Sophie Frank extract from *The Window* for tomorrowsbooks.

The cell was small, twelve feet by twelve. It possessed three windows. In none of the windows was there glass. The window which looked on to the alleyway was curtained by thick black serge into whose heart was cut the shape of the cross. In sunlight the symbol shone gold; in moonlight, silver. The second window looked straight onto the church altar, the third onto a room in which Alice, the maidservant, slept.

There was a squat narrow bed upon which were laid ample blankets. There was a three-legged stool, something like a milking stool. There was a table, just wide enough to lean on, without carving or ornament.

Beneath the table was a pot. On the table was a cup of cow's milk and a crust of bread. There was also a slate candlestick, in which, on this first night, a candle burnt. There was a wedge of ample parchment, two uncut goose quills, a silver penknife, a pot of black ink and a pumice stone.

There was also a small altar, clothed in white, upon which stood the stout black marble cross which Sister Benedicta had given Perpetua ten years previously.

Part One.

I can't see much from my window, nor am I meant to. I can see the head of the sitter. If I stand, the legs. If I crouch, a view from the waist up. The window is a twelve inch square which looks onto a dusty alley sloping down from Ber to King Street. I am a stone's throw from my mother's house. The alleyway was never cobbled.

There's a gully running under the window, down which effluent trickles and sludges into the river. The stench is appalling at six in the morning. It gets better mid-afternoon.

It's a stench which I'm used to. At my mother's house, servants emptied the privy. So too, in my own house. It was only during the Plague that the job fell to the family.

I am beginning to fully understand what the cell offers me. First, peace - a deep, deep silence in which to eke meaning from my visions. Secondly, it returns me to my frail, base mortality – a face that we must all each and very minute be aware of. Being cold – which I am most of the time - recalls the same truth. Being hungry or ill, or just lonely.

Oddly, the stench reminds me of the jasmine Sister Benedicta grew against the Priory's South Wall. What makes the beauty beauteous, Sister Benedicta said, in terms of *scent*, she added – sotto voce – as if scent itself was a sin, was an element called the base note. Every great smell is but a sum of composites, possessing, like the most affecting music – a range of notes both high and low. The best scents – which Sister Benedicta defined as being the fullest and most mature – have pungent whiffs of excrement running through them.

So it is.

I remember the aroma of sweet rose otto, musky frankincense, myrrh, even common lavender. With all these fragrances, it's not a question of there being one smell but many, each suggesting varying degrees of carnality. Thinking of pleasant scents is probably a sin. Maybe Father Joseph would class it so. Already I miss Sister Benedicta. I wish she would come. She made clear this wasn't possible the last time we met. She said, 'The rule is severance. Severance is what Mother Abbess decrees.' Even when I was newly widowed, drowning in loss, living – subsisting - at my mother's house, Sister Benedicta had to fight with her superior to see me.

Severance is the rule, and yet, like so many absolutes, it's hard to keep. Already memories flood my head, images I try to fend off. The first night, I dream of His body on the cross – so vivid, so real that it's hard to work out where my Eben begins and where my Christ ends.

Mother won't keep away. First thing next morning she's rattling at the shutter with a gift of newly cooked bread.

I hurry up from my cross to open the shutters. A thick white fog cloaks the rooftops. A thinner mist hangs in the alleyway. A smell of fallen leaves and damp cold earth wafts in.

"You know I cannot take it, mother. I cannot even touch it."

My mother rolls her eyes. She smiles. The small bun – a perfectly risen, exact sphere made from the costliest white flour and fresh from the baker's oven – sits on her skirt, tempting.

"Already we're missing you," she says, drawing a finger over the roll's shiny egg glaze, sniffing its warm yeasty smell. "Won't you? It tastes very good!"

Can I be missed so soon? I peer through the curtain, or rather, the hole that the cross makes within the curtain. My mother's pale oval face is fully visible; it crowds my field of vision, blocking out the row of buildings behind. In the raw morning light, I notice how mother's cheeks are flecked with rust coloured blemishes larger than freckles. Her irises are brown as ever but the cornea is marked by a delta of pink veins. Two or three wiry grey hairs protrude from otherwise black eyebrows. The skin surrounding her eyes is hatched with fine lines; that of her lower, hollow cheeks dry and papery. She has endured almost two score years and ten.

