgin?" Luís darted over to stand behind Pepe. "But... Then she must be a witch! How else to explain how she came here?"

"Don't be an idiot," Gonzalo reprimanded.

"A witch!" Luís fled the room.

"And now look what you've done," Gonzalo sighed. "He'll tell the entire village the poor woman is a witch, and then what?"

"And how do you know she isn't?" Pepe said.

"*Por Diós*, Pepe! Don't be absurd. This is the 20th century. We don't believe in witches."

"No?" Pepe shrugged. "Maybe it is best if I take her back to my place instead – just in case. Our priest should not have a potential witch as a guest."

"Oh, and you would be safer?" Joaquín demanded, eyes darting over to the woman who was watching them with obvious trepidation.

"I'm a gypsy, Joaquín. We know how to handle witches – in fact, according to the good Spanish people, many of us *are* witches." Pepe held out his hand to the woman and smiled. To Gonzalo's surprise, the woman nodded and danced towards him, allowing him to close his fingers round her wrist.

Lucy was no fool. The look in Pepe's eyes was lust, no more, no less. The way her flesh tingled under his touch was lust. But at least he regarded her with no shade of fear, no inexplicable reverence. This man saw her for what she was; a woman. His woman? Lucy's back erupted with little shivers. If he wanted her, he'd take her, she could feel it in the strength of his fingers, in the warmth of his skin.

The priest blocked their way and said something rapidly, lips moving so fast Lucy could not make out as much as a syllable. Not that she understood anyway – that much she had realised already, although she suspected the man holding her hand was called Bebe or Pepe. She curled her fingers round his, felt him squeeze back, even if he was presently focused on the priest, who was frowning, mouth pursed in a way that hollowed out his cheeks, covered by a fuzz of grey bristles.

The fat little man cowered behind the priest, regarding her as if he feared she might suddenly turn into a serpent. If only he knew... Her stomach tightened round a pebble of ice-cold fear. Lucy berated herself for her instinctive rejection of the prayer beads. She should have taken them, should have pretended pleasure and familiarity, but instead she'd shied away like an unbroken horse, afraid the papist beads would burn her.

The priest was still talking. Pepe or Bebe was still holding her hand, refusing to let go. The priest stabbed his digit into Pepe's chest a couple of times, Pepe nodded, nodded again, and then they were out of the room, she more or less dragged in his wake.

Lucy came to an abrupt halt. There was light outside! She craned her head back, studying the lantern over the priest's door. She couldn't see a flame, nor did the light flicker – it burned a steady orange. There were several such lanterns, lighting up the cobbles below her feet, throwing darker

patches of shadow to lurk in the corners of the houses. She glanced at Pepe. He had tilted his head to the side and was watching her with an amused expression. He said something, repeated it several times. "Looss," she deciphered silently, studying his lips. He pointed at the lanterns and said it again. "Looss."

Something barged into her, sent her flying to land on her knees on the cobbles. Pepe looked angry. He waved his hands about, scowled at someone behind her and helped her up. The boy. Lucy smiled at him, but he was weeping, snot running from his nose as he pointed at her and yelled something. Doors opened, bright light spilling onto the street. So much light! People converged on them. The boy yelled something again, Pepe pushed her to stand behind him, hands held open and placating. The assembled men and women shuffled on their feet. An old hag crossed herself, spat to the side. Two of the men approached her, gesticulating. Pepe lowered his head and glared at them, and they came to a hesitant halt.

Lucy placed her hand on Pepe's back, feeling ridges of muscle under her fingers. He tensed under her touch. One of the men pointed at her hand, spat out a word that had some of the women shaking their fists at her. Lucy cowered behind her protector. There were more people moving towards them. A rock flew through the air. It struck Pepe on the arm and he reeled. Things were thrown at Lucy, things that landed on her arms, on her chest and her hair, and burst apart into wet, slimy patches of red. The two men rushed Lucy and she screamed – silently, she assumed. Hands on her arms, her chest, and she spat someone in the face.

