

THE FIRST DIVE

I hit the water. No, it hit me. It slapped me in the face then pulled me under. My head filled with its stink. I tried to hold my breath, but the water's wet fingers were in my nostrils, inching up and up. I couldn't open my mouth to scream; if I did, I'd be dead. But at this rate, I was going to be dead anyway. The River Thames's strong arms yanked me, away from the boat, away from my mother, away from my life.

Below the surface, the Thames talks to you. It's the stab of beaks as the gulls dive for fish. It's the sound of oars plunging in and out of the heavy water as pilots guide the merchant ships up to Wool Quay. As I sank further down, I thought I heard different sounds, proper voices, children's voices like mine. If I could open my eyes, I was sure I'd see those children floating on the current, children like me who'd wobbled and fallen.

"Tell us your story, Eve," they whispered. "Tell us your story."

A POPPET FOR A PENNY

My name is Eve. I'm twelve years old and I'm surprised I've lived that long. I'm a Southwark girl, born and bred – just outside London across the River Thames – but I've lived in other places too.

Sometimes I still wake up in the middle of the night gasping for breath. In my dreams, the bed linen turns to water, pressing against my eyes, blocking my ears to everything apart from my slamming heart. Then I hear my mother calling.

“*Mpendwa*, you are safe.”

She calls me *mpendwa*, her beloved. I surface out of my nightmare into the morning.

Three times I've ended up in deep water, so far. Twice I nearly drowned. The third time – well, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll start by telling you about the first time.

It was the last day of the Bartholomew Fair. I'd never been to the fair before, even though every year

Mama had promised to take me. You know what adults are like. They look you in the eye, make you a promise and then forget it by the time they look away. But Mama isn't like that. She doesn't make promises that she doesn't think she can keep, because so many people have broken promises to her.

There was a good reason why Mama hadn't kept her promise before. The fair lasts for three days in August and on the first day, every year, I'd wake up, lie still and listen. Every year, I'd hear the same thing: rain. I could hear it dripping into the pots Mama had lined up under the eaves. That is, the years when we even had eaves, of course. The August before, we'd had nowhere to sleep and we came close to being arrested as vagabonds. Eventually we'd sneaked into a grain store, but we spent the dark hours fighting what must have been the King Rat of Southwark. I knew that we definitely wouldn't be going to the fair that year.

The summers when we did have somewhere to live, I'd creep out of bed and check outside to see how bad the rain was and it would always be the same. Mud and dung oozing across the cobbles, trampled into a slippery mix by horses' hooves, with little rivers of mud running along the pathways, mixing the muck into a special sticky mess that never wanted to let go of you. Even the dogs looked sideways at it and tried

to find a way round it. Mama and I didn't have fancy leather boots or even a pair of clogs to get us through that mess. I just had my old pumps and no matter how many times Mama tried to sew it back, the seam kept unravelling, so my toe stuck out the front. By the time I'd walked three steps in that mud, I'd have been barefoot.

Even if we had braved it on the muddy streets, we would still have had to cross the river to get to London. The quickest way was by wherry boat, as the bridge was always jammed with carts and traders. But who wanted to sit in a small boat on a wild, deep river in the rain? So every year, instead of going to the fair, I ended up doing chores. Last year, I churned butter from dawn to dinner. After that, my arms were so strong I could have squeezed the butter straight from the cow.

This day was different. We'd been lodging at the Boar's Head, an inn off Tooley Street, up under the eaves again. I woke while it was still dark. Mama had left buckets out, but I couldn't hear the *drop, drop* of water. I squinted into the darkness. I could just about see the dark shapes of the dresser and Mama's sewing basket on the table. The travellers in the room below were laughing and singing and someone in another room was coughing hard. I could hear the ostler, who looked after the guests' horses, humming to himself in

the courtyard and then the clop of the horses' hooves as he led them to the stables. Next to me, Mama was still sleeping so I knew it must be very early in the morning. I didn't want to leave my warm place in the bed because it had taken me a long time to get comfortable last night. The inn had been busy and Master Horstead, the landlord, had Mama serving guests long into the night. It was hard for me to sleep when Mama wasn't next to me. It still is.

I had turned on to my side to try to go back to sleep, but something was wrong. No, something was right! I'd gone to sleep listening to the rain falling into the buckets, but it was all quiet now. I lay perfectly still and listened. No rain. I nudged Mama.

"Go back to sleep, Eve."

I sat up, pulling the blanket from her. She tried to yank it back, but I was holding it tight.

"Listen, Mama! The rain's stopped!"

