

Come sit down on this sunny stone  
'Tis wintery light o'er flowerless moors –  
But sit – for we are all alone  
And clear expand heaven's breathless shores

– Emily Brontë

## 1

### **Susan Knowles-Chester (1788–1851)**

The twelfth of December 1847 is the decisive day in Susan Knowles's life. By then she is almost sixty years old, and four years later she will die. In the course of her life there are many days she looks forward to, days that beforehand, or even as they advance, seem to swell with meaning, but which in hindsight did not fulfil their promise. Yet in its early hours, that twelfth of December in the year of our Lord 1847 seems like any other winter's day, commencing in darkness, concluding in darkness, and cold, with a north wind lofting the grainy snow on its breath, making the streets of Bridge Fowling shivery and pale in the morning twilight. Only for a moment do Susan's footsteps betray where she has gone, turning right into Church Street, up the steep slope past the cemetery, and by the time she quietly enters the grounds of the parsonage from the back, no one can tell from her tracks any longer to what poor soul that envoy of Death was hastening.

The villagers have a horror of her work, she leaves grief in her wake wherever she goes like driftwood, yet when the time comes, many ask for her help, it's a public secret. They all know that most of them, however devout, cannot pass away without fear or physical embarrassment, yet everyone is always full of praise for the serenity with which the dying man or woman accepted God's will, how peaceful it was, how comforting, and likewise, everyone in the village knows that many women, after weeks, or sometimes years, of nursing a family member, can no longer bring themselves to perform the final duty, whether out of grief or fear or disgust or simple ignorance of what to do. Susan teaches them the time-honoured customs, the practical steps, and even then, after learning the rituals, they still prefer to have her perform them. She comes and goes in secret, the wealthy press a few shillings into her hand at the back door, the poor a few pennies, no one has to know, sometimes not even the family, not even the husband.

She was taught by her mother when her dear sweet Susey died, succumbing to scarlet fever at the tender age of four. To Susan, the most appalling thing about the ritual was the balls of soaked cotton for weighing down her daughter's eyelids, for hours after Susey had closed her mild brown eyes for the

last time, Susan still believed she wanted to open them again and fix her helpless gaze on her mummy. And almost as terrible was the sheet Susan was expected to use to hold her daughter's jaw shut before rigor mortis set in, like muzzling her for all eternity. But Susan's mother explained to her that, out of love and respect, they were doing their best to prepare Susey for eternal life. The prayers they recited, the washing, the clean nightshirt, the brushing of her cropped hair, the folded hands, everything had to be just perfect for those who wished to see her one last time, as well as for Susey herself, especially Susey herself, who would soon meet her Maker in dignity and be admitted to heaven as the cherub she was. It's like a wedding, Susan's mother told her, you wash behind your ears beforehand, and between your legs, put on your finest clothes, speak ceremonious words, and begin a new life. Susan had never forgotten that, a wedding, that was what she tried to see where others saw Death.

Darkness fell over Susan's life after Susey's passing, she awoke in the shadow of Death and laid herself to rest there, over and over each day, like a relentless march from bed to bed. Never before in her life had she paused to reflect on the symbolism of black for mourning, the wisdom of Father Drayden's biblical words, the consolation to be derived from a family grave like a carefully made bed into which she would one day crawl to rock Susey to sleep. She drew the greatest solace from the thought that all those rituals had developed through the ages because millions of others had preceded her in heartbreak and discovered that these were the actions that brought relief. She had Susey's grave to visit, she had a lock of Susey's blonde hair to touch, which reminded her of the time before her daughter's hair had to be cut short to bring down the fever, and she had sermons, psalms and prayers to hear, sing, whisper. Like a spell, the carefully chosen words reached the edge of the darkness, where life's ring of light touched the dead, tickling their toes, lapping the tops of their heads, nothing more, so they knew the living were thinking of them but they did not awaken. That was why on Sundays, and only on Sundays, Susan went to bed with the peaceful feeling that she'd visited Susey's room upstairs to tuck her in and kiss her goodnight, so she could sleep, so both of them could sleep.

