Coombes

Start

ELIZABETH. But… had she met the Wax child before?

COOMBES. Sally was employed as laundry mistress in the Wax house for a time.

ELIZABETH. Oh. I did not, and then did she quarrel with the girl?

COOMBES. No, by all accounts the girl doted on her and was distraught when she was dismissed.

ELIZABETH. Why was she dismissed?

COOMBES. Some stomachers disappeared from Lady Wax's wardrobe.

ELIZABETH. So, so, so Sally has confessed?

COOMBES. No, but she is guilty without question. Her husband says she arrived home in the middle of the night covered in blood with a hammer in her hand and laughed and laughed and rapped out a volley of oaths to the Devil.

ELIZABETH. I heard she was not very happy in her marriage.

COOMBES. Yes, at least the poor man is free now. A discontented wife is a Hell on earth.

ELIZABETH. And Sally is, she is sentenced to hang is she?

COOMBES. She is and she will, there's a crowd fifty-deep outside the assizes waiting to see it, but she pleads the belly. We have eleven women empanelled but must have a twelfth.

ELIZABETH *shakes her head, disturbed, and starts churning again.*

ELIZABETH. Find someone else, I cannot.

COOMBES. The girl is lying.

ELIZABETH. I cannot be the one to say so.

COOMBES. Alice's mother lies abed, dying of grief!

ELIZABETH. And what of Sally's mother?

COOMBES. What of her? Janet Cobb's loins have brought forth only terror.

ELIZABETH. She suffers too.

COOMBES. She has brought a devil into the world.

ELIZABETH. With respect, was I who brought Sally into the world. Janet merely contributed the screaming.

COOMBES. You delivered the girl?

ELIZABETH. Yes, she was my first.

COOMBES. Really? You must have / been

ELIZABETH. I was three days short of fourteen, my mother could not leave her bed, so I caught her instead and put her in Janet's arms.

She stops churning. Pause.

Dear little old girl.

COOMBES. Not any more she ain't. Biddy has a hang-gallows look if ever I saw one. Born on Newgate step, she was.

ELIZABETH. That's true there's creases in her character, but I do not believe she's a murderer.

COOMBES. You are in a minority. Trust me, there was soil on the mangle when that one was put through.

She goes on churning again.

ELIZABETH. Well. Perhaps motherhood will improve her.

COOMBES. There is no child Lizzy! It is pure gammon.

ELIZABETH. I believe her.

COOMBES. You have not even seen her!

ELIZABETH. I know she has been tried in a cold room by cold men on the word of a cold husband, with no one to speak for her and a mob outside the window. Even if she is lying I do not blame her, I would lie too. When a woman is being buried alive she will reach for even the grubbiest tool to dig herself out again.

[redacted]

COOMBES. You would not talk this way if you spent but a minute with her. All the time I been bailiff, I have never encountered such wickedness, that is unthinkable there should be so much evil so close to home. She asked for a cup of water this morning. I found myself outside myself thinking: I am watching a devil drink a cup of water. How could the Devil deal in such dull things as cups of water?

[redacted]

ELIZABETH. Perhaps she is not a devil. Perhaps she only lost her head in loyalty to one and now faces a hanging for it.

She stops churning. Deeply troubled [redacted]

COOMBES. Ah, now, what's this then? Cheer up doll. Go on, that is awful to me, to see you so miserable.

ELIZABETH. Please Billy. Tell the Justice I was not at home.

[redacted]

COOMBES. Oh, suit yourself. I'll not carry you there. We'll sit with eleven, go quicker without you, there ent a woman on that jury wants to see her live.

[redacted]

I hate it when we quarrel.

[redacted] End

ELIZABETH. Katy!

KATY *comes running on. She has been painted with brimstone and is bright yellow.*

COOMBES. Just the maid I was looking for.

He holds out the daffodils to KATY, *she takes them, pleased and shy.*

ELIZABETH. I must go with Mr Coombes. Fetch my shawl.

COOMBES. That's the job!

KATY *runs off again.*

ELIZABETH. And a loaf of bread!

ELIZABETH *moves quickly, collecting butter paddles, taking washing from the line.*

COOMBES. I thought she was better.

ELIZABETH. So did I. I clean and wash and clean and wash and still my children itch.

KATY *returns with* ELIZABETH*'s shawl and a loaf of bread.*

Take the churn. Here are the paddles for when the butter comes, and after, rinse the heavy linens. I'll be back to help you fold.

ELIZABETH *puts her shawl on and gathers the paddles.* KATY *starts churning. She watches the sky as she does.*

COOMBES. When's this old comet coming then Kit? You spend so much time searching that sky, reckon your neck's gonna get stuck like that.

KATY. Mr Halley said it shoulda come before Old Year's Night.

COOMBES. That's three months late then. I call that very rude.

KATY. I dassent miss it. I'll be dead before that comes round again.

COOMBES. You don't know that. That's in the future that is, you might live to a hundred, my granny did.

KATY. When does the future start?

COOMBES. Well. When the past ends, probly.

KATY. When does the past end?

COOMBES. Oh I dunno, reckon… reckon round about, uh… NOW!

He leaps on her, tickles her, she giggles.

ELIZABETH. I'd walk ahead if I were you Mr Coombes. That's stingy old weather, I won't dawdle, and your legs are shorter than mine.