

Val Doughty

## ***Goodnight, Jack***

*First Prize, Jennie Hackman Award for Short Fiction*

My dear Mrs. Kelly,

I am returning your heart. I didn't mean to take it quite the way I did. I don't even want it like this—all cold and heavy and growing black and foul and sticky where I hid it in the corner of my room. So I will give it back to you for now.

It's not all my fault, you have to admit. Even from the first time we met in the hospital, you had it coming. I was carrying up the dirty sheets from the morgue to be washed, but I pushed the narrow door at the top of the stairs too hard and heard you squeal on the other side. "Easy, love," you said when I squeezed through the half-open door. "No one wants to pay for damaged goods." Yes, I remember that. And in the Ten Bells that night when you saw me and put your arm on my shoulder and chattered on for hours to your "friend from the hospital." I knew very well what you were.

All that week you were there, and when you were after your pennies, you were the whole damn city's friend. And mine, and I hated you for it. Hell, I still think of your hair hanging loose as you leaned over the bar next to me and laughed while you told me how you hated bonnets because they hid that lovely hair. A pretty whore's a crime, Mary.

Didn't you notice, didn't it cross your bloody mind that the killings started that week? No, of course it wouldn't have. On Thursday night I couldn't do it. I didn't want to sit beside you and try not to look. So I stayed behind at work. I said I had to sharpen up the knives—the little sharp ones for the surgery and the stained old wicked ones they keep down in the morgue.

I didn't mean to take one. But I was downstairs wiping the last blade clean, and I put it in my pocket. I don't know why. It almost felt like it didn't want to go back in the drawer, like it wanted to come with me. I was going to put it back, eventually.

But I still had it Friday when I went to the pub and saw you inside, and stood across the street waiting for you. You can guess what I was thinking, love, with the knife in my pocket. I don't know what I would've done if you came out. Well, I guess now I do, but

standing there that night, I wasn't sure. But you didn't come out, and I left after a while and went walking.

I still don't know whether I meant to do anything. I wanted to, still want to. And I remember once a long time ago. But I try hard not to think of that. But sometimes when I think of that first night, I could almost swear I didn't know I was going to go through with it. I was half-thinking I'd just scare the old girl when she offered—

It was that Polly. I saw her in the pub sometimes. You must have seen her, too. You must have seen her on the streets, you whore! Seen her find a man and thought if you'd been a little faster the trick could've been yours. I've seen you whores, the way you watch like starving dogs whenever one of you picks up a man.

Her eyes went so wide when I killed her. I remember that. And I cut her. How I cut her, Mary, before I ran. And it felt good, like waking up from a good sleep after being so tired, or stretching your arms after carrying something heavy.

That weekend when you didn't hear from me, it's because I was afraid to leave home. I'd never done a job like that before. When I went back to the hospital, by God I was ready to bolt. A constable came around. He talked to some of the doctors and asked if they remembered someone of Polly's description, but the doctors get mad too easy. They're saving lives, they'll tell you, and they don't have time to waste on some old dead whore. So the man went around to the rest of us, the rank and file. They came to me while I was mopping up where a little girl who'd been bitten by a dog had bled on the floor. I said no, like everybody else. He said 'thank you' and went away. Love, you can't guess the thrill I felt.

But it faded and I was back at the Ten Bells with you. You were scared, a little anyway, but whores die. It's nothing new. Before long you were making light of it. In just a bloody week, and you were breathing easy again. "...But maybe some nice strong handsome gentleman would walk me home," you said. "Just in case." And you leaned against me, and laughed, and called out, "Goodnight, Jack" as you wandered out alone.

How the hell could you make fun of what I'd done and then go and sit beside me and try to make me your friend again, you whore! All at once! And then I needed my knife again, needed another night out.

The girl that time was dark-haired, and maybe she was pretty once like you are. Were, I mean.... But she was dead before I had her. She had that dead look the old whores have. Can you imagine looking into lifeless eyes like that every day? I had to, Mary. When you woke up and when you slept and when you ate if you had any food at all, she'd look at you with hollow eyes, your own—

I hate it! I hate to even look at the whores when I go by. It's worse to look at than what I do to them. And I could tell—I've seen some that far gone in the hospital—she was as good as buried. Consumption, maybe. I think she knew it, but the words just fell out anyway. "You're dying."