Susan would have preferred to forget Death's physical manifestation, but in fact the image of Susey's body in the coffin remained her most vivid memory of her. Her unnaturally pale face, her features frozen halfway between resignation and surprise, her little hands folded over her chest in a pious, adult fashion, and how cold she felt whenever Susan gave in to the urge to squeeze her daughter's fingers, or kiss her on the cheek, and recoiled each time from the stiff, chilly touch like starched sheets in winter. She discussed it with Father Drayden, who told her it was only human to remember that kind of appalling image best. When you learn to see death as an indispensable part of life, he said, then your memories of the living Susey will return.

Susan didn't know what to do with that advice, for though she was more aware than ever that all living people must die, it was not clear to her what further insight she needed to find her way back to Susey. She didn't dare to ask Father Drayden again, but he noticed that her grief was undiminished. And so it was that, on the most terrible day of his own life, he put his suffering aside for a moment and concerned himself with hers.

Father Robinson Drayden was married to Betty Stancliff, whom he had met as a student at Cambridge. He loved her very much, too much, it was whispered in Bridge Fowling, for in spite of her fragile build and weak constitution, she became pregnant with clockwork regularity. In six short years, this resulted in two miscarriages, four daughters and not a single son, and during the delivery of her fifth child, they even had to call in Dr Allsopp. Mary Pickles, the maid at the parsonage, turned up to fetch him in the afternoon, and Susan saw them hurrying down Barley Street together. She prayed for Betty, and in the hours that followed, she thought of her several more times.

In the middle of the night she was roused by a banging on the front door. Joseph drowsily went down in his nightshirt, and a few moments later he shouted up the stairs that it was Mary from the parsonage, she'd come for Susan. Susan pulled on her dress and rushed downstairs. Is Betty having a hard time, she said, and Mary told her the baby had come out the wrong way, feet first, she said. Dr Allsopp had asked Father Drayden which of the two he should save, the mother or the child, and Father Drayden had, without hesitation, chosen his wife. But Betty had vetoed this romantic decision, the delivery had taken so long and been so exhausting, she'd said, that she was bound to die in a few days at most, and the scraps of life left in her were meant for her child. The two men could only respect her wish. With great effort, Dr Allsopp managed to turn the baby around, and she was born, alive and well, a genuine miracle, yet another girl. Helen was her name, Mary said, but on the subject of Betty she was silent.

Susan went with her through the sleeping village to the parsonage. It was a balmy August night, the sky already turning a light pinkish-blue along the horizon, with a moist smell in the air of the hot day slumbering in the distance, beyond the flowering hills. Susan did not ask Mary why Father Drayden had sent for her. He was seated at the table in the drawing room, his head bowed as if top heavy with held-back tears, not praying, this much Susan noticed as Mary let her in. When he looked up at her, she recognized the confusion in his eyes, the pain so great it blotted out all feeling, and she knew why she was there. She's upstairs, he said, second door on the left, would you lay her out. Betty's family lived far away in Cambridge, his own mother and sisters lived near Manchester, and his daughters were far too young for the job, the eldest seven years old and the youngest two hours. Mary could do it for him, but he was asking Susan.

Mary gave Susan a bowl of lukewarm water from the kitchen, a washcloth, two towels, a large quantity of cotton wool and the shroud that Smith Baines, the village baker and undertaker, had brought when he took Betty's measurements for the coffin. As she climbed the steps, Susan felt she was confronting Death itself, and her heart pounded as she opened the bedroom door. Betty was lying on her back on the bed by the window, covered with a sheet, the light of the oil lamp on the chest of drawers playing over her face. Someone, probably Mary, had placed two balls of wet cotton on her eyelids, wound a cloth around her chin and tied a big knot in it on top of her head. It made her look comical, like a harnessed horse with blinkers and a tassel on its halter. Although the window was open, it smelled odd in the room, a scent Susan found familiar but could not place, until she threw back the sheets and saw the blood. In a vast, tentacular stain spreading from her knees to just below her breasts,

her insides had flowed out of her over her nightdress, over the bottom sheet, which someone had tried but largely failed to clean, over her legs, over her hands. The horror of what must have happened in that room stopped Susan short, as if she was staring at herself lying there on the bed after giving birth to Susey. Not the mother of a perfect little girl who had miraculously grown inside her, but this devastated body. As she pushed large wads of cotton balls into Betty, between her legs, front and back, she considered the fine line between life and death, and she prayed for her.

