

'A very talented writer'

SUNDAY TIMES

THINGS IN JARS



JESS KIDD

'An arresting talent' *DAILY MAIL*

THINGS IN JARS



Jess Kidd was brought up in London as part of a large family from County Mayo and has been praised for her original fictional voice. Her first novel, *Himself*, was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards in 2016 and she was winner of the Costa Short Story Award in the same year. In 2017, *Himself* was shortlisted for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award and longlisted for the CWA John Creasey (New Blood) Dagger. Her second novel, *The Hoarder*, a tale of a lonely care worker, was described as a 'a lyrical gothic detective saga' (*Guardian*) and 'a brilliantly imaginative tale of secrets and lies' (*Daily Express*). Both books were BBC Radio 2 Book Club picks.

@JessKiddHerself | jesskidd.com

Also by Jess Kidd

Himself
The Hoarder

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JESS KIDD



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For my mother

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[September 1863](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[May 1841](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[September 1863](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[May 1841](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[September 1863](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[May 1843](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[September 1863](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[May 1843](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[September 1863](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[August 1843](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[October 1863](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[September 1843](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[October 1863](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[October 1843](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[October 1863](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[February 1837](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[October 1863](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[October 1863](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Prologue

As pale as a grave grub she's an eyeful.

She looks up at him, startled, from the bed. Her pale eyes flitting fishy: intruder – lantern – door – intruder. As if she's trying to work out how they all connect, with her eyes cauled and clouded.

Is she blind?

No. She sees him all right; he knows that she sees him. Now her eyes are following him as he steals nearer.

She's pretty.

She's more than pretty. She's a church-yard angel, a marble carving, with her ivory curls and her pale, pale stony eyes. But not stone – brightening pearl, oh soft-hued!

He could touch her: stroke her cheek, hold the wee point of her chin, wind her white curls around his finger.

Her lips are beginning to move, pouting and posturing, as if she's working up to something, as if she's working up to *sound*.

Without further thought he puts his hand over her mouth, his skin dark against hers in the lantern-light. She frowns and her feet beat an angry tattoo despite the restraints and the coverlet is off. She has two legs, *like a girl*. Two thin white legs and two thin white arms and not much else in-between.

Then she stops and lies still, panting.

The touch of her: she is like nothing in nature. Skin waxy and damp, breath cold: an unnatural coldness, like a corpse living.

And that smell again, stronger now, the sharp salt of the open ocean, an inky seaweed tang.

She fixes him with her pearly eyes. He feels the slick nubs of her teeth and the quick, wet probe of her tongue on his hand.

The man fancies that his head is opening like an easy winkle, the child is tapping and probing, her fingers are inside his mind. Touching, teasing the quivering insides. She is dabbling and grabbing as with a jar of minnows, splashing and peering as with a rock-pool. She hooks a memory with her little finger and drags it out, and then another and another. One by one the child finds them, his memories. She cups them in her palm, shimmering, each a perfect tear.

A boy slips on wet cobbles, himself, following a cart with a potato in his hand.

A woman turns in a doorway with the sun on her hair, oh, his brother's wife!

A four-day-old foal stands in a green field, a pure white flash on its lovely nose.

The child tips her palm and watches the tears roll away.

Panic floods the man. Something swells in him – a pure and compelling disgust, a strong sudden urge to finish this creature off. To throttle her, stove in her face, snap her neck as cleanly as a young rabbit's.

A voice inside him, the lispng voice of a child, mocks him. Isn't he the most ruthless of bastards, wouldn't he smother his own mother without a care? Hasn't he done all things, terrible things, not stinted on the things he's done? And here he is frightened to grant the kindest of *mercies*.

The man looks at the child in dismay and the child looks back at him.

He loosens his grip on her and takes out his knife.

A lantern dips and flares in the doorway and here's the nurse. An ex-lag with a few years on her and a lame leg, clean of garb but not of mouth, used to bad business. Likes it, even. The others behind like her personal guard – two men, neckerchiefs up around their faces. Odd birds; elbows tucked in, heads swivelling, light-stepping, listening, blinking. With every step they expect an ambush.

'Don't touch her,' the nurse says to him. 'Get away from her.'

The man, looking up, hesitates, and the child bites him, a nip of surprising sharpness. He pulls his hand away in surprise and sees a line of puncture holes, small but deep.

The nurse pushes past him to the side of the bed, glancing at his hand. 'You'll regret that, my tulip.'

She makes a show of pulling on fine chain-mail gloves and unhooks the restraints that hold the child to the bed, dressing her in a harness of strong

material, one limb at a time, buckling the child's arms across her chest, lashing her legs together. The child lunges, open-mawed.

The man stands dazed, flexing his hand. Red lines track from palm to wrist to elbow, the teeth-marks turn mulberry, then black. He twists his forearm and presses his skin. Sweat beading on his forehead, his lip. What kind of child bites like this, like a rat? He imagines her venom – he feels it – coursing through him, from arm to heart, lungs to bowels, fingertips to feet. A blistering poison spreads, a sudden fire burning itself out as it travels. Then the lines fade and the marks dull to no more than pin-pricks.