"I ain't dead yet," she says, "and 'til I am I still have to bloody eat." I don't think she wanted to think about it. Who would? But she spoke mad for just that second before her face went sad and dead again. "Just get on with it," she says. She'd already picked her skirts up to her waist. I touched her neck, just gentle like, the way the doctors sometimes do. I don't know why I did it. But she looked up, surprised. She never must have felt anybody touch her except to—

But then I strangled her, and...

And after that one, Mary, then you were really afraid! Whenever anybody in the pub mentioned "The Knife," you'd pale and touch my arm and say you might just have another gin. (You might have mentioned then it was your rent you were drinking! Someone would have bought you a drink. Even I might have.) And I felt strong because you were afraid of me, and because you stayed so close to me, your 'friend from the hospital,' your 'drinking pal,' your 'nice strong gentleman' to protect you from the fiend in the papers.

It must have been nice anyway, love, to have a friend who wasn't a client, too. You must have wanted somebody to talk to or have a drink with who wouldn't ask you later to turn around and lift your dresses for him. That must be why you kept so close to me, and made me your protector.

While it lasted, anyway. Was it a whole week? Ten days? Hardy little partridge, aren't you, love? And you were careful but not scared, and the boys in the Ten Bells told jokes about what happened and you would slap my back and laugh. You laughed at me, Mary! Remember once, when you were leaving, some bloody drunk called out, "Watch out for The Knife!" And you stopped in the door and said back, "Don't worry about me, gents, I'll give him what he wants" and went out while everybody roared. I ordered another gin, then, and not, Mrs. Kelly, with my bloody rent!

Isn't that just the way with you? You only let us close to you to show us why we shouldn't have, just like your man Barnett. You should see him in the bar. He worships you now that you're done. You can't fool me, you miserable slag! You're the same with your fear as you are with your smiles and your filthy favors!

They call you lots "Unfortunates" but you're not. Didn't you ever think of it? I'll tell you who's unfortunate, Mary. Joe Barnett is unfortunate, and all the other husbands who went away because their women went out on the street whenever they got the bloody

chance. Whores, unfortunate? What about all the little bastards afraid to look down alleys in case they ever saw their own mother? That's an Unfortunate!

And the whole time, too, I wanted to go back to it again. It was like an itch. It was like a rat gnawing in the wall beside my pillow. It kept me up at night. I shouldn't have let it. I didn't want to want to. But I did, damn it! It wasn't safe. The newspapers and the law, they were all out after me. But I couldn't make the feeling go away.

I didn't want to listen to you at the Ten Bells, so I sat all sober in my little room, trying hard not to think of the dead girls, or long for the living ones just outside. It was so hard to do. If I let my mind slip just a second, Mary, I could feel the blood on my hands. I stayed there on my cot staring into the shadows. Mrs. Thorne, the lady I rent the room from, she thought I was sick, that I caught something at the hospital, but she left me alone. She has her own worries. Even at the hospital, I couldn't get away from it. Every time a woman walked by me as I worked, I thought of the knives ranged in her tidy, felt-lined drawers. I thought of those knives carving out her throat, leaving a red wound screaming in her skin.

Do you see what you've done to me, Mary?

I had to give in. It was black and raining when I did. It felt like I was dreaming, but I can remember everything so clearly. I can still see the reeling drunks I passed in the street, the sober men and women hurrying home through the fog, the red glow of a constable's bulls-eye lantern bobbing with his steps. I wandered a long way, looking for a chance. I made it all the way to Berner Street before I stopped and leaned against the wall of the Working Men's Club there. My clothes were wet and cold, and I was starting to feel nervous again. Standing there with the German songs and oily, yellow light spilling out through the windows, I almost went home, until a man and a woman came out of the shadows of the yard. He walked away unsteadily, staggering right past me, but she stood there in the light, fussing with something in her hand.

It was Long Liz, who drank in the Ten Bells, right up at the counter where she always had an audience for her daft stories. I stepped towards her, and she looked up, trying to smile since she knew me, but not quite beating that used-up, empty whore's look. You can't change it really, even if you were in your own home with your own son. "You got the thruppence, Jack?" I nodded, and she moved into the dark by the gate while I wrapped my fingers around the knife's handle, already turning her back to me and lifting up her stained and ragged skirts. I had to stand so close behind her to reach her throat. I snatched the nice, checkered handkerchief she had around her neck and pulled back, twisting, as I cut her throat.