Here came Pepe, and now he was brandishing a knife. One of the men was thrown to the side, the other scrambled away on all four, retreating from the blade. Pepe helped her up to stand and she swayed, steadied by his hand on her waist. Her clothes were torn, she was dirty and frightened and wanted to cry. But Lucy Jones didn't cry. Instead, she straightened up and took a step forward, her bandaged hands held high. Pepe spoke. He pointed at the boy with his knife and shook his head. The crowd shuffled and shifted, as restless as the sea under a stormy sky.

"How can you listen to him?" Pepe yelled. "One moment the little idiot is screeching he has found the Virgin, the next he is calling her a witch." He glanced at the woman, unable to stop himself from registering the patches of milky skin visible through the tears in her strange blouse. No buttons, he noted, eyes lingering for an instant on the odd laces. "The boy spends too much time in the sun with the pigs. It fries his brain."

"But you..." Luís began, eyes huge in his pinched face.

"He's a liar, a good-for-nothing little bastard," Pepe continued, shamed by the look of hurt in Luís' eyes. "Well, mostly he is a good boy," he amended, "but remember when he told us there was a unicorn down by the river?" He snickered, and some of the men laughed. "Or when he said Eufemia had grown angel wings?"

"I..." Luís said. Pepe grabbed hold of him, pulled him close. "Look at her, Luís." The boy squirmed, Pepe tightened his hold. "I said look at her! What exactly do you see, eh?"

"I..."

"A woman," one of the men called out. "A damned fine woman, and how like you, Pepe, to have your hands all over her already." There were several cat-calls from the other men.

"I say she's a witch." One of the women shouldered her way through the crowd and Pepe sighed. Alfonsina was still carrying a torch for him, no matter that he'd broken off things several months ago. Now she glared at the stranger, hands akimbo. "Or if she isn't a witch, she's some sort of slut."

“Slut?” One of the men laughed. “She’s got more clothes on than you do, Alfonsina.”

“She’s an evil temptress!” Alfonsina screeched. “Look at you, salivating as you stare at her!” Several of the women agreed, shifting that much closer. Yet another rotten tomato flew through the air, landing on the woman’s chest. To her credit, she didn’t as much as flinch.

“Witch, witch, witch,” the women chanted, and Pepe felt the handle of his knife grow slippery with sweat. The assembled people surged forward, Pepe stood his ground.

“Silence!” Father Gonzalo strode into the light. “What is going on here?”

“We don’t want her here,” Alfonsina said, pointing at the woman.

“You don’t want her here,” one of the younger men called out. “Maybe you fear the competition, hey?”

“Competition?” Alfonsina snorted. She turned to the priest. “She’s a witch. Luís says you said so.”

“I did no such thing!” Father Gonzalo bristled. “Do I believe this poor woman is Our Lady? No. Has she ever pretended to be Our Lady? No. Do I believe she is a witch? *Pero por favor!* We live in the 20th century, not the Middle Ages.” He gave the assembled people a stern look. “The bishop will be here tomorrow. He will talk to her, and then we’ll see. But personally, I only see a confused woman. A woman who must wonder what sort of misguided, uneducated people she has ended up with.”

“We didn’t ask her to come,” Alfonsina said, adjusting her blouse over her generous breasts. There were several concurring comments.

“Maybe she didn’t want to come,” Pepe retorted. “Maybe she was stolen away from somewhere. Look at her – she doesn’t look like a farmer’s wife, does she?” He drew the woman close. No, the villagers muttered, she didn’t.

“I bet you she’s never done an honest day’s work in her life,” Alfonsina said in a sour tone, throwing with her head so that her dark hair bounced.

“Well, neither have you,” Pepe retorted. “You’re still living off your father’s lottery winnings.”

“Best get married while you still have some of it left,” Carlos the blacksmith called out. “Unless you’re dowered, no one will want you, Alfonsina – at least not as a wife.” The men erupted in laughter, some of the women snickered as well and drew back from Alfonsina, leaving her angry and alone.