"Zillah and Martha spent all last night weeping. None of us slept a wink," my mother says, turning the bun round and round in the palm of her hand. When she receives no answer, she stares at the thatched roof above my cell, then repeats, "Hannah and Martha spent all night weeping. None of us slept a wink."

"I heard you the first time, mother," I reply. I am amazed at my steady tone. My chest has tightened and my heart throbs irregularly, in disquieting bursts.

"Yet it seems you are not listening."

"I am."

A woodpigeon coos. Mother sniffs. All at once, her sniffs become tears and next thing she is blinking furiously and wiping her wet cheeks with her sleeve. I reach out, am

about to push through the curtain to touch her. Just in time, I stop. Remember where I am. Rein my arm in. Slide both hands under my bottom so neither stray. The restraint hurts: it is the first great hurt I suffer inside my cell.

"Why did you do it? Have you nothing to say? Have you lost your voice?"

"If anything, I am finding a new voice," I reply.

Men and women walk past. To me it is their midriffs that are predominantly visible, not their heads. A donkey trundles past - four bulbous knees, four muddied fetlocks. A woman wanders up to my window. She pushes in front of mother, leans down, sticks her face up to the cut-out cross. Her mouth opens. Yellow teeth and a tongue furred white.

"My turn next, if you will!" she says.

Mother snorts. The woman shuffles a few feet back, then hovers at mother's shoulders intrusively, arms folded. Mother's lost for words. Finally, the woman chimes across mother's muffled sniffs, "If no one's going to talk, can I?"

Mother nods. Stands. "Think on my misery," she mutters, as she turns towards King Street.

"None is as bad as mine, fancy lady," the visitor mutters, taking her seat.

Father Joseph warned me that I would be overly popular in my first weeks. All day, visitors come and go, eager to try me out for counsel. One asks is it truly wicked to eat an egg on Friday when there is no other food to be had? Another wants to know how severe a transgression is it to forget to cross oneself before the altar? The majority bring rather more significant requests, wanting me to pray for sick relatives, or the recently deceased.

Mid-morning, a mother comes, flanked by two daughters. She is barely able to stand for raw grief. Her son died only hours previously in an accident at the forge. Flames licked his back, setting light to his hair and clothes. By the time the blacksmith heard the boy's screams and came running into the stone room, the child was motionless on the ground.

I am in no doubt that the boy will now be rising heavenwards, playfully as a swallow soars blue skies on a summer evening. I could say this out loud. Afraid of being judged flippant, I suggest something safer; that we share the Rosary.

The mother cries and sniffs through the first decades of the prayer beads. I can see that she is taking nothing in, nothing in at all. Such is the power of the rosary that it often it does not matter that we listen or not; it only matters that the words somehow flow over us, cleanse us. By the forth decade, the woman has calmed enough to hear me. By the fifth, she joins in with a mumble and by the seventh, she speaks quite clearly. When she leaves, she walks unaided. Of course, I do not expect her tranquillity to endure, but at least she has experienced a few blissful moments of serenity, and she might trust that they will visit her again.

On the first day, there is another difficult visitor – an ailing, elderly gentleman wracked with fear at dying, accompanied by his son. When he first takes the stool, the old man's eyes yawn wide as leather on a tanner's stretcher. Once he settles, he peers at the curtain, squinting for focus.

I could assault him with the need for full repentance. I could augment his enquiry over whether or not he has purchased an indulgence.

I suggest we share the Pater Noster.

We repeat it ten, fifteen times. Each time, the muscles around his eyes relax a tiny measure. His jowls loosen.

Despite the mother's agony and the dying man's dread; despite my feelings that somehow good was ministered through me; despite my belief that I led each visitor to a measure of peace previously elusive; despite, in short, my feelings of confidence in my new role, when the day ends I am beset by my own fallibility. When I try to sleep, it is my mother's visit that haunts me, sticking in my flesh, thornlike.

A woman comes to the window, catching me in a sated frame of mind. She says, “You are so tranquil that it seems you are barely human”. She does not say this because she wants me to feel poorly. She is making an observation: she is awe of who she thinks I am. Or who I have turned into – a person unbound by earthly troubles.

