

1910

Flat 1F1

Jessie MacRae (21)

the arrival

MY FATHER'S corpse stares out across the North Atlantic swells. Grey eyes. Eyelashes adorned with beads of rain. Tiny orbs to reflect our entire world. Primrose and squill dance at his feet. His body is rammed into a crevice. The shore is scattered with storm debris. Cargo boxes. Little green bottles with faded labels. Swollen pods of seaweed slip underfoot. It takes me an hour to get from our clifftop to the water's edge. I have a blue glass bottle. It is tincture of iodine. Skull and crossbones on the front. I wash it out. Tell it my secrets. Stopper them. Lay it on the water. When I look back our beach has a long straight line – right down the middle – like the spine of a book.

It is where I dragged my coffin.

I use his oars.

Push the vessel he built for me – into waves. It is not the journey he foresaw me taking in it. My father built one for each of us from old church pews. Knocked them together outside the kitchen window, so my mother would see. She saw the world through those four square panes. Each season. Each sorrow. That night he made her sleep in hers. Then my brother took to his. I varnished mine ten times

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without any premonition. How buoyant such a thing can be! A light spray fans peaks of waves. I will not look back at him in his crevice. It had to be done like this! Hoick my skirt up. Wade into the sea. Pale bare thighs bloom red in the cold water. I kiss my mother's cross. Set it onto the floor so there's one holy thing between me and oblivion. The sea won't take me. I am the devil's daughter. Nobody wants responsibility for my immortal soul. My address cannot be – The Devil's Daughter, North Sea. I'll never knock at heaven's door. Hell knows I could do far worse than take over. I dip the oars in. Pull away from the island. I watch the dark blue line of the horizon. A seal pops up. Black eyes. Long whiskers. He'd have me sire a seal child if I'd do him the favour of drowning.

On the first night I lay down in my coffin when the winds drop.

Easiest sleep of my life.

When I wake the ocean swells roll bigger and bigger. I sing. Smoke. Thin spires rise up. I breakfast on oatcakes and cheese. Run chapped fingers through the water. The seal brushes them with his whiskers. I eat a raw fish I brought with me. Lob the bones out. It barely touches my hunger. A hairline crack appears in my coffin. Cross myself three times. Wish I had brought more to eat. I see no ships all day. The sun falls with regularity. Her opposition – the moon – rises. It is round and yellow – a single eye to watch my journey.

On the third morning a fog unfurls.

A ship calls out long and low.

The spirits of the sea are matched in sorrow by the living. I rest my elbows on the sides. Scan the horizon. All I can see

Luckenbooth

is a grey abyss that feels like it has come directly out of me. The day passes in misery. At night the skies clear and wind picks up faster and faster until sailing feels like flying. Arms out – travelling through a hundred, million, billion – stars.

I have no compass.

When I draw near land I shout – *where are we?*

Those who don't faint, or cross themselves, or throw something at me – give enough information to get me to my destination. I drift into the Water of Leith at dawn. Four cormorants skim across still water – wings almost touch their own reflection. So graceful! Stash the coffin behind the trawler boats away in a corner of the docks. I tie it up. Leave it bobbing in the harbour. I climb out on rusty wall prongs. Men argue nearby. I strip quickly behind barrels – comb my hair twenty times, tighten my corset, pull on clean stockings, slip my ma's best dress over my head. It is charcoal with a square neck. Low enough to see a heart beat. Tie up long brown hair. My skin is white-blue. My lips are kept fresh with Vaseline. There are neat green buttons on my leather boots. The priest bought them for my mother. She gave them to me. I throw my farm boots over some barrels. Somebody will use them no doubt. My old dress is stuffed in a bag. I pull out the last piece and carefully fix the clasp – her silver cameo.

I'm ready.

Walk quickly along Constitution Street.

The thing is to try and look like a woman.

Not a demon.

I have the eyes of every man on me.

Flawed thing.

All want.

Jenni Fagan

They could find so many reasons to hang me.