“We want her gone,” Alfonsina insisted. “A woman to appear like that, and she can’t even speak, can she? I say she’s a temptress sent by the devil himself to lead us all astray.” She glared at the woman beside Pepe, at the priest. “Or are you saying, Father, that the devil no longer tries to tempt us into sin?” Alfonsina crossed herself and spat to the side. “Evil must be destroyed, Father – or at least banished.”

As if she understood what Alfonsina was saying, the woman moved that much closer to Pepe, her hand sneaking into his. He closed his fingers round hers.

“Do not act the fool you are not, Alfonsina,” Father Gonzalo admonished. “This woman is a stranger, and yes, she seems to be deaf. She is also very beautiful, but none of these facts make her evil, do they?” He clapped his hands together. “I’ll have you all leave – now. Go home and meditate on the lack of compassion and charity you have just shown this woman.” He stared at them in silence until they dispersed and walked off, some in two’s, some in groups of five or six. Beside him, Pepe felt the woman soften, tension draining out of her rigid back. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, overwhelmed by the insight that he would never let anyone hurt her. Ever.

She stood by the door and watched him. The room was small, the walls whitewashed, the floor packed earth. Pepe crossed the room to a large sink, turned the contraption that sat atop a length of pipe and water gushed forth. It wasn't quite as surprising now as when she'd seen it at the priest's house, but all the same, Lucy laughed. Water, spouting as if by magic from a pipe!

He gestured for her to sit down by the table and fiddled with the lantern that sat on top of it. Lucy wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant odour that emanated from the lantern, but was very impressed by the bright light. Pepe produced a rag, dipped it into the water, and wiped her face. He wiped at her hair, cleaned her ear. When he reached for her laces, she shrank back, laughing silently at herself. Her skin was clearly visible through the tears in the fabric of her bodice and shift. So she let him undress her, noting that he kept his eyes mostly averted while he washed her. It made her feel unattractive, and she shifted on her seat, sufficiently to bring one of her breasts in contact with his hand. He froze. Dark eyes met hers, and in them she saw red-hot desire, mirrored by the way her pulse began to thud, her privates contracting with need. Fingers grazed her skin. She shivered. Lucy craved to be touched, to be held. It was well over a month since anyone had touched her – at all – and now this handsome man was sliding his hands down her waist, over her hips.

When he took her hand and led her to the bed, she followed. When he kissed her, she kissed him back, allowing him to press her down onto her back, to take her. Her man. The thought fluttered through her brain, just as it had done when first she saw him. Her man, and for all that he was dirt poor, Lucy knew he was her destiny. A harsher life on this side of the time divide awaited her – a life without any of the comforts she had known before. Atonement, of sorts, Lucy supposed.

Pepe lit a cigarette and reclined against the wall. Beside him, the woman was sleeping, one arm thrown over his waist. He fingered a tendril of her hair, a vivid shade of gilded copper, and smiled. Not the Virgin, and most definitely not a virgin either, this bed-mate of his had proven quite the tigress, as voracious for him as he'd been for her. He stroked her cheek, her bare arm. Impossibly smooth skin, so white his every touch left an impression. Hands unused to work, to a life of leisure. Well, that would change soon enough. His woman would have to work – whether it be washing laundry or helping him in his somewhat more illegal pursuits, the woman at his side would learn to earn her living, the living of their children.

Pepe shook his head. He'd known her a handful of hours and already he was contemplating a future with her. At least he knew her name now, he thought, studying the LUCY she had written in the condensation on his window. Below it, he had written PEPE, and she had smiled and nodded, as if she already knew. Pepe dragged the last of the tobacco smoke into his lungs, stubbed out the cigarette against the wall and turned to her. He wanted her again, needed to sink into her welcoming warmth and fill her with his seed. His woman.