"What if it has?" she grumbled.

"It means we can go the fair!"

I scrambled out of bed and looked out of the window. A faint line of light spread up from the east. A dog barked and it started all the others barking too. Mistress Sleet opened her window and shouted at them. She should have known better. The dogs just thought she meant "bark louder".

Mama sighed and sat up. “Are you sure it’s not raining?”

“Yes! We can go, can’t we?”

“We’ll see, *mpendwa*.”

Mama’s “we’ll see” could mean “yes”, but I had to be patient. It wasn’t just down to her to decide. Master Horstead usually had a long list of chores for Mama to do and then Mistress Horstead had an even longer one on top of that. Mama had to do them. If she didn’t, they’d make us pay more for our room, and we couldn’t afford that. We didn’t want to end up fighting rats in the grain store again. We knew we were lucky that we even had this. So, Mama set off to change the bed linen in the rooms that had been occupied while I cleaned the chimney grates and built up the kindling and wood ready for fresh fires. After that, we went down to help prepare the day’s food. Then we waited and waited. Finally Mistress Horstead gave us permission to go to the fair, so long as we returned in time to help serve the guests in the evening.

At last! I was really going to the famous Bartholomew Fair! First though, we had to get there. On fair days the bridge across to London was more crowded than ever. I thought we would at least try, but Mama said no. By the time we’d managed to get across to the other side, she said, we’d have to turn around and come right home

again. I'm sure she was right and that was one of her reasons for saying no, but I also knew that there was something on the bridge that she didn't want to see: the traitors – or what was left of them.

You see, I was born in 1558, the same year that Queen Elizabeth became queen. Mama hadn't been in England very long, so didn't really know what life had been like here before, but the old people in the taverns still talked about it. It had been a hard time for everyone. The Portuguese on the island where Mama was born were Catholics, like England had been, but when Elizabeth became queen, England didn't know what it wanted. Queen Elizabeth's father, King Henry VIII, had been Catholic, but then he'd stopped and made himself head of a new Church of England so that he could marry Elizabeth's mother. When he changed his religion, everyone else was meant to as well. When Henry died, his son Edward didn't change things, but Edward died when he wasn't much older than me. Then his Catholic sister, Mary, became queen and everyone was supposed to be Catholic again. I'd heard that she'd wanted to kill everyone who wasn't a Catholic. Now it was Elizabeth who was queen and it was forbidden to be Catholic again.

It didn't bother me so much as nobody had bothered asking Mama and me how we worshipped. But Queen

Elizabeth had upset many people who had thought they could be Catholic again. The ones that were caught found themselves locked up in the Tower of London. Once they'd confessed to being Catholic, their heads were chopped off and stuck on pikes on top of the gateway to the bridge as a warning to others. You couldn't see their faces because they were covered in tar, but Mama still thought their eyes were watching her.

So, no going over the bridge. That meant crossing in a wherry boat. I was nervous, but reminded myself that this was part of the big adventure. As we walked towards the river stairs on Pepper Alley, we soon realized that we weren't the only ones with that plan. The whole of Southwark seemed to be heading to the fair, jostling on the jetty for a boat to take them across the water. The tide was low. It looked like we could almost walk across the stones and mud to London, but even like this, the water could be deadly. Mama held me tightly. People sometimes look at us because our skin is browner than everyone else's, and Mama always worried that something might happen to us. I think that was because of what had happened to her in the past.

At last we reached the front of the queue for the boats. I couldn't help smiling. The sky was bright blue and tiny clouds looked like smudged fingerprints. A gull dipped down into the water and flapped away with

a fish in its beak. I held Mama's hand tighter and she smiled down at me. Even the wherryman were smiling. Of course, fair days were their favourite. They would have a heavy purse of money by the end.

We found ourselves sharing a boat with a farmer and a live goose. The goose was in a basket, but was far from happy about it and showed its displeasure by trying to peck the farmer through the reeds. I could feel the river's strength beneath our little boat as the wherryman weaved between the other vessels. I counted eight more wherries heading back to Southwark. Through the bridge's arches, I glimpsed a galleon, a huge sailing ship, anchored at the wharf on the other side of the river. I asked Mama where she thought it had come from, but she didn't reply. As we came close to shore, a barge cut across us, gliding towards Westminster. The goose flapped around and the boat rocked harder, making the wherryman swear. Mama cuddled me in to her and didn't let go until we safely reached the other side.

