

Five Ways Jane Austen Never Died by Samantha Henderson

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(1)

“Fly! It’s beautiful, Fly!”

Captain Frank Austen smiled at his sister, for she was beaming at him and paid the little statue in her hand no mind at all.

“You might look at it at least, Jane,” he teased. “It cost me a pretty penny in the Shanghai marketplace.”

“Oh—of course—yes...” She looked at the intricately carved figure and smiled. It was a year and more since Frank had sailed to the South Seas, and his white teeth in his sunburned face were strange and wonderful to her.

But what a monstrosity he brought her! She laughed with amused horror and turned it over in her palm.

It was carved from a jet-black stone that seemed to swallow the light from the wide, sunny window, leaving nothing but a void in a convoluted knot of tentacles. It was cold, colder than stone should be in a woman’s warm hand, and it gave her a strange feeling, like the memory of a toothache or the lingering weakness of a fever.

“What a dreadful creature, Fly,” she laughed, holding the statuette closer to her face. “Is that what an octopus looks like?”

“A little, although I understand it’s supposed to be some heathen god. Villainous fellow it was who sold it to me, darker than a Chinaman. A trader from an island to the South, I imagine. Gave my steward the vapors, at any rate. He’s from the West Indies, a superstitious boy, and he said that the thing was cursed and would bring bad luck to the owner. I had to hide it away in my trunk in the end, and tell him I’d thrown it in the sea. You’re not afraid, are you, Jane?” He grinned down at her.

“Never, Fly! Although Cassandra will make me cover it over before she’ll sleep in the same room.”

And Cassandra did, and Jane swathed the statue with her pelisse, for she would have her brother’s gift near her, although she was afraid of it, a little, almost a pleasurable thrill of fear, like the moment after a nearby lightning strike. And so that first night, and the second, and the third, when she had sunk into the little death of sleep, the long, smoky whips of darkness coiled from underneath the carving’s shroud, spiraled across the room to where Jane lay, insinuated themselves gently up

her nostrils and down her throat, and began their work.

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(2)

I buck out of the timestream, recover, and bend over, retching air. That's why you don't eat for twenty-four hours before you make a jump, and a purge or two's not a bad idea, either. I learned that the hard way.

When I can straighten up, I back against the damp plaster wall (the walls at Chawton were always damp, though Edward never believed it) and wait, listening. In the late summer afternoon, heavy with heat, the ticking of the clock in the study sounds loud and portentous as a drumbeat. Scant golden light lies sluggishly against the drapes on the other end of the hallway.

Cassandra is away, visiting our brother and sister and their innumerable brood. My mother is nursing a migraine with her feet up on the best sofa in the parlor.

And Jane is coming up the stairs.

I draw my modified Glock and stand, waiting in the shadows.

I've practiced this, over and over, in my mind and on simscreens. But a little flutter starts in my gut, below the sternum-point of the carapaced interface.

I swivel out the moment she tops the flight, practice making the movement smooth, face her, left hand cupping the right, elbows bent to take the shock. The Glock points straight at her breastbone. I have to be careful not to aim too high, because she's not as tall as the others. She's exactly my height.

Of course she is.

A round face, with soft brown curls surrounding it, and a white cap topping all. She sees me and her mouth makes a little "o" of pure astonishment.

Does she recognize me? My face is leaner, the curls cropped short. In the bodysuit I probably don't even look like a woman.

She looks at the gun and blushes that apple red, with no blending to it, no art. I feel the hot blood in my own cheeks, twinning hers.

I want to explain why. How the temporal seam has ruptured, how she must not obey the Prince Regent's summons. Why she mustn't meet John Ashe. Why she can't write *Between Friends*. How this is better than the cruel progress of

Addison's Disease.

But the training takes over and I squeeze the trigger and the beam I can't see strikes her, dead beneath the tiny bow on the high Empress Josephine waistline. She looks down, puzzled. It will take a few seconds for the internal disruption to be complete.

She looks at me and frowns, and the butterfly flutter becomes worse. I can't help it: I look down at myself in turn. A hole has formed where my stomach ought to be, wavering wetly at the edges, growing larger by the second. If I bent over I could see the carpet through the gap in my midriff.

I look back at Jane. Soon my lungs will be gone.

"The fu..."