All the time the creature watches him, her eyes darkening – a trick of the lamp-light, surely! Two eyes of polished jet, their surfaces flat, so strangely flat.

The nurse is speaking low, standing back to direct. 'Roll her, bag her, make haste, watch her mouth.'

They wrap the child in canvas, a staysail to make a hammock of sorts.

The man, manipulating his arm, examining the pin-pricks, suddenly finds himself beyond words. He makes a sound, a vowel sound, followed by a string of gargled consonants. He drops to his knees, like one devotional, and falls backwards onto the hearthrug. He would scream if he could, but he can only reach out. He lies gasping like a landed catch.

From the floor he watches the two men lift the bundle between them. They move with deliberation, as if underwater.

The nurse limps over, lantern in hand, and looks down at the man. Her diagnosis: he is in a bad way, face as grey as his county-crop. Not old but already life-waned – and now this.

He begins to sob.

The nurse could sob too for the loss of a good thief, the kind who'd abstract the teeth from your head without the opening of your mouth.

She kneels with difficulty. 'Close your eyes, lad,' she whispers. 'It will help me no end.'

Trussed in a canvas hammock she's no weight. But the two men would carry a far heavier burden with greater ease. Of course they'd humoured the nurse, heard her stories in the tavern with a few inside them. But they see it now, in the child, as she said they would: all kinds of wrong.

What of the man fallen? They balked to touch him after. The carrying of him would be worse than the leaving of him and they feel the leaving

keenly. The child swings swaddled between them, big-eyed in the lantern dimmed; oh, they see it now, in her. By the time they reach the landing the men are sweating with the effort of not dashing her head against the wall. One would shoot her through the eye in a heartbeat; the other would cut her throat in a blink. At the top of the stairs they are in danger of hurling her down.

The nurse keeps them in check. Giving whispered orders, steadying them with her strong fingers on arms and ribs.

Bringing them back to the job in hand, for the money.

‘Don’t think on it!’ The nurse speaks urgent and low. ‘Don’t think on anything. Hoist her, aye, and we’ll be gone.’

The big house is silent tonight, but for our intruders moving through corridors with their trussed burden and breath-held shuffle. Awake to loose floorboards and creaking doors and light-sleepers.

But the servants slumber on. The housekeeper, tidy-bedded, neat of nightcap and frill (like a spoon put away for best), inspects the linen cupboards of her dreams. Smiling at immaculate piles, heaven-fresh, as clean as clouds. The butler, proper, even in his nightshirted sleep, patrols an endless cellar. The bottles giggle in dark corners. They ease out their corks and call to him in honeyed voices. They sing songs of laden vines and sunny hillsides and duty forgotten – liquid bewitchment! He grips his lantern and will not stop. The housemaids, in their attic nests, are dreaming of omnibuses and pantomimes. The cook snores fruity, unpeeled and well-soaked under warm sheets, as solid and brandy-scented as plum pudding. She dreams of matchless soufflés; she hunts them down as she sails in a saucepan over a gravy sea. All are senseless in the tucked-in, heavy-breathing, before-dawn quiet.

The big house is silent tonight, but for our intruders, hurrying out of the servants’ door.

The dogs lie poisoned in the yard, their muzzles flecked with spittle, a breeze ruffling their fur. This is the breeze that came over the sea, miles inland, past wood, fields and lane to whisk the gravel on the drive and dance around the rooftop chimney pots and whistle through the keyholes.

The mice are wakeful and so too is the mean-eyed kitchen cat who needles after their fat pelts, sly and silent. This snake-tailed curse of the larder watches the figures hasten across the cobbled courtyard, throwing

moonlit shadows in their wake. The barn owl sees them as they round the house. She ghosts above on silent wings.

The lord of the manor. He, too, is awake.

A lamp burns in his study as he frets and puzzles, considers and adjusts. He bends over his writing, his handsome whiskers peppered with grey, his brow furrowed. He could be a fortune-teller, the way he's inventing the future, coaxing and muttering it into being.

The shadows pass outside, crossing the terrace.

Perhaps hearing their footsteps, the lord of the manor looks to the window, but, remarking no change in the night sky, returns to his plans.

The shadows move quickly over the lawn, towards the gate, two with swag slung between them, one following, limping.

The bundle is cradled over the ground. The child feels the grass whip under her canvas hammock. She feels the night air on her face and takes a breath of it and lets out a sigh you can't hear.

The sea rocked asleep, now wakes and answers, a refrain of waves and shale-song. The rain in the sky that is yet to fall, answers; a storm gathers. All the rivers and streams and bogs and lakes and fens and puddles and horse troughs and wishing wells wake and answer, adding their voices; faint and rushing, purling and gurgling, muddy and clear.

The child looks up. For the first time she can see the stars!

She smiles at them, and the stars look back at her and shiver.

Then they begin to burn brighter, with renewed fever, in the deep dark ocean of the sky.