She was unprepared for the heavy demands Betty made on her. When she'd agreed to Father Drayden's request, she'd had only a vague idea of what awaited her, but he must have known what he was asking her to do, because he'd seen hundreds of his parishioners die. And as she wrestled with Betty's body, her unruly arms and legs, her long, loose hair, the clammy nightdress with its sickening smell, and eventually, in despair, cast all propriety aside, undressing her without the cover of a sheet, and even washing her like that, exposed and naked, she cursed him, unable to understand why he'd done this to her, even summoned her from bed in the middle of the night for it.

Betty was like a helpless child that Susan had to soothe and clean up, she spoke to her gently, pleading with her, please don't fight me, comforting her, telling her about Susey, praying with her. A strange kind of understanding developed between them in that long grey hour between dark and dawn, one which shut out everyone else as if the walls of the room were the borders of the world. And with a clarity such as she'd never experienced before, Susan recalled the last two weeks of Susey's life, when she'd shut herself up in the small bedroom with her because of the risk of infection, and died with her yet had to live on afterwards, alone. Neighbours and her sisters left food in the corridor for her at mealtimes, and she spoke to Joseph through the shut door. Her whole life had been focused on the small, ailing body she was determined to nurse and save. But she had been powerless, eye to eye with Death, who knows no mercy.

The water in the washbasin turned pinkish-red, she knew she should fetch clean water at the pump, take the bloodied sheets and garments to the scullery to soak, have a chat with Mary. She didn't go, she stayed in the room with Betty as the first rays of sun entered through the open window, their warmth emphasizing Death's icy presence. She brushed Betty's long hair, folded her hands across her chest, sat in the chair by her bed. A great peace descended on her, as if she'd come so close to the edge but not quite tumbled, as if she'd caught a glimpse of the country where Susey dwelled now, an extension of everything familiar to Susan, the other side of life.

It was not long afterwards, less than five weeks later, that Susan discovered she was pregnant. Joseph was happy, but she felt a wordless certainty she was bearing the child of Death, conceived in that unwanted, indecent embrace with Betty's body. For two years she had been very careful, unwilling to betray Susey with a new baby. She'd sometimes pretended to be sleeping when Joseph desired her, and when she did have intercourse with him, she crept off to the kitchen afterwards to eat wild carrot seeds. She hadn't realized she should take the same precautions after laying out a corpse, no one had told her that, and she didn't dare to take her questions to Father Drayden.

Now that she knew, she saw the similarities between the one thing and the other. She thought constantly of that grey hour with Betty, she longed for another chance and resolved that then she would handle it more decently. She went to Smith Baines, the undertaker, and offered him her services, he promised to discreetly inform his customers that she could lay out their dead for them, and then she made the same request of Dr Allsopp and Father Drayden.

Before long she was eye to eye with Death again. Without the despair that Betty had provoked in her, she did a better job, and that made it less overwhelming. As more and more dead bodies were entrusted to her care, she arrived at a solemn ritual that took in every previous occasion, as intimate as a prayer yet with appropriate detachment. The time between the moment when she opened the bedroom door and saw the dead person lying on the bed in his state of indignity and the moment when she covered the immaculate body with a sheet and offered him a few final words, that time was for her and Death. She alone understood his true nature, the others averted their eyes from his dirty tricks, his ruthlessness, his unbridled appetite, while she was his accomplice, she erased his tracks, so that her fellow men and women could capture him in consoling words instead of having to encounter him in the wild, that is, until the fateful day he showed up at their bedside.

She gave birth to a baby boy, John, who was not misshapen or sickly as she had feared, and later to a daughter, Martha, and he did not take her from her either. She loved her children, but not the same way she'd loved Susey. This was not because she was afraid, she was no longer capable of it, as if something in her had died when Susey let out her final breath. She spoke to no one about her firstborn, only to him, in that ever-recurring hour, as she endeavoured to remove the marks of his teeth from his chosen prey and he looked on in sardonic silence, because after the funeral he would once again be free to eat his fill. Susey was the secret she shared with him, and just as she had once ceded half her daughter to Joseph, she now reluctantly granted Death the same share. Susey began to show a confusing resemblance to her new father. After laying out dozens of bodies, Susan no longer knew for certain whether she had washed Susey herself, that last time, or whether perhaps her mother had done it for her. Could no longer remember how Susey had looked as she lay in the dining room in the small coffin Joseph had made, for she had taken on the peaceful smile of the dead faces Susan had skilfully forced into shape. And even now, despite what Father Drayden had promised her, the living Susey had still not emerged from behind her pale, motionless lookalike.