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(3)

"Water, Cassandra. Is there no more water?" Jane's face was red and white and every wrong color, and Cassandra held a scrap of linen soaked with warm water to her lips. Jane swallowed painfully and groaned.

"More linens," said the surgeon, laboring between her sister's spraddled legs. "Clean ones, as large as possible." Whether he spoke to her or the midwife was unclear, but Mrs. Bowdin flashed Cassandra an eloquent look. She was holding Jane's leg, bare and terribly pale, out of the surgeon's way.

"I shall return soon," Cassandra whispered in her sister's ear. Jane blinked at her, uncomprehending. Cassandra moved to gather the clothes at Mr. Akins' feet, not daring to glance into the terrible chamber that was her sister's body. The white clothes were stained, some light pink from the water's first breaking, others clotted black.

They smelled, too, like dying flowers in a jar.

Cassandra shouldered the heavy oak door open. A glance showed her the surgeon, hands half plunged into Jane's body, while Mrs. Bowdin pressed the leg up, almost to her ear.

"You must push now, Mrs. Bigg-Wither," said the surgeon, hatefully, impossibly calm. "You must bear down hard."

Turning from the sight she let the door snick shut behind her. And there he was, big and clumsy. Harris Bigg-Wither, every inch the concerned husband.

You've killed my sister, thought Cassandra, with a clear, illuminating hatred. *Too old to have a first child, and delicate.* She could kill him, Mr. Harris Bigg-Wither with his money and respectability and his large, prosperous stomach. *I should have made her leave Manydowns that very night, after he proposed. I knew he disgusted her. I knew she accepted him in a fit of despair. It would have passed in time.*

“How does Jane?” he said, *sotto voce* and composed. “She screamed that once. But now she’s so quiet.”

Then he saw the clothes in her arms and blanched. Cassandra found that satisfying, almost as good as striking him across the face.

“It comes hard,” she said, forcing her voice to be gentle. “And my sister is not built for childbirth.”

She brushed past him and hurried down the hall, feeling his cow-like gaze against her back. When she returned with clean linens he was gone.

She opened the door and almost dropped her burden. A white thing twisted in Mr. Akins’ hands, looking like a skinned rabbit. A thick blue cord connected it to the space between Jane’s legs. Everywhere the bright copper smell of blood.

As she watched the small pink mouth opened, soundless at first, and then a tiny cry.

Cassandra had almost forgotten there was a baby inside her sister.

Deftly the midwife took the child. The surgeon held out his hand, and Cassandra instinctively hurried to him, giving him a thick wadded cloth. He pushed it between Jane’s legs.

Jane’s face had lost all color, save where a thin trickle of blood oozed from a bitten lip. When Cassandra came to her side she opened her eyes, huge and hazel in that pale face, and smiled. Mr. Akins finished his work between her legs and stood beside Cassandra, looking at Jane appraisingly. His hands were streaked with blood; he held them shoulder height.

“She seems better,” Cassandra said to the surgeon, in a hoarse whisper. She stroked Jane’s forehead: she’d stopped perspiring, and her skin was cool to the touch.

“She’s dying,” said Mr. Akins. “I’m sorry, Miss Austen, but the baby was at such an angle ... there was too much damage. She’s lost too much blood.”

He turned away to dip his red hands in the basin by the window. The pallid light of dawn was creeping in. In the corner the baby wailed.

Jane turned her head so Cassandra's hand was cupping her face. She murmured something, for all the world like a sleepy child.

"What is it, Jane?" Cassandra bent close. Jane's breath smelled sweet and sickly.

"The baby," Jane breathed. "Is it a boy or girl?"

Cassandra didn't care.

She'd drown the brat in the nearest puddle if it would bring her sister back.

"A girl," she said, for the sake of saying something. There wasn't much time.

Jane smiled, slyly, as if she had a secret. "A girl," she said. "Emma. Call her Emma."

"Emma." Cassandra nodded, and a hot tear spilled down her cheek. Emma.

Not Cassandra.

She always expected Jane would name a daughter Cassandra.

"A healthy girl, nice and fat," called Mrs. Bowdin from across the room. "Sucking on my finger already."

Jane's smile froze, and her eyes glazed and drooped.

Carefully Cassandra shut the lids.

"I'll tell Mr. Bigg-Wither," she said.