Next morning, he woke to her hands on his body. Pepe smiled and stretched, thinking that it was not every man who was fortunate enough to have a golden-haired angel in their bed. And this particular angel was his now, he decided as he rode her towards his own completion. Afterwards, she nestled close to him and sighed. He caressed her back, relishing the silence. He had never understood women's need to talk after relations, most of what they said emotional blackmail that had as its single purpose to wrest a "*Te quiero*," from him. But this woman, she just looked at him through sleepy eyes, her mouth softened into a smile that made it quite impossible not to kiss her – again.

She remained in bed while he made them coffee, and he had to laugh at her grimace when she tasted the strong, dark brew. Yet another novelty for her, as was running water, buttoned shirts and

street lamps. But her past didn't matter – not now. Pepe decided never to ask, uncertain if he would want to know the truth, or catch her lying to him. Something was very strange about Lucy – Lucía – but Pepe knew first-hand that some secrets were best left alone.

The church bells rang for early Mass, and with a sigh, Pepe got out of bed. The bishop would be here any moment, and he had every intention of being present when Lucía was presented to him. First, however, there was the matter of clothes to sort. From under the bed he produced a small cardboard suitcase, containing what little he had left of Marcela's things. He nipped at the silk of the faded pink slip. He missed his sister, the last member of his once so large family. Just like his mother, Marcela had died of consumption, hacking herself to death in this bed. Not for her a fancy sanatorium in the mountains. No, poor people died where they lived, untended and unaided.

Pepe had undressed his fair share of women, but he had never dressed one before. She studied each new garment he handed her intently, turning it this way and that, and her skin went the colour of an August sunset when he helped her with the garter belt, amused by how she fumbled with it. Slowly, he rolled the silk stockings up her legs, all the way to mid-thigh, and he couldn't quite resist caressing the milky whiteness of her skin, allowing his hand to travel high enough to graze her dark red pubic curls. More intimate than making love, he reflected as he snapped the garter straps into place. Much more intimate, he corrected as he helped her tug the silk sleeveless shift over her head.

Dark skirt, a dark blouse with white polkadots and flounces on the sleeves – Marcela's only concession to her heritage – all that hair caught up into a messy bun and covered with a light blue scarf, and she was ready to meet the bishop. Pepe took her by the hand and set off for Father Gonzalo's house.

Halfway there, they were overtaken by the bishop. Pepe made big eyes at the brand new T-Ford, wondering just how a humble servant of the church could afford this beauty in black and burgundy. Lucía uttered the first sound he'd heard her make, a terrified squawk as she retreated from the vehicle. Her grey eyes were abnormally wide, and he saw her swallow repeatedly as she studied the car. She mimed a horse and looked at him. He shook his head. No horses required. Lucía bit her lip, squinted at the car and made yet another sound, this one an admiring "aaah!" Pepe urged her on. Best not have her gawk at things she would never have.

Father Gonzalo did not look entirely pleased when Pepe insisted he should stay.

"She's my woman now," Pepe explained.

"Really?" the priest said drily. "One of the many, eh?"

"Lucía is special." Pepe could hear how brusque he sounded.

"Lucía?" Father Gonzalo turned to look at the woman. "Is that her name or have you just given her one?"

"It's her name." Well, almost.

Pepe had no liking for the Church. Ever since his childhood down in Andalucía, he had regarded most priests with distrust. After all, it was a priest, a Father Diego, who had forcibly separated him and his siblings from their mother, screeching that it was a well-known fact that vagrant women like their mother were whores and immoral, most unsuited to raising children. "It would be best for all if your kind was wiped from the earth," he'd added, shaking an admonishing finger at Pepe's oldest brother. "Instead, you gypsies breed like rats. But I will beat the *gitano* out of you – out of all of you."

He had certainly tried, Pepe mused, remembering far too many beatings at the hand of the priest. Two of his sisters had been forced into convents, his youngest brother had disappeared into the night and ended up God knew where, and Pepe himself had fled with Marcela when he was

fourteen. After years of walking the back roads of Andalucía they had found their mother in Seville – just in time to witness her death.