I go past the boundary wall. Odd symbols and rubbish and broken tools line it. Some of the children run by me barefoot. They must have soles like leather! Up along Elm Row. Finally – the very fancy new North British Hotel appears. I turn onto North Bridge and wind skelps me in the pus. I can see Edinburgh Castle away to the right: wisps ay steam from Waverley Station below: Arthur’s Seat and the crags to the left – a flash of blue further even than waves. It’s good to know the sea is nearby. It’s important – in any city – to know the escape routes at all times. Da used to bring me here once a year. He’d sell offal, or trade, then leave me to wait in a tavern whilst he went off with a woman. I stop in the middle of the Tron. Behind me there is the Royal Mile, to the left is the Southside and on the right North Bridge. I stand in the middle. Streets crossed below me. Tenements of all heights stand as sentinels on either side. They inspect everyone who passes below. The High Street is cobbled and it slopes up. There’s wooden doors and small blown-glass windows or fancier sash panes with wooden shutters. A motor car turns right onto Cockburn Street. The spunk-hawker stacks his tinder. Between the well-dressed and moneyed there are glimpses of the hungry and hunted. A big church has a beggar sat on its steps with his ratty wee dug. A young man smiles. He wants to defile me. An urge to let him. Right here in the street. Who can save me? My father is the devil! Our kind are not holy. I must perfectly hide the sharp tip of my horns. Woodsmoke spirals out of tenement chimneys. The reek permeates everything. Pretty rooftops are tiled like dragon skin. Just as I am about to step forward a black mass flows onto North Bridge. Along the High Street

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news signs declare: WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE. One thousand two hundred men of God flock toward me. They stride in tens, twenties, hundreds. I knew God would have a message for me, but I did not know he would be so direct.

I spit.

Saliva – still tinged pink.

I look at it there on the cobbles, just a tinge of blood – only seen by me.

Everywhere there are black suits and motion.

The men press close as they go around me. Cleric collars. Smooth hair. Clean skin. Moustache or beard. Shiny shoes. They pass like crooked ships on a grey sea. A young minister's eyes slide over my body with thoughts impure as any. I know what lays in his trousers damp and feeble as a mouse. That thing will only stand on end for cruelty. Heat on my temples. I could easily stake him! Shoes click on the cobbles. One by one they disappear into the City Chambers up ahead. The speech crier calls out.

– Evil walks among us!

I step forward.

The spires at St Giles' Cathedral rise up.

Gargoyles crane their necks out bug-eyed to stare.

Edinburgh seduces with her ancient buildings. She pours alcohol or food down the throats of anyone passing, dangles her trinkets, leaves pockets bare. She's a pickpocket. The best kind of thief, one you think of – most fondly.

There is a cage around my heart – made of bone, bone, bone.

I must appear not to see.

Not to know.

Jenni Fagan

Rub my foot against my leg. Check the bit of paper again. The drawing has the entrance to No. 10 Luckenbooth Close clearly marked but I am told nobody can ever find it. Ignore the cathedral and the cobbled heart. I walk by the entry to the close three times before I take a few steps back.

Turn down into a shady narrow street.

The sounds of the city quieten.

A man dressed smartly appears and he glares at me. I have to press back against the cold wall to let him pass. He is a reptile. Stones for eyes. Scutes all over his skin – slick, armoured – a tail to flick left-to-right. Over a million years reptiles have perfected their ability to detect and exploit weakness. It is almost admirable. Sometimes they seek easy prey. Other times they enjoy a fight. They sit in courtrooms. Deal out judgement. Turn up to football games. They turn a red leather barber's chair and welcome your child with a lollipop and a wide reptilian smile. They act in theatres. Teach in schools. They hold keys to the police station. They bake your wedding cake. Bow onstage as a curtain falls. They write poems. They take up a good cause. They save things – loudly! They are careful to be seen to be doing things that are nothing at all to do with murder. They are charming. They are liked. It is important to make sure others – owe them. Reptiles lay in bed reading. They get a cold. They take two sugars in their tea. They are concerned for you. They bring a gift. They are often top of the pile. Who would be a top predator and let a nicer person pass? The more talented? The greater thinker? No, no, no! That's not how it works. I am not talking about lizards. This is nothing to do with geckos. I have no issue with chameleons. It has no relevance to turtles. The reptiles I describe – are crocodiles.

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God must have mercy on you if you lay down in your bed each night with a crocodile.

If you marry one!

Have its baby and look into tiny baby crocodile eyes!