We scrambled out on to Puddle Dock and for a little while afterwards I was still swaying, though I could have just been dizzy with excitement. We joined the noisy crowds heading up the narrow streets towards the fair. We heard it before we saw it. A trumpet, street criers and the shouts of laughter became louder as we drew nearer. Soon I could smell the fair too, wafts of roasting

meat curling their way over us. I imagined whole pigs and lambs turning on spits, sausages and hams and all the fruit that Mama had told me about. Apricots and oranges – fruit I never even dreamed that I'd taste.

Boom! Boom! Boom! As we came on to Smithfield, a girl marched towards us banging a drum. She was about the same age as me, a little taller, with a cloud of light-brown hair that her bonnet couldn't hold in. She was wearing a white gown with blue stars sewn on to the skirt, and every time the drumstick thumped down, her bonnet gave a little shake, threatening to fly free. She stopped in front of us, drumstick in the air, and gave Mama a little bow.

“Good mistress,” said the girl. “Do you care to know the secret to your fortune? Do you wish to know how the stars fall for you and your daughter? Do your humours feel out of balance on this fine, beautiful day?”

Before Mama could reply, the girl leaned towards us, like she was telling us a secret.

“My brother, Griffin, is the best soothsayer in the whole fair. He learned from the Queen's own favourite, the great John Dee himself. You will find us next to the fire-eater.”

I tugged Mama's hand. “Can we have our stars read?”

Mama smiled. “Be patient, Eve! There are so many things to see.”

She was right. Over in one corner, the sharps had set up tables for games of shove ha'penny and dice, offering a heavy purse to anyone who could beat them. I laughed. I recognized two of the rogues from the ale houses in Southwark. The gamblers who didn't lose their money at the tables would lose it to the pickpockets watching carefully nearby.

An acrobat had slung a rope between two poles, higher than our heads. He stood on it, one foot stretched out, carefully finding its place before the other foot lifted, all while carrying a shrieking woman on his back. We wriggled our way through the shouting crowd. In a clearing, two men were dodging and smashing sticks together, their faces shiny with sweat. One had a bleeding cut above his eyebrow. I wanted to stay and watch, but Mama pulled me away.

“Are you hungry?” she asked me.

I was always hungry! She knew that. She showed me a handful of coins.

“I've been saving these for this very day!”

We were richer than I expected. I wondered if Mama had carefully put aside a little money on all the years that it had been raining too hard for us to come. We walked past trays of fat, dark figs and pale-green plums, cauldrons of pottage and tables groaning with cheeses, tubs of pickled herrings and pies. But I knew

what I wanted and I led Mama back to the hog roast, watching carefully as the stallholder carved the slices for us. We found a patch of grass and settled down to enjoy our food. As I sunk my teeth into the soft, smoky meat, I wondered what it would be like to eat this every day. It wouldn't have to be pork. Mutton would do, or capons roasted with herbs or... I sighed. It would *never* happen. Maybe that was a good thing because if it did, I wouldn't appreciate it as much as I was enjoying this now.

Afterwards, we walked around again. I saw the drummer girl. She raised her eyebrows at us, but Mama shook her head. She'd decided it was time to go. The sky to the east was starting to darken, and Mistress Horstead would be expecting us. There was also too much ale being swilled and that always leads to fights. We wanted to be out of the way before the brawling started. We wormed our way through the crowds, back towards the edges of the fair, and then a stall caught my eye. The woman behind it had a pale, lined face and a wide, friendly smile that made her eyes crinkle up.

On the table in front of her were row after row of poppets. Some looked floppy, made from rags and wool, with faces stitched from dark thread. Mama had made me one like that when I was little, but I had lost it on our travels. Others were wooden with carved faces

and gowns made from rich fabrics. The woman held up one of the smaller poppets and beckoned me. Before Mama could grab me, I ran towards it.

“Do you like it?” the woman asked.

I reached out to touch it, but she shook her head. It had a wooden head, the colour of my skin. Its body was softer, made from fabric, dressed in a blue gown topped with a crisp white apron. Dark hair poked out from beneath its bonnet.

“It will bring you luck,” the woman said.

“We need luck, don’t we, Mama?” I said.

“Yes.” Mama laughed quietly. “We do, but I’m not sure a poppet is the way to find it. You are far too old for toys, Eve.”

The lady nodded, like she understood. “It’s not just a poppet. It’s a lucky poppet, so lucky I can sell it cheap. Just three halfpence. That’s all it costs to buy you luck.”

Mama shook her head. “I could buy a whole chicken for that.”

