

BRIGHTON ROCK

Graham Greene

'Who are you?' Rose implored her. Why do you interfere with us? You're not the police.'

'I'm like everyone else. I want justice,' the woman cheerfully remarked, as if she were ordering a pound of tea. Her big prosperous carnal face hung itself with smiles. She said, 'I want to see you're safe.'

'I don't want any help,' Rose said.

'You ought to go home.'

Rose clenched her hand in defence of the brass bed, the ewer of dusty water: 'This is home.'

'It's no good your getting angry, dear,' the woman continued. 'I'm not going to lose my temper with you again, it's not your fault. You don't understand how things are. Why, you poor little thing, I pity you,' and she advanced across the linoleum as if she intended to take Rose in her arms.

Rose backed against the bed, 'You keep your distance.'

'Now don't get agitated, dear. It won't help. You see - I'm determined.'

'I don't know what you mean. Why can't you talk straight?'

'There's things I've got to break - gently.'

'Keep away from me. Or I'll scream.'

The woman stopped. 'Now let's talk sensible, dear. I'm here for your own good. You got to be saved. Why -' she seemed for a moment at a loss for words. She said in a hushed voice, 'Your life's in danger.'

'You go away if that's all -'

'All,' the woman was shocked. 'What do you mean, all?'

Then she laughed resolutely. 'Why, dear, for a moment you had me rattled. All, indeed. It's enough, isn't it? I'm not joking now. If you don't know it. There's nothing he wouldn't stop at.'

'Well?' Rose said, giving nothing away.

The woman whispered softly across the few feet between them, 'He's a murderer.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' Rose said. 'There's nothing you can tell me.'

'You crazy little fool - to marry him knowing that. I got a good mind to let you be.'

'I won't complain,' Rose said.

The woman hooked on another smile, as you hook on a wreath. 'I'm not going to lose my temper, dear. Why if I let you be, I wouldn't sleep at nights. It wouldn't be right. Listen to me; maybe you don't know what happened. I got it all figured out. They took Fred down under the parade, into one of those little shops and strangled him - least they would have strangled him, but his heart gave out first.' She said in an awestruck voice, 'They strangled a dead man,' then added sharply, 'you aren't listening.'

'I know it all,' Rose lied. She was thinking hard - she was remembering Pinkie's warning - 'Don't get mixed up,' She thought wildly and vaguely: he did his best for me; I got to help him now. She watched the woman closely; she would never forget that plump, good-natured ageing face: it

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stared out at her like an idiot's from the ruins of a bombed home. She said, 'Well, if you think that's how it was, why don't you go to the police?'

'Now you're talking sense,' the woman said. 'I only want to make things clear. This is the way it is, dear. There's a certain person I've paid money to who's told me things. And there's things I've figured out for myself. But that person - he won't give evidence. For reasons. And you need a lot of evidence - seeing how the doctors made it natural death. Now, if you -'

'Why don't you give it up?' Rose said. 'It's over and done, isn't it? Why not let us all be?'

'It wouldn't be right. Besides - he's dangerous. Look what happened here the other day. You don't tell me that was an accident.'

'You haven't thought, have you,' Rose said, 'why he did it? You don't kill a man for no reason.'

'Well, why did he?'

'I don't know.'

'Ask him.'

'I don't need to know.'

'You think he's in love with you,' the woman said, 'he's not.'

'He married me.'

'And why? Because they can't make a wife give evidence. You're just a witness like that other man was. My dear,' she again tried to close the gap between them, 'I only want to save you. He'd kill you as soon as look at you if he thought he wasn't safe.'

With her back to the bed Rose watched her approach. She let her put her large cool pastry-making hands upon her shoulders. 'People change,' she said.

'Oh, no they don't. Look at me. I've never changed. It's like those sticks of rock: bit it all way down, you'll still read Brighton. That's human nature.' She breathed mournfully over Rose's face - a sweet and winey breath.

'Confession . . . repentance,' Rose whispered.

'That's just religion,' the woman said. 'Believe me, it's the world we got to deal with.' She went pat pat on Rose's shoulder, her breath whistling in her throat. 'You pack a bag and come away with me. I'll look after you. You won't have cause to fear.'