Her hot blood leapt out onto my cold, rain-soaked skin as she struggled, her body flopping against mine, and then gave a little gurgling noise and fell. It was strange, Mary. I just kept looking down at her, and thinking about that foolish thing she used to tell about her family drowning on the Princess Alice and how she'd keep changing the story when she'd had too much to drink. It was Long Liz, lying in the rain and filth of the yard.

Maybe I was thinking about it longer than I thought. I still stared when I heard hooves coming and cartwheels rattling up toward the gates, and it took me a moment to realize what that meant, what would happen to me if anyone saw me standing over her. But when it did strike me, God! I could already hear the harness creaking in the dark as I dove through the shadows and pressed myself against the soot-stained brick wall. I saw the pony shy as it came into the yard, and the old man stop. I could already feel the noose around my neck. And then, he left the horse and shuffled off toward the club, calling out in German.

I ran. I tore around the cart and out the gate as if it was the mouth of Hell, and I kept going. I heard them start to shout behind me in the distance. I barreled down a by-way in the dark as I saw ahead a bobby's red-eyed lantern swinging and blinking as he ran the other way. I had left Whitechapel and run into the City itself before I slowed down, and I was mad, Mary. I hated that bloody carter, Liz, myself, the whole blasted city. My hands, my whole arms shook and twitched like I was going to shake myself apart, and the fog felt too thick to breathe. The first woman I met was staggering. She was drunk, and swaying, and didn't see me 'til my hands were around her throat and I was tearing her apart.

I won't pretend I didn't like it. There was something about their bodies falling limp against me, about shoving the knife so deep into them. It felt like I was doing something I should have a long time ago, that time I remember maybe. But it wasn't worth it. I couldn't risk getting caught again. I expected somebody to tap on my shoulder any minute and say, "You'd best come with me, Jack." Honest, love, I thought I was done.

I should have stayed home and hid, but I couldn't. I kept going to the Ten Bells. It was better to be afraid with you. I didn't want to be alone in my little room with Mrs. Thorne worrying downstairs. Can you blame me for liking the feel of your side against mine, of your hand on my arm and my fingers over yours? I pretended to forget who you were. Your face was still alive, still young, and it looked so soft if I could ever just touch it. I could fool myself for a little while. Sometimes I was even tempted to walk you home, even knowing I would have to walk home through the streets that seemed to swarm

with men in blue, and what your Joe would think.

And he must have thought it anyway. I've heard him saying you were never a whore and you never drank. But he knew about the drinking, and when he found out about the rent, he must have understood the rest. When you told me how he said he couldn't trust you, how he yelled and threw the kettle that broke the window, that must be when he knew what you were.

He still loves you. I sat beside him in the pub one night, and he was crying. Maybe if we had both tried harder, we really could have forgotten.

Forget, forget, forget! I can't forget. You drank up all the money he gave you, drank up everything he gave you to pay the rent, and sold yourself to anybody behind his back! You'd do it to me, too, if I forgot!

But I still hoped I could. I was planning ahead to keep my pretty partridge, even before he left you. I started stealing little things at work—watches, handkerchiefs, anything I might be able to get a few coins for. I got them off bodies mostly, or ones who would be dead soon anyway. I thought I could make a gift of the money. Maybe, I thought, if you had just a few shillings, you could take an honest trade. Or else buy lots of gin. I know you, Mary.

Though, maybe I didn't. I thought about it after I saw you at the hospital again. I didn't even see you until you were leaving, and even then I almost didn't recognize you. You had a bonnet on, and I know how much you hate them for hiding your nice, long hair. I didn't expect to see you in one. "Where have you been?" you said. I thought for a second you came to see me, until you started crying on my arm.

Why didn't you say something before? I had the swag to sell for you, if you needed the cash. And the baby....You shouldn't have waited 'til you were going to have a child to mention that you were going to get thrown out on the streets if you didn't get help, that Barnett had finally had enough and left, and you'd have a stranger's baby in a gutter somewhere, "With Jack the Ripper for a midwife," you said.

I didn't mind it anymore, your joking. How could I, with your face buried in my sleeve and your tears soaking through my shirt? And you know I would have helped you, if you needed it. I really did mean it when I said you'd be alright.