It was therefore with an element of distrust Pepe watched the bishop enter the room. Lucía was sitting on a chair, eyes locked on Pepe who was lounging against the wall. The bishop's eyes flicked over to Pepe before returning to rest on Lucía.

The bishop took a turn or two around her. "Where did she come from?"

"From nowhere," Joaquín replied. "Luís saw her wandering the wilderness."

The bishop snorted. "People don't just appear like that. She must have travelled there, somehow."

"Well, if so we haven't found any traces of how," Father Gonzalo said. "Joaquín speaks the truth, Your Excellency; she just came walking from the west."

"Dressed like that? I thought you said she was wearing blue."

"She was," Joaquín put in. "Beautiful blue skirts – long, sweeping the ground."

"And now she is dressed like a gypsy," the bishop muttered. "More's the pity."

"She's dressed like any young woman," Father Gonzalo protested, but he eyed the polkadot blouse with open dislike, making Pepe stiffen his spine.

"And she's deaf, you say?" The bishop clapped his hands together behind Lucía's back. She didn't move.

"Like a post," Father Gonzalo sighed.

"She must have fled from a mental institution or something." The bishop bent to peer Lucía in the face. Fat fingers tugged at a tendril of her hair. Lucía jerked her head away, scowling at him.

"There aren't any close by." Father Gonzalo moved that much closer to Lucía, bushy brows pulled together in a frown as he regarded the bishop.

"There is in Cáceres." The bishop said.

"In Cáceres?" Pepe laughed. "And you think she walked all the way here from there? Besides, Cáceres is to the east."

The bishop gave him a sour look. "Maybe she hitched a ride with someone. We will have to look into that." He made as if to take Lucía by the arm.

"Don't touch her," Pepe warned.

"Or what?" the bishop sneered. "You think she can stay here? The villagers don't want her."

"She's going nowhere with you," Pepe said. "She's with me now."

"One night in your bed doesn't make her yours. It makes her a whore." The bishop laughed. "She's quite delectable – I will find her adequate living accommodations in Badajoz." From the light in his eyes, Pepe deduced the bishop intended to make a gift of Lucía to one of his friends – assuming he would be given a gift of comparable value in return.

"No." Pepe straightened up. "She stays with me."

"Says who?" The bishop yanked Lucía upright.

"Your Excellency," Father Gonzalo protested. "She is no chattel to be carried off against her will. We must ask her..."

Whatever else he intended to say was lost in the bishop's angry exclamation. He covered his nose with his hands. "She hit me! The bitch hit me!"

Lucía rushed over to stand beside Pepe.

"You'll pay for this," the bishop said, dabbing at his bloodied nose. "Antonio, take her and carry her out to the car." The large man that doubled as the bishop's chauffeur and general dogs' body came towards them.

"No," Pepe said.

"Do as I say!" the bishop commanded. Antonio tried to grab Lucía. Pepe didn't hesitate. He kicked the man in his shin and pulled his knife.

"I said she stays with me."

"Pepe, don't be a fool." Father Gonzalo held out his hands to him. "You can't disobey the bishop."

"I can." Pepe gave Gonzalo a scathing look. "And so should you, Father. He aims to steal her away against her will."

"But Pepe," Father Gonzalo said, "she doesn't belong with you."

"She does. For ever." When Antonio made yet another attempt to grab Lucía, Pepe head-butted him, sending the big man to land on his backside.

"How dare you!" The bishop's face had acquired the hue of a ripe tomato. He helped his man to stand. "You can keep your little whore, what do I care? But you can't stay here – the village won't have you – and especially not now that you've insulted me."

Joaquín nodded repeatedly, scraping his foot as he told the bishop that was most definitely the truth: the village would have nothing to do with the gypsy and the woman.

"We'll leave then," Pepe said. "Go south."

