

*The Whole of it came not at once —
'Twas Murder by degrees —
A Thrust —and then for Life a chance —
The Bliss to cauterize —*

*The Cat reprieves the Mouse
She eases from her teeth
Just long enough for Hope to tease —*

—Emily Dickinson

PROLOGUE

Her breath was soft and ragged. She crouched against the column and closed her eyes, placing her flushed cheek against the stone as if she could draw strength from its bulwark. Despite the cold of the night, rivulets of sweat dripped down her back, the wool dress soaked through.

She had slipped from the back of the carriage when he stopped to water the horse. She heard his shout of anger behind her, but she fled unseeing. The row houses and factory shops stood dark, their window lamps extinguished at this late hour. She fled through the silent lanes, sensing his relentless presence somewhere behind her.

She had come to the edge of the city street and could feel an opening in the space around her. She saw the outline of the trees and a hill above, a stark silhouette against the night sky. She knew this place, an entrance to Fairmount Park. It was familiar, a place of respite where she could walk and admire the view.

She ran into the park towards the river's edge. The curved paths led to picturesque fountains and by day, the river terrace was full of people enjoying a leisurely stroll. Now the expansive lawns and the well-tended shrubbery were a landscape cloaked in darkness, the amorphous shapes looming and fearful.

RITU MUKERJI

The moon rose above the river, casting light on the expansive surface of the water. She could see the waterworks on the promontory above the dam. The upper river stretched away into a placid pool, the surface smooth as slate. She could hear the soft rush of water as the waves poured over the dam.

It had been a mistake to leave the streets. She needed a place to hide.

She ran into the first pavilion, her footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. It was like a Greek temple of antiquity. The graceful buildings stood in a line, their stately columns gleaming in the moonlight. It was the province of a fairy tale, a ballroom empty of revelers. She could have been an elegant princess awaiting the first waltz, the drape of her gown trailing across the floor. But she stumbled, her legs weak and aching from the strain of exertion.

The buildings were an ingenious screen for the turbines that churned the river water day and night, purifying it for the city's water supply. Underneath her feet she could sense the steady creak of the wheels turning. She knew there were doors leading to the wheelhouse. If only she could get below.

She reached the first door. Please, dear God. She turned the knob urgently. It was locked. She rattled it frantically, pushing her shoulder against the heavy frame. It was stuck fast. She ran to the next building and tried the door there. It was the same. She suppressed a sob as fear pressed on her chest like a weight.

She came to the final landing above the dam. There was nowhere left to run. She stopped at the railing and leaned forward. She could feel the fine mist of the water as it fell in a graceful arc below. The current was swift below the dam and the foaming waves churned as the river continued its path. How many times had she come here to watch, mesmerized by the many patterns of the water.

She took off her coat and shoes and climbed up on the railing. Her toes gripped the edge of the precipice. She allowed herself a moment of

MURDER BY DEGREES

freedom, outstretching her arms. Her heart was pounding from the chase. But this place would hold no more fear for her; instead, it would be the site of her blessed release. She clasped the locket around her neck, pressing it tight in the palm of her hand.

She willed herself to look back. He was there, just as she knew he would be. She could not see him in the darkness. He was shrouded in a cloak with the hood pulled over his face. But he realized what she was about to do. The specter coalesced in terrifying form, running towards her. She lifted herself with her last remaining strength and jumped.