The crocodile will suckle its victim at night. Each morning they will wake with disdain and a wide-toothed smile. They open their muscular arms only a little. Through evolution they have learnt how to make you want them. Once you step into want they begin to squeeze you tightly. Grin wide crocodile grins as they expel air from your lungs – keeping eye contact all the while. An ancient dance. Spin. Spin. Spin. Descend to the depths. There it is – the deepest ocean floor with a forest of seaweed to filter out the light. Your face will be unbelieving at the end of a death-roll ride! When your body is limp and your expression – incredulous – they will stash you.

Sometimes they will swim back down, sunlight halo behind them.

It won't be to rescue you or apologise – it will be to find your corpse and take another good long leisurely bite. Whilst you'd like to think you were something unique to them what you find as you turn around is millions of other women and children (mostly) all stashed in an identical watery grave.

What I must do is sew my real eyes shut and look out with a pretty blue set painted on.

This is it – No. 10 Luckenbooth Close!

Go down four stairs as a smell of ammonia climbs up my nose.

These tenements are so high!

Laundry creates strange shapes in between me and the sky.

The air is dank down here and much older than on the

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street. This place is closer to the castle than I thought it would be. Looking up I can see nine floors, built from huge slabs of stone. The steps are scrubbed clean. I pause with my hand on a freshly painted wooden door like it is a lover's chest.

It's heavy to push open.

The stairwell smells of lemons.

Wall tiles are a dark green, my mother's favourite colour. An ornate balustrade and a huge glass cupola all the way at the top like the church manse library where I hid from my father. Turn onto a landing. 1F1. Raise my hand. Before I can rap lacquered wood – the door swings open. A woman almost as wide as the doorframe – she's clearly angry.

– Yer late!

– I'm sorry.

– Ye dinnae look sorry.

I don't attempt contrition. It's not in my array of convincing facial expressions. I try out impassive. Honest isn't something I carry off. Neither is concerned. My mother always said I did a good line in unreadable and impassive. I arrange my features into something to appropriate those attributes. The woman snorts. Turns around. I follow her into the apartment. High ceilings with ornate cornices, polished wooden floors, long red Persian rugs. There is a smell of tobacco and woodsmoke and brandy.

– They're waiting. I'll show you around quickly before I go. Don't go down to the basement – ever!

– I won't.

– It's locked anyway but you better not.

– I promise.

– Are yer boots clean?

– Aye.

Luckenbooth

– Say, yes – in here and talk slowly – don’t use Scottish in front of them.

– I won’t.

– He can understand it but he doesnae like it. Mr Udnam is a Minister of Culture, a man of letters!

– I was told.

– If you do one thing wrong – they will hang ye by the morning.

She leans in toward me with manky breath. Grey hairs strain to escape a shiny pink skull – even the woman’s follicles don’t want to be near her.

– Speak only when you’re spoken to.

– Yes.

– Are ye sure those boots are clean? If there’s shite on yer boots clean them downstairs. This flat takes up nearly the entire first floor. Below here you’ve got the entrance way and underneath that you have the basement cellars. You don’t want to go into the cellars – you’ll no get back out. There’s catacombs down there, you know that?

– Aye.

Follow her down a hallway with polished wooden furniture. Lash-less eyes. Dry, cracked, dimpled hands.

– Over here is the lady’s room.

A real four-poster bed. Carved tables. Thick curtains. A fancy armchair with winged legs so it can fly away! These rooms are huge! Highest ceilings I’ve ever seen.

– Is it Jessie?

– Aye.

– He takes his clients in the other room, the consulting room. He does all of his work and socialising in there, he sleeps there as well.

Jenni Fagan

This is nothing like our two-room croft at home. Our place had sheep in there with us when it was freezing, which it was, every winter. She takes me back to the kitchen. There is a wooden butcher's block in the centre of the room. A scrubbed table in the corner. An old range cooker emanates warmth. Herbs hang on a rack. Heavy iron pans sway on hooks. There is a real copper pantry – fitted out to keep every bit of bread or cheese, cool as a shelf in a fancy cheese shop.

– Ye can kip there.

The woman points at a gap under a huge wooden dresser.