"You do that." The bishop straightened up. "Leave my diocese, and don't you ever dare to show your face here again, y'hear?" With that he strutted off, an apologetic Joaquín at his heels. "And you," he threw over his shoulder, stabbing a finger in the direction of Father Gonzalo, "you and I will have a very long talk. Very long." The door banged shut behind them.

"I'm sorry if I've got you into trouble," Pepe said.

Father Gonzalo shrugged. "His Excellency and I rarely see eye to eye on anything." He gave Pepe a challenging look. "If you want to keep her, you must marry her." Marry her? Pepe threw a look at Lucía.

"Why?"

"I can't just let you take off with her otherwise," the priest said. "She's my responsibility too, you know."

Pepe studied Lucía. "Fine, we marry." He put away his knife. "Now."

She didn't understand what was happening. She had not liked the fat priest who had hovered round her like a blowfly round a dung heap, and even less when he'd pulled her upright, dragging at her as if she were a dog on a leash. Her hand hurt after the blow she'd dealt him, but at least she'd had the satisfaction of seeing him bleed. Serve him right! And then the big man had come for her, but once again, Pepe had defended her, placing himself and his little knife before her. Like Uncle Matthew with Aunt Alex, she thought, a protective presence that would allow no one to harm his wife.

Now, the other priest was bustling about like an old hen, digging about in closets for one object after the other. The fat priest had gone, shaking his fist at Pepe in a way that had Lucy regretting she hadn't hit him harder. She'd drifted over to the window to watch him get into that strange carriage of his, all bright and shiny and with no horses. She wanted one of those, she reflected, but they were probably very expensive.

The priest and Pepe were involved in a heated discussion, soon joined by the fat man who seemed most irate. Lucy left them to it and turned her attention to the stacked books. In Latin, in a language she thought might be French, several in another tongue, and none in English. She pulled out one at random and opened it. Such thin paper, such neat type. On the desk was a broadsheet of

sorts, and to the right it said “*Abril 22, 1918*”. April of 1918... Lucy hugged herself; she had fallen forward in time!

Her reverie was interrupted by the priest. He made the sign of the cross on her forehead, and she steeled herself not to recoil, not this time. The priest smiled at her and took off the light blue head-cloth. Instead, he covered her hair with a black, sheer veil, made of exquisite lace. What was this? Pepe took her by the hand and led her to the church. They entered through a side door, the priest and the fat man hurrying ahead. Candles were lit. There was that cloying smell of incense again. She shivered in her thin blouse but obediently approached the altar, her hand in Pepe’s.

It struck her the moment the priest turned to face them. She was getting married – being married was a better verb, because this was a decision taken over her head. No one had asked her, and she yanked against Pepe’s hold, but he just tightened his fingers into a painful squeeze, dark eyes admonishing her to behave. Lucy panicked. She couldn’t wed him, she was already married, and bigamy was not a sin she wanted to add to her extensive list. But then sanity kicked in, reminding her that in this time she was unmarried. Henry was long since dead.

And so Lucy was married to a man she didn’t know, in a language she couldn’t lip-read. She had no idea where she was, she had no notion of where they might be going, but she suspected things had not changed overmuch since her time. Once a woman was wed, she belonged to her man, which was why Lucy’s formidable mother-in-law, Kate Jones, had preferred to remain a widow to being married again. Lucy fingered the cheap silver band that now decorated her finger and licked her lips. She didn’t even know what her married name was.

Seville, July 1919

Sevilla was hot. Unbearably so in the summer. Lucy sighed and shrank back in the shade, hefting the baby to lie closer to her chest. A son, named Marcelo after his dead aunt. At present, Marcelo’s father was doing his sing and dance act on the little plaza, and it was but a matter of seconds before Lucy would begin her work, slipping through the crowds in her full gypsy skirts as she deftly picked pocket after pocket. She always left her hair unbound and uncovered when she did this, having quickly realised that a fair gypsy was such an attraction that the men she singled out as potential victims never noticed her fingers in their pockets.

Lucía, the gypsy, that was who she was now, wife to Pepe Romano, mother to little Marcelo and already pregnant with a new child.

