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ALSO BY VIRGINIA FEITO

Mrs. March

VICTORIAN PSYCHO

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PROLOGUE

Death everywhere. Death in the river, in the corpses floating upstream and down, in the bellies of the things feasting upon them. Death in the drinking water, pooling into wells and unspooling within villagers as typhoid and cholera and diphtheria. Death on display for an extra sixpence at the wax museum. In the wigs of the living made from the hair of the not, shorn by enterprising undertakers from corpses sealed in caskets. Death melting in a dyed Christmas candle. Death in babies, oh so many babies – the unbaptised slipped into other corpses' coffins in a cheating bid for a grave and a funeral, stillborn pillows for the dead. Death in the rat pits in pub basements as dogs mangle hundreds to the cheers of their gambling masters.

It's crushed in paint.

It's papered on the walls.

Everywhere, death.

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Mr Pounds is a mystery I am intent on solving.

PART I.

THREE MONTHS TILL CHRISTMAS.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH I ARRIVE AT ENSOR HOUSE.

Ensor House sits on a stretch of moorland, all raised brows and double chin, like a clasp-handed banker about to deliver terrible news.

I meet its mullioned eyes from the open phaeton, rolling across the moor to my destiny, my breasts jiggling in my corset.

‘That there’s Ensor House, there,’ says the driver beside me, jabbing his jaw at it. He is one of Mr Pounds’ servants, dispatched to Grim Wolds Station to transport the new governess to the house.

My gaze falls to the horse’s velvet haunches before me, then to the driver, his cheeks pitted with smallpox scars, his large drooping nose bulging like a goitre. We’ve only just met, but I can already sense a decadently slow mind behind his vacant eyes. His mouth hangs half-open, housing a single protruding tooth.

‘Do you know the masters well?’ I venture to ask him.

‘Eh.’

I am unsure of what this means, so I press on. ‘What are they like?’

He says, simply: ‘I’ve ’ad worse.’

It is a promising start. The muscles behind my face move

furiously as I examine the bleak landscape. The day is setting, the clouds flickering as if candles were burning within them. There is an edge of sleet to the air – tiny hands holding tiny knives that slice at one's fingers and cheekbones. The phaeton trundles over uneven ground, its disproportionately large wheels tilting its two passengers dramatically starboard so that I slide into the driver. He pats my thigh with one chilblained hand as the other grips the cracked leather reins.

My new employers, I suspect, would have considered sending a larger, closed carriage an extravagance – too indulgent a conveyance for my first day of employ. They wouldn't want me entertaining any fanciful ideas.

I glance down at my lap. The driver's hand still rests there. I look back at my trunk, which rattles against the luggage rack, my gilded initials fading from the worn hide.

The horse stops at the gateway and hangs its head in what could be construed as a sign of defeat, and the decrepit driver hops down with surprising deftness to unhook the latch and drag the iron gates open across the gravel. We continue past a pair of crumbling stone pillars and ascend the drive.

The servant brings the carriage to a halt a short distance from the house, saying nothing. I understand I am to exit the carriage, and with that I slide off, my dress riding up my thighs. My boots land in mud with the squelch of viscera squeezed in a fist.

A crooked tree bows before me, the very points of its leaves a vibrant red. Smears of ivy frame an upstairs window, through which a stern-faced woman looks down at me.

The main entrance to the house beckons across a field of snowdrops that call to mind a group of women whose heads

droop under their bonnets in deference. I approach the studded wooden doors, my skirts sweeping through the flowers with scythe-like gusto.

It is early fall, the cold is beginning to descend, and in three months everyone in this house will be dead.

THE HOUSEKEEPER, MRS ABLE, greets me in the hall, her foot tapping on the flagstone. Mrs Able is not, of course, married, her title merely a formality of her post. Her left eye wanders, and I wish I were possessed of a compass to determine to which cardinal direction the eye points most often.

She clears her throat. 'I expect you had a fair journey. It is cold, but it shall get colder,' she says, or something like it. She speaks in an excruciatingly low monotone. I lean forward in order to discern her words, mumbled from her mouth as if still tethered to it.

'I can bear the cold,' I say.

One of her eyes settles upon my frock. I suppose it is a rather dispiriting frock, because her mouth thins. 'I shall show you to your room,' she says, and together we plunge into the house.

It is rich with dark oak and thick Turkey carpets and shadows of the deepest black. I can barely see my hand on the banister as we ascend a grand staircase and turn into a long gallery lined with closed bed-room doors.

'Enzor House was once a medieval house,' Mrs Able explains, her mumble imbued with pride. 'It has been built out through the centuries to accommodate each new generation.'

Mrs Able is turned slightly away, as if reluctant to fully expose her back to me. An engorged vein circles her throat and

descends into her collar. 'I've had a smaller apartment in the back prepared for you,' she says. 'I expected you would disapprove of the unnecessary finery of the large front chambers.'

'Of course,' I hurry to say. The enjoyment of luxury and indulgence denotes a certain kind of moral degradation most unbecoming of a governess.

We pass said front chambers and turn sharply into a poky, stone-floor passage off the main gallery, where Mrs Able opens a short, solitary door. She gestures to it. As I walk inside, the skirt of my dress brushes her limp hand, which she withdraws instantly. Mrs Able, I muse, is a woman who has never held a penis.

'You are expected presently downstairs in the dining-room, to meet your employers, and mine,' she says from the doorway.

I recall, briefly, my past employers. Their sullen glances. Their clean fingernails. Their secrets, wrapped in silk handkerchiefs or secreted under velvet-collared frock coats or behind Tyrian-dyed curtains.

'Mr Pounds,' I say, removing my plaid cloak. 'Is he . . . gracious?'

'He is a good master,' Mrs Able says, though do I detect the slightest pause in speech, the softest of hesitations in her gaze, lowered almost imperceptibly from mine?

She retires after entreating me, once more, to descend promptly for dinner. I fasten the door, then turn to survey the bed-room. It consists of more dark oak and heavy drapes and appears all in all harder to set on fire than my previous lodgings.

I make my way to the window and take in the north-east garden, currently illuminated by what little twilight remains.

Surely the ugliest of all of Ensor House's gardens, yet vastly more agreeable than the view from my childhood bed-room, which showed me the churchyard. The churchyard, brown and rotted and crooked, like the inside of an old man's mouth.

Sensing eyes on me I turn, anticipatory smile in place. I am met by my own reflection in the oval mirror of the washstand. Her frozen smile beams back at me, but I can see she doesn't mean it. Her eyes are two bullet holes.

I bend over and lift the lid from the chamber pot, expecting to be greeted by my predecessor's slops, but the bowl is clean.

My trunk has yet to be brought up. I lick the palm of my hand, and with it flatten my windswept hair and wipe a smudge from my cheek. This is as great an effort as I can expend on my appearance at present. I am ready to meet my employers.