– You're near the cooker so the floor is warm. If a rat comes, kill it! You look too delicate to kill anything but you will have to. I saw one last week. Size of a bairn. I used a spade to take its head clean off.

I smile.

– I heard about yer father, barred fae maist ay the islands is he, no? Why'd they no bar him fae this last yin?

– They knew he'd only row back and slit their throats whilst they slept.

There is a silence apart from the grandfather clock tick-tick-tick-ticking in the hall.

– What did he die from?

– I poisoned him.

– Terrible.

The woman tuts. Stacks up china plates. Whatever I say is not what she hears, or often, what anyone does. I'm like the girl in the story who lets toads fall from her mouth but others think they are pearls. I still have the smell of death on me. It will be weeks before it goes.

– What does Mr Udnam's fiancée do?

– Elise is a suffragette, so she thinks. Marched with that

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Pankhurst wifey last year. Rich wummin have time fir aw that shite!

The woman inspects the width of my hips.

– Send her in!

We both look down the hall.

A red glow from the fire.

Drapes pulled.

The maid grabs her coat, crosses herself and leaves.

The front door clicks shut.

I smooth down my dress. Pinch my cheeks. Walk slowly to the consulting room. Elise is sat on the desk. Amethysts fir eyes. Her hair is even longer than mine. It is the reddest hair I've ever seen. She wears a green silk dress. Fingernails stained red as if she has dipped them in blood. I fancy she does exactly that each morning. Bare feet. They are tiny. I take the long ornamental pipe she holds out toward me. There is a wicked tilt to her smile. Behind them a huge bay window looks out across the entire city. Views of the skyline sparkle brighter and brighter as I put the pipe to my mouth and inhale.

Mr Udnam smiles.

I hold the pipe back out, unsure that I can stop myself from dropping it.

He turns to kiss his fiancée's neck and puts his hand out toward me. She leans her head down to hear my heart beat – lays her hand on my throat and strokes it. She takes a long drag and whispers.

– Open yer mouth.

She blows smoke deep into my lungs – heaviness descends through each part of my body taking every bad memory far away.

Jenni Fagan

- How pretty she is, Elise, do you think this one will take?
- Yes, I think she'll do more than fine.

An entire wall of books curves to inspect us. All those characters, plots and locations look toward each other and then me. There is a gap in the top row that looks like a black tooth. An electric hum in the air that is nothing to do with his fancy Tiffany lamp. Mr Udnam pours each of us a drink, green, in a tiny crystal glass. It is sweet and sharp and soothes as much as the smoke from the pipe does.

- You know why your father sold you to us, Jessie?
- Yes, I do.
- The child will be named by my wife.
- Of course.
- We will raise the infant with no knowledge of who you are.
- I understand.
- Do you? You will not approach the child if you see it in the street. You won't speak to us again afterwards. My wife will go into confinement during your containment. When the baby is born Elise will say she gave birth in America. We will never let anyone know the child is not completely ours. You have my word that I will pay you in full and raise the child in the best manner possible.

- Thank you.
 - Are you happy to do this?
- Elise sounds like she smokes a lot of cigarettes.
- Yes.
 - Together? All three of us?

It would be hard not to nod to anything she says – the woman is a walking spell.

- The money was due to go to your father.

Luckenbooth

– God rest his soul.

– As law sees it, he is sadly not alive any more so that can't happen.

– I understand.

Mr Udnam looks at me like he knows exactly what has been in my mouth this week and I get a taste at the back of my mouth like iron and grit and earth and ice so cold it could burn your skin away. He could choose not to pay me. He could send me away easily. I keep my face relaxed. Imagine a tiny house somewhere that has a name I chose for it above the door and no man to keep me.

– So the fee will go to you, is that acceptable?

– Yes.

My heart beats so hard.

It will happen.

One day I will have a place of my own.

Another sip of green liquid soothes me as Elise gently pulls my dress down and traces my shoulders with her fingertips. She kisses the back of my neck. Light kisses. Her lips are soft. I'd like to pretend I don't want this but every bit of my body and mind and soul desires it too. She uses her tongue to flick out and there is a shudder all the way down my spine as she grips my waist and pulls me gently toward her. He undoes her bodice. Her nipples are small. She pulls up her skirt – parts her legs so I can see – blows a smoke ring into my face.