Susan not only laid out the dead but also sewed burial shrouds, palls and mourning dress, and Joseph, who was a furniture maker, built not only tables, chairs and cupboards but also coffins. Death was a generous employer, a simple elm coffin fetched a price of two pounds or more, and wealthy villagers often wanted a triple coffin, for which Joseph could ask six or seven pounds. Even during hard times in Bridge Fowling, a severe winter, unemployment, an epidemic, Susan and Joseph Knowles lived well, as the villagers noted enviously, and they were not the only ones. They had a close working relationship with Smith Baines, who arranged for the funeral, the pallbearers, the dinner, and a carriage and horses if desired. And the stonecutter William Randall, the gravediggers Frank Joiner and Job Wynne, the goldsmith in Steadborough, Ezra Wade, who made jewellery with locks from the hair of the dead for

remembrance, the printer Joel Witherspoon, who sold mourning cards and black-edged stationery, the sexton Thomas Finch, Father Drayden and Dr Allsopp, all of them profited where others suffered. Vultures, they were called behind their backs, and some even suspected them of causing the illnesses that plagued Bridge Fowling, for the hand of fate always spared the Knowles and Baines families.

In the fourth year of Susan's pact with Death, in the autumn of 1817, Father Drayden's eldest daughter Sarah died at the age of eleven, of consumption. One rainy afternoon Mary came to fetch Susan. Susan brought her bag, which contained her Bible and ribbons, towels, cotton wool, shrouds and caps in various sizes. She did not see Father Drayden, the drawing room door remained forbiddingly shut, and she did not hear any children's voices, it was silent in the house. Mary sent her upstairs. First door on the left, she said, there's a bowl of water for you.

Sarah had died not half an hour earlier, she was still warm, her suffering still palpable. Susan shut the girl's eyes, weighed down her eyelids with wet cotton wool, and wrapped a cloth around her head and jaw. Thin as a rake, she was, emaciated, not an eleven-year-old girl but a little old woman. Susan pulled the chair up to the bed and sat down beside her with the Bible in her lap. Laying out children was always difficult. No matter what she tried, Susey would cower away in horror, refusing to look over her mother's shoulder, to listen when Susan spoke to her, to play on the floor at her feet.

Seated by the bedside, Susan read aloud from the Bible, prayed for poor Sarah and now and then closed her eyes and waited to see if Susey would keep her company this time after all. Almost an hour later, she rose from her chair, and as she undressed Sarah under the sheets with polite, practiced hands, she heard children's voices in the entryway downstairs. She thought of Susey, and the thought was so potent that she saw her there, her light brown eyes, her blue frock, her blonde hair, her mischievous smile. Then there came a rattling at the door, the handle moved down, and up, and down again, as if a child was standing on tiptoe to reach it. Susan's heart skipped a beat, she stared at the door in trepidation. It slowly opened to reveal a girl in the doorway, four or five years old in a blue dress. For a second, which it seemed would never end, Susan refused to let the truth sink in. She drank in the sight of the girl, coloured her brown hair blonde, her grey eyes brown, filled out her wiry form with baby fat. It was Eliza May, Father Drayden's second youngest daughter. You aren't supposed to be here, said Susan, you can see your sister soon, when I'm done with her. Eliza made no reply, keeping her eyes on Sarah's body beneath the sheet as she closed the door behind her and approached.

Susan would have sent away any other child, forcefully if necessary, but a remnant of Susey still clung to Eliza, something elusive that stirred a warm, tender feeling Susan had not experienced since before Susey's death, and hadn't been aware of missing until it seized her here and now, at the sight of this unfamiliar child. The poor thing had no mother to care for her, Betty would be mortified, her daughter had outgrown the pale blue dress, the sleeves were more than an inch too short, the hem was no longer at her ankles but halfway up her calves, and her feet were bare and dirty. She looked like the child of a pauper. Have you been playing on the heath, Susan asked.