I tell her I have come a long way and that in my life I have known such aches, loss and suffering as to think I’d surely die from them. Now, that pain has lifted.

“Lifted? For ever?”

“I hope so. It is possible.”

The woman chews her lip - unconvinced, but not daring to voice her reservation. Me too, I am unconvinced. Although I hope I have come to a still point (my life at last a finely wrought tapestry, the yarn tightly knotted and each stitch in place) it is surely possible that the threads will only hold tight for so long before the unravelling begins and I need start again.

I’m now called Anne, but for years I was Perpetua.

I was called Perpetua because sin is unceasing, joy eternal and life everlasting. I was also named Perpetua after the Saint – a young, married mother of noble birth, thrown to the ravages of rabid cow, bear, boar and leopard in the amphitheatre of Carthage alongside her servant Felicity. Family history had it that my father, Peter, chose the name because he liked the way its four syllables skipped off the tongue in a quick babble, fitting my smiling, giggling disposition.

The city in which I was born and in which I have lived all my life is the second largest in England. My father was its second wealthiest merchant. From the years 1343-1349 the river that links this outpost of England to a wider continental world flooded only once and rarely silted. The port flourished and its surrounding plains offered lush grazing and bore good yields. They were easy years. At harvest, the docks were busy with merchants selling not only wool and worsted for which the city is famous, but also mountains of corn, wheat, barley, onions and apples.

There was plenty to eat and plenty to drink and in most families, plenty of children. My mother, Susannah, bore four in four years. Only one, the lone boy, failed to reach his first birthday. My sisters are I were farmed out to suckling nurses, women who became more a mother to us than our own. My wet nurse's husband was a farrier. He worked in a room in which I was forbidden to set foot. I can still hear the hiss and sizzle of hot iron dropped into the water and the smell of freshly moulded metal which wafted from behind the closed door. I was two and a half years old and fully weaned when I was returned home. My parents were strangers. Mother still bemoans the time it took me to settle compared to my sisters who, subjected to an identical separation, settled within weeks. They found it easy to replace wet nurse with mother.

My father complained that women surrounded him, though secretly he enjoyed the benefits of being a single male in a hive of tending females.

We lived in King Street. My father brought the house from a butcher. A butcher did not need proximity to the river as cloth merchants did, father argued. The man would do better to move over to Ber Street, closer to the cattle market. The butcher nodded moderately, then, when he saw the quantity of silver groats my father offered him, enthusiastically.

My father extended the original house. Soon it was large enough to hold guild meetings and civic feasts. He added an upstairs solar in which my mother and sisters sewed, played music and slept. We had two servants and one cook, more if an occasion demanded. They lived in a small room next to the kitchen. Beneath the hall lay an arched, fireproofed undercroft. Here my father stored his fabrics, dried fruits and wines.

The walls of the ground floor were built from stone. Those of the jettied second storey were made from timber uprights filled with layers of wattle and daub. The roof was tiled, not thatched. The home was built around a central courtyard, the domain of the family sow. Each day we fed her any leftover scraps. Every November, Rebecca, the family cook, ceremoniously slit her pink neck. Zillah caught the blood in a silver tankard which she later tipped into an offal pie. The pig gave us one vast feast, and when the minced flesh was

made into tarts, many lesser ones. My parents always bickered over who could spoon out the succulent brains. Both knew that my mother would win.

In the courtyard there were too many ginger, white, tabby, black and silver cats to count. They belonged to no one in particular and scavenged from every kitchen in the neighbourhood. There was a hencoop, in front of which cats sat all day long. At night, when we opened the hall door we were met by a chorus of begging meows, a line of flashing green eyes, and the sow's low grunt.

Behind the house was the orchard which, were it not for my father's wharf, would have run right down to the riverbank. There were figs, apples, plums and damsons. Cherries and pears flourished. In better summers, apricots and green grapes clung to the south wall. There were strawberries and gooseberries. A rope hung from the apple tree: the grass beneath made soft landing.

In summer, spring and autumn the sun shone continually. In winter there was snow which, like the sun, dazzled day-in, day-out. Sometimes it must have rained. I don't remember it.