“We breed like rabbits,” Pepe has said when she told him. “Us gypsies like big, big families.” She had merely nodded, by now accustomed to belonging to his people, doomed to an itinerant life from one city to the other, to a life on the fringes of society. Her husband insisted she dress as the women of his people did, and she complied, even if in doing so she became an even odder outcast – not only was she deaf and fair, she was apparently a *gitana* too.

By now, she was used to being yelled at – she could lip-read sufficient Spanish to know what they were saying – to being shoed away from shops and streets. She was reconciled to living her entire life in a sequence of small, dark rooms, none of them close to the size of her former bedroom. Her husband was mostly a good man, but he could be rough at times, like if she didn’t turn over all her pickings to him, or when he got home tired and she wasn’t quick enough in serving him food.

This was her life now, she reflected some hours later, trying to soothe the baby back to sleep. On the table were stacks of clean laundry that Pepe would deliver to her customers, on the floor were two huge heaps of dirty washing that she had to get done tonight. The water in the cauldron

was already simmering, and she added soft soap to the water before dunking in the first of the six loads. Lucy studied her hands, no longer as smooth and as cared for as when she arrived well over a year ago. Now she had her share of callouses, there were faded marks where she'd burned herself with the heavy iron, and her finger tips had acquired a faint yellowish tinge from all the cigarettes she rolled.

Work, work, work... It seemed to Lucy this was all she did these days – in between caring for her husband's needs and the baby. And soon there would be another baby. And another, she grimaced, and another after that... She was too young and fertile, and her husband was proud as a peacock that already she was breeding again.

The baby at her breast squirmed. Lucy lifted him to her other side, smoothed at the dark curls. Her son, born into a harsher existence than her first three children, entirely dependent on her – and his father – for survival. Well, she wouldn't abandon him or his future siblings, she would work herself to the bone to keep them safe and sound. As safe as a gypsy could ever be, she amended with a wry smile, clutching the child to her heart.

When Pepe came in some hours later, he ducked under the clean sheets, hung to dry on the clotheslines that traversed their little room. Lucy gave him a tired smile and brushed a tendril of damp hair from her forehead. He kissed her nose, went over to the cradle to inspect his sleeping son and then sat down at the table, giving her a demanding look. Lucy hurried to serve him chickpeas in broth, with bread and beer on the side. She sat down beside him, sliding in a finger under her neckline to adjust her breasts. They were constantly heavy with milk, and she was already rounding with the next bairn, making her far curvier than she was comfortable with.

Once he had eaten, Pepe took her to bed. Layer after layer he undressed her, a collection of skirts and petticoats that landed in untidy heaps on the floor. Finally, she was only in her shift, and he kissed her nipples through the thin material, laughing at the resulting spreading damp patches.

"*Mi mujer,*" he said when he laid her down. Yes, she was his woman. His to hold, his to breed with, his to command. Did he love her? Lucy wasn't sure, but she could see in his eyes that he wanted her and needed her – as desperately as she needed and wanted him. Always. Maybe that was enough, she reflected, stroking his hair as he slept by her side. Or not. With a little sigh, she rolled over.

Come dawn, it was back to the drudgery of her life. The baby wailed, he was fed, he slept and woke again, constantly hungry. The heaps of laundry grew with every new load Pepe brought back, and then there was the little sack of tobacco waiting for her, hours and hours spent rolling the cigarettes Pepe would then sell.

Atonement, Lucy thought as she sank down to rest during the midday siesta, with Pepe already snoring beside her. Sometimes she wondered just how long she would survive in this her brave, new life. She swallowed back on a wad of tears. As if attuned to her, Pepe rose on his elbow, eyes dark with concern as they looked at her.

"It will be fine," he whispered. "I'm here, *mi amor*. I will never leave you, *corazón*." And Lucy drifted off to sleep cocooned in the certainty that he did, in fact, love her. Almost as much as she loved him.