A giant crocodile on the wall bares its teeth.

One hand slips down my front. Another pulls my hair back – exposes my neck – like a swan on the butcher's block.

1928

Flat 2F2

Flora (33)

the drag ball

THE POLAR bear is at least ten feet tall. She stands on her hind legs. Salutes! Children at the end of Iona Street jump up and down. Anxious mothers yank them back. A wee lad-die gets a slap over the back of his head. He has bloody knees and he stares at the polar bear with reverence. The energy on Leith Walk is palpable. Blue skies! Jazz music spills out from a tenement window. A woman leans out, watches the crowd and rolls a cigarette.

Down below her people talk and gesture.

Their words are trumpets.

An old man dances – each step a key on the piano.

His jumper sleeves are mended at the elbows but he glides with a dance-hall elegance.

Hearts beat like big tom drums.

A barmaid comes out to see it all. There are 460 soldiers stood either side of Baška Murmańska.

Handsome, dangerous, war-wearied men.

Baška has black eyes.

The polar bear weighs 650 pounds and she is an official daughter of the Polish regiment. The men have a brightness to them. A luminosity to their eyes. They have seen too

Luckenbooth

much. Baška Murmańska has kept more than their spirit alive. She could kill any of them easily. They do not look at her with fear. Outside the bars men smoke and watch, unable to believe what they are seeing. Cloth caps, waistcoats. Smart jackets. Shoes shined so the scuff won't show for a good half hour at least. They are all having a few pints and a nip before kick-off at Easter Road. Opposite them the soldiers mill around chatting to each other beside Baška Murmańska.

That's exactly how it was.

Flora needs to stop going back to this over and over again but she does not want those memories to fade.

She nods to the barman.

Accepts a second Gin Rickey and twists the stem in her fingertips. Flora can remember every second of that day nine years ago. It was the most important moment of her life. A man she had never met before walked up to her. He was eternity and she was the beginning of time. They had travelled 12.9 billion years to meet each other – at the end of Iona Street. There was some reason for him to say words. Flora said some back. It was all so polite. All the while another conversation was going on below that one. He was in uniform. It was the last day she would ever wear hers. War was almost done. They were ready. To forget. To make love. To walk back to a stranger's flat and go to their bed.

She finishes her second cocktail.

Drinking too fast.

Always.

Nods at the barman again.

His face is watchable and kind. It's not to be underrated in a man. He has a beard. Wild eyebrows frame warm

Jenni Fagan

eyes. His lips are too moist. He isn't skinny. Flora can't take that in a conquest. She should not be thinking like this! It's bad. It is. She shouldn't be getting drunk in the afternoon. She should not have had cocaine for breakfast and certainly not with champagne. Flora takes another tiny bump from a phial. Lets it sting her nose. Brighten her eyes. She warns herself. Behave, behave, behave! Do not fuck a stranger ten minutes before attempting a long-awaited possible reconciliation. It's in the big reconciliation handbook! Don't do it.

Her man from the beginning of time had taken her to bed. He made her feel more free than she thought it was possible to feel. He told her she was a chimera. It was the first time she had heard that word. There were other words before that. Freak, hermaphrodite, boy-girl, in-between. He was the first one to tell her she was not two things but one perfect creature made from stardust.

He wanted her in every way.

It turned out in the end that it was him who was two things. What he thought he was. Then who he actually was.

The pain in her is too great.

The barman has a jaded tone that makes him more attractive.

He is not too handsome. Flora is not attracted to conventionally handsome men. They don't fuck so well. She doesn't get that thrill of truly losing control with them. She gets that with flawed men. He laughs at her story and there is a real dirtiness to his laugh. He's the exact kind of (someone else's) husband she ends up in bed with. The risk of this occurring becomes more precarious around drink four. Flora picks up drink three. It tastes so good. She has to find

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out today. If her ex-lover – who she has not seen now for eleven months – is still – after all this time – the one she wants.

– And this happened when?

The barman pushes a sparkling glass toward Flora.

– Dear God of fuckery please help us all!

– Ay?

– Is this my fourth cocktail?

– Do we need to count?

– Yes, we do.

A smile.

He lights her cigarette.