The woman frowned, then sighed. “A scrawny chicken will give you a couple of mouthfuls of chewy meat. This poppet will bring you and your daughter good luck for the rest of your long lives. I will take one penny for it, even though that will break me.” She gave me a sad smile. “I want you to have all the luck, young sweetheart.”

I stayed quiet. I was from Southwark. I knew all the tricks.

Mama handed over the penny and the woman passed me the doll. I smiled at her, but she was already hailing new customers. I clutched the poppet to me as we trotted back towards the river. A wind had struck up and it felt like it would bring rain with it.

“We’ll take the bridge,” Mama said.

The tide was high by now. As we approached the river, we could see the wherry men having to work harder to ferry their passengers from shore to shore. Mama looked up at the darkening sky, then down at the water churning through the piers under the bridge. Downstream even the cargo boats seemed to be trying to shake free from their moorings.

The bridge, though, was truly blocked. A horse had collapsed, tipping over its cart full of barrels. Black, tar-like pitch spilled across the cobbles. Crowds were shouting and trying to push past, without walking in the sticky mess. We tried to find a gap to pass through, but it was impossible. The people heading to London wanted to reach it before the city gates were locked for the night, while those leaving were intent on arriving safely in Southwark while there was light. There are many desperate rogues on our side of the river and few watchmen to stop them.

“The wherry it is,” Mama said. “Let’s be quick before the weather worsens.”

This time there was even more of a jostle for boats. As well as people like us returning home, young men and women were looking to enjoy the theatres and beast-baiting on Bankside. Many of them looked like they’d already been enjoying the ale houses around the fair. Mama used her shoulder to get us to the front, but refused to take the first boat. She said the wherryman looked drunk. The tide was at its highest. We needed steady hands.

A man shoved Mama aside. “Move if you’re not travelling.”

He was tall and I could smell the beer on his breath. It was hard to see his face properly in the twilight. Judging by his clothes, he was far away from being a gentleman.

Mama drew herself up. “I can assure you, sir, we are travelling.”

The man looked Mama up and down. She stared back.

The man nodded. “Please accept my apologies.” He took his purse from his pocket and drew out a handful of coins. “Allow me to pay for your passage.”

He stepped into the wobbling boat and passed the money to the wherryman.

The wherryman studied the coins. “Where to?”

Mama looked from the man to the coins. Was she going to refuse? Mama was always suspicious of strangers.

“Tell him where you want to go,” the man instructed. “The fare is paid.”

“To the church stairs, please,” Mama said.

Mama stepped into the boat and held out her hand to help me in. The boat only had two seats so I settled myself on Mama’s lap. The man who had paid our fare took the other seat. She sat upright, gripping me with one hand and the side of the boat with the other. I felt her flinch every time the boat lurched on the tide.

The boat pushed off and the wherryman set to with his oars. We’d only just left the quay when it felt like the river had reached up, grasped the hull of our boat and was tugging it downstream towards the bridge. Mama gripped me harder as water splashed over us. The other passenger had closed his eyes and was moving his mouth like he was praying. I held my poppet to my chest. *If you really are lucky, now is the time to show it.*

The wherryman laughed. “Old Father Thames is having a dance tonight.”

“God have mercy!”

The shout came from beside me. The man next to

us was sitting upright, eyes staring ahead.

“Starboard! Ahoy!”

Another wherry swerved towards us. I glimpsed the passengers’ terrified faces before it veered away. Our wherryman swore and rowed harder. I knew that if I looked to my left, I’d see the arches beneath the bridge; I could already hear the water gushing through. If your boat was caught in that stream, it was like a monster took hold of you. You were thrown in the air before being sent in to the spinning depths.

We were in the middle of the river now, the rain a slow, steady drizzle that soaked my clothes.

“Stop, boatman! Turn back!” The man was struggling to his feet.

“Please,” Mama said. “Stay seated.”

Her voice was whipped away by the wind. The wherryman shouted something cruder, but the man ignored him.

“Turn back!” the man shouted. “Before you kill us all!”

“Sit down, sir!” Mama held on to me and tried to grab his arm at the same time. The boat lurched and more water slopped over the side. Mama’s nails were digging into my stomach. I tried to breathe, but my chest felt as if it had been hammered so flat, my breathing couldn’t work.

“Return, boatman! Return!” The man lunged towards the wherryman to seize the oar from him.

The boat shook as the wherryman fought him off.

“Stop!” Mama let me go to try and force the men apart.

The boat twisted towards the bridge. Suddenly, I saw not only the arches, but every brick and every crack between every brick. I heard the splash and howl of the water as it shot between the pillars. Then the boat pitched and I hit the water.

No, it hit me.