It was hard, though, coming to say what I was thinking of. It took a long time to make up my mind. I had a lot to forget, not just what you and I were, but before that...I never had forgotten it completely. But I thought I could do it.

I was scared the night I went to McCarthy's Rents to find you

and looked for the broken window you'd told me about. I stood in the shadows, watching women pass—whores. A man stood in the street and looked for a long time at the house. I thought he might have seen me, and I almost crept away, but he left first.

And I heard you singing. You have a lovely voice.

I didn't really mean to break in. I knocked, but only softly. I didn't want to be seen out at night. I was still too afraid of being caught. You never answered anyway. I guessed you must have been asleep. But you had told about the broken glass in the window, and how you've had to reach through the window to draw the bolt since you lost the key. That's all I did. And I didn't mean you any harm when I came in. I should have left when I saw you sleeping.

I think you were dreaming when I woke you. Your face was worried under your sleep, and you opened your eyes and said, "Oh murder!" I almost bolted. But then you looked up and said my name. "What are you doing here?" you said. But you said it calm, not angry, like there was a reason for me to wake you up before dawn. You said it like a mother. "What is it, Jack?" For a second, I couldn't remember it at all.

But then I did tell you, and I meant it, Mary. I swear. I wanted to take you back with me to Mrs. Thorne's, and I'd keep you there and you wouldn't have to be a whore anymore. And not just like when you were with Joe, when you didn't have to but still you did. I really thought I could do it. Wasn't I a fool? I know you, Mary! I thought I could give you money for gin, and when the baby—

And when the baby came, you could be a real mother. Because mothers aren't supposed to be whores.

You stared at me, propped up with your elbow on your pillow. And when you smiled, I should have been relieved, but I felt like we should run, go straight back to my little room and hide from all the police and hangmen looking for me, all the ones who'd tell your little boy, when he was born, his mum's a slag, like they always told—Like I always had to hear when—Mary, we should have run! We had to go! But when you got up, and when the blanket slid away from you, you were wearing just that nightshirt. Then your arms were around my neck, and you were laughing into my chest. But I saw our reflection in the broken window. I saw you cling to me and kiss me.

And I had tried so hard to forget! Not what you were or what I am. Why would you make me remember after I tried so bloody hard? What would you do if that empty, lifeless face the whores wear was the one that fed you and looked after you? Or if you stood on the side of the alley and watched your mother hanging off some man the way you hung on to me, and felt the weight of a stolen cut-

throat razor in your pocket, and ran from your own thoughts? What would you have been!

I should have run from you. I would have, but I couldn't. I felt my fingers start to shake again, and my back and arms went stiff. I couldn't move. I couldn't do a thing but watch you in the glass as you fell back and said my name. I watched you sit me down all stiffly on the edge of your clean white bed. I wouldn't have known that you were shaking my shoulder if I hadn't been watching. You tried, Mary. I know you tried. I wish...

And then when you ran your hands over the knife under my coat and you stopped your "Shhh-shhing" and your fingers pushed at the cloth around the edges of the knife, you knew. "Jack...?" you said, and said it again, whispering. When I woke you, you were dreaming about the Ripper, weren't you? You must have been to jump right to it like that. "Jack!" you said. Now I have the nightmares, and I hear you saying, "Jack! Jack!"

What was I supposed to do? I was scared, and still in that blasted memory.

It's not my fault, Mary, you have to see. I didn't mean to. I keep thinking of that bloody mess and your poor corpse all torn up on the little bed...

I almost can't remember how I came to take your heart away with me. It wasn't right of me. That wasn't how I wanted it to happen. It's starting to spoil, anyway, but I couldn't feed it to the dogs outside Mrs. Thorne's like I did with my other little keepsakes. It wouldn't seem right, love. I'll send it back to you.

Every day I think the law is going to come and take me away to hang me. Mrs. Thorne knows what I am, I'm almost sure. Maybe she won't tell. If she does, I'll see you soon, where we both belong. If she doesn't, I don't think I'll ever sleep again without hearing you say, "Goodnight, Jack," like you used to in the Ten Bells with your little white hand on my shoulder.

Goodnight, Mary.

Your Friend,  
Jack the Ripper  
Halford

P.S. On second thought, since you're not using the heart, and I've grown attached to it, maybe I'll just keep it for you 'til I see you. I'll preserve it for you. I can probably find something from the morgue that'll do the trick. If you'd rather have it now, write back, love.