A table of lawyers in the corner drink in such a serious way. Heads up! All the better to disdain the bar. Not her legs though. Nobody is disdainful toward Flora's legs. She pulls her skirt up another inch. Give them something to make laws about. Arseholes! She turns back to the barman. He is easily ten years younger than she. He tips beer out of catch trays, shines up optics, turns back toward her whilst polishing glasses.

– It happened when the soldiers were evacuated to Edinburgh from Russia, they had been fighting the Bolsheviks, she says.

– And they march up Leith Walk with this polar bear, Baška Murmańska and you did too?

Look him straight in the eye on reply.

– Aye, all the way along Princes Street everyone was going wild!

– I bet!

The barman turns reluctantly to serve someone else.

Flora swivels on her chair.

Checks out the bar.

Jenni Fagan

There isn't a man in here wouldn't go to bed with her if she let him.

Whether they would stay in it once she undressed, is another matter. If they did most would ignore her in the street later, or they'd cross the road to pretend they didn't see her and if she knew them personally – they'd hope she never mentioned it again. If she tried to bring it up they'd say they didn't want to discuss that. They would want to fuck her but not talk to her. Or be seen with her. They'd want to take her body in all kinds of violent ways in a darkened room but on the street – they would not hold her hand.

Tiring.

– I should've got drunk in Leith, this place makes my teeth appear inferior.

– I ken exactly what you mean, it's so posh it makes me itch, he agrees.

– The thing about Baška Murmańska – is she was a testament not to war, but to love. What the soldiers couldn't give in the war to those they loved, they could give freely – to this wild creature. Baška Murmańska saved each and every one of them. Straight up. She did it for love.

– It's a dangerous business, he says.

– War?

– Love.

– Aye, it is that.

– Unsurvivable at times, he watches Flora carefully.

– I'd rather my mind was gone, she whispers.

Round tear-filled eyes glitter in the mirror behind him. The barman has dimples and a quiet, assured manner. If only she could love a man like him, one that was actually decent.

Luckenbooth

She has to do this.

Just walk a few doors along.

Go down into Luckenbooth Close, then go up to 2F2. Don't climb up the drainpipe. Those days are over. Take the stairs. Go to his landing. Knock lightly. Wait until he opens the door. Appear to be a reasonable human being. That's the tricky bit. He sees her reasonable human being and raises her a lunatic.

– Why is it a certain kind of love brings out our worst selves? Flora asks.

– That's the real one does that.

– Why?

– Dunno. It's like a poultice. Draws it out.

– The madness?

– Aye! If love can heal us then first it has to pull all our demons right up to the surface, no? How can we slay what we can't first see?

– I think you're right, she says.

Flora's eyes glow with her own brightness.

– You know what happened to Robert the Bruce's heart? the barman asks.

He pushes olives in a fancy glass jar over to her and she ignores them as they lean closer together.

– No? What happened to Robert the Bruce's heart in the end?

– They cut it out, cast it in iron and gave it to Sir James Douglas to wear in a metal urn around his neck day and night.

– Why?

– To take it on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Robert insisted.

Jenni Fagan

– The dead ay! So fucking demanding. Why the Holy Land? Was it the only place able to purify his murderous heart?

The barman nods.

His eyes have flecks of gold in them.

He lights another cigarette for her.

A double flame in his eyes.

He taps the packet and lights his own, touches her hand as he drops the flame.

– I know someone with a heart like that, Flora says.

They are still too close together. She holds her cigarette in long thin fingers. They can both stay warm in this glow for a wee while more. Ignore the lawyers behind them, filing out the front door.

– Did he make it to Jerusalem?

– No, he didn't, the barman shakes his head.

– Of course not.

– I don't think murderous hearts should get absolution that easy, lady, do you?

Flora takes a long drag – leaves a rim of red lipstick around the cigarette, tries not to smile back at him.

– What happened to Sir James Douglas?

– He died fighting in Spain along the way. They boiled the flesh from his body. Took his bones back to Scotland alongside his mate's heart – in its iron-clad box.

– Fucking hell.

– Such is the way of love.

He opens the cellar hatch. Someone rolls barrels in from the street.

There is a sound of chickens, or maybe a goat.

Flora triple-drags her cigarette.