Eliza reached out and cautiously touched Sarah's cheek. Surprised by the change in her sister, she quickly withdrew her hand. Susan explained that these were Sarah's material remains and her soul had gone to heaven. Is that what kept her warm, Eliza asked, with a sidelong look. The most beautiful eyes Susan had ever seen were set in that child's thin face, greyish-blue with a glimmer of golden brown and large and gleaming, as pellucid as a pool of water in the summer sun. Go sit there, Susan said, pointing to the chair, so I can get on with my work. Eliza climbed onto the chair and watched with a solemn expression as Susan cleaned Sarah's body beneath the sheet with a wet washcloth. All was changed by the girl's innocent, greyish-blue gaze, and the room filled with Susey's presence, so misleadingly real that the contrast between Susan's resignation of minutes ago and this joy was too stark for comfort, and she could barely force back her tears.

Does dying make you dirty, Eliza asked. Not as dirty as your feet are, Susan said, and she kneeled down in front of the girl and washed her feet with clean water from the ewer and dried them with an unused towel. Don't you have shoes and stockings, she asked her. Eliza wiggled her toes, I don't want shoes, she said. Susan tried to persuade her she'd catch a chill, but her arguments made no impression.

She took a shroud from her bag and spread it over Sarah under the sheet. While putting on the right sleeve, she held Sarah's hand, as if they were walking down the street together, and saw Eliza's eyes on their interlaced fingers. On impulse, Susan held out her free hand to the girl. Eliza turned her head away, and Susan withdrew her hand, embarrassed, and because the rejection seemed to grow and grow in the silent room, she told her about heaven, saying that later, much later, Eliza would be reunited with Sarah in that place more beautiful than words can say, and that in the meantime Sarah would play with the angels who live there and no doubt have a wonderful time. Eliza thought about that for a while. But what will happen to *her*, then, she asked, pointing at the body on the bed, as if there were two Sarahs, one here on earth, and one out of reach in heaven. All Susan could do was explain that in three days she would bury Sarah's body in a fine, comfortable coffin. Eliza said they had buried their cat Brady out on the heath, and that a month later, when their dog dug him up, she hadn't recognized Brady anymore, but it was him, she said. Is God hungry, she asked.

Is God hungry, it summed up all of Susan's unbecoming feelings after Susey's death, the anger, the doubt, the self-pity, for why had God made Susey and then permitted her so little time to enjoy earthly life. Father Drayden said the chosen few that God loved most were the first to be taken up into heaven. That made no sense to Susan, was Susey supposed to have sinned, would she still be alive if she had. She finally concluded that it was God's fault, not Susey's, an inference she made in silence and would never have the courage to speak aloud. God was hungry, and He made Death do the dirty work.

As she walked home in the rain, and that night as she lay sleeping, she searched for a good answer to Eliza's question, the answer she should have given instead of saying, like a coward, that Sarah must have been pleased to see her cat Brady in Paradise. Mama is there too, Eliza had corrected her. Ah, that poor child, no mother, no older sister to care for her, and a month later Susan was back in the parsonage, for now it was Rebecca, Father Drayden's second eldest daughter, who had died of consumption. Finding the right answer to Eliza's question had become yet more urgent, but still Susan had nothing to offer her. When Mary came for her, she decided as she packed her bag that she would

do her best to console Eliza, for what was to become of that lonely little girl. She would tell her that while God's ways may seem cruel and mysterious now, He had a higher plan that the two of them could not comprehend. Later, as an old woman looking back on her life, Eliza would see the point of her suffering and even be grateful for it. That's what Susan would tell her.

She was sent to the same room where she'd laid out Sarah, the same bed, almost the same girl, the light brown hair, the brown eyes, the long, thin fingers, the emaciated body, but younger, Rebecca was only nine. Keeping an eye on the door, Susan undressed her, washed her, put a shroud on her, but Eliza didn't come. Susan realized she'd been looking forward to the girl's arrival. It felt untoward, as if she'd asked for Rebecca to die just so she could wash her little sister's dirty feet again. When she was done, she sat in the kitchen with Mary for a while, hoping Eliza would show up to sit by the fire or ask for bread. She asked Mary how the three surviving daughters were getting by, are they very sad, she said. Mary told her their uncle from Manchester had come to fetch them the week before, because Father Drayden was worried they too would fall ill. Were they coughing, Susan asked in alarm, no, not that, or not when they left, Mary said. But Susan could no longer rid herself of the thought that what she had recognized in Eliza May Drayden was not Susey, but Death.