But instead she went to the cradle, where Mrs. Bowdin fussed and the child cried, low and rhythmic.

"We'll have to get a wet nurse from the village," said the midwife, matter-of-factly. "Sadie Purcell will do. Just had twins, and the one of them died, poor mite. I'll see to it."

Cassandra nodded, staring at the child. Wet brown curls were plastered to its scalp.

"Cassandra," she said. Her voice was flat. "Her name is Cassandra."

Mrs. Bowdin let the baby suck on her knuckle. "We'll have you rede up in no time, little Cassandra," she said. "No time at all."

Cassandra smiled.

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(4)

Cassandra called him the Gentleman from Chawton, and thus Mr. Akins came to be known. Six months before he'd taken the old parsonage, claiming to be a retired physician, and employing a husband and wife as housekeeper and man-of-all-work. Speculation raged in the village as to his origins, but he was such a dull man, queer and painfully correct in all his transactions that the menfolk lost interest, then the girls, and soon it was left to spinsters at tea to whisper and conjugate whether he was the natural son of a runaway heiress and a rich Indian nabob, or the product of a secret marriage between an actress and the heir of a royal Duke.

Rich he was, certainly, or at least comfortable, and it was odd therefore that the marriageable maidens of Chawton dismissed him so soon. Perhaps it was because he showed little interest in them himself.

Because he was comfortable, and Edward Austen was rich, they had little of substance to talk about and therefore became friends. Because they became friends, Edward naturally took him to visit his mother and sisters in the comfortable cottage in which he had installed them. Because he had been introduced, he came to visit the Austen sisters almost daily.

Because she was clever, and sad, Jane knew that she was his object.

Not in matrimony, although Cassandra hinted as much. And he did not appeal to her: so tall, with limbs that jointed oddly beneath his garments and strange, hairless hands. Nevertheless he asked nothing better than to call upon her and sit in the front room, unnaturally upright on a low-back chair while she sat first properly, then with her feet up as she grew used to him and the pain and fatigue grew worse. He spoke little, and looked much, and soon she bathed in the warmth of his regard like a patient in the waters of Bath.

Two things became clear. He saw her not as a woman, but a curiosity. And he knew about her writing.

Many knew: her family; some friends; the Regent's physician. But it was strange that a stranger would seek her out and would betray by small slips of conversation that he knew the characters that lived in her books better than she did herself.

He always carried a small black portmanteau, which rested beside his chair when he visited: a remnant, perhaps, of his former career. He inquired softly after her illness, and sometimes made a motion towards the bag, as if he would pick it up, but never did so.

This day was bad. The very blood in her veins ached, and she felt that hateful blush come and go and hotly come again. She could not stir from her arrangement of chairs.

But Mr. Akins called, and would not go, and must be seen. Indeed, there was an odd comfort in his familiar silence. He sat a long time, observing her quietly. So quiet was he that once she caught herself sleeping; between two blinks she lost herself and woke to find the sun three panes away from where it had been a second before. He had not moved.

“It had been wondered...”

He paused and cleared his throat.

“We have wondered why it was, at the height of your illness, that you did not take the sofa but instead preferred the chairs. Some say it was because you considered the sofa your mother’s peculiar domain. I wonder if that is true.” Although he was still, too still, his voice was agitated.

“Bubbles and gates,” he murmured under his breath. “Bubbles and gates, and they pop and close. It must be done now, if at all.”

She felt her eyes open wide, and that beat in her chest that sometimes turned painful.

She knew she should be terrified.

“You are a mystery, Miss Jane, a mystery I thought I could solve. But having opened the box, I find more boxes.”

A little silver ball appeared in his hands, filigreed and folded upon itself, like a shoe-rose. He stretched it into a thread, tight between his fingers, and gave it a little shake. Green light came from it. He studied it as he might a sheaf of paper.

“Addison’s seemed most likely,” he continued, in that calm, impossible manner. “The weakness, the discoloration of the face. The back and abdominal pain at the end. A failure of the adrenal glands. A craving for salt. Kennedy had it. Now the symptoms are managed with monthly treatments. We could contrive a series of drops, if you’d cooperate.”

She looked at his eyes as he said this, knowing his *now* was not her *now*.

“Next possibility: breast cancer. More difficult. A multi-shot would take care of it but it’s tricky. I’d need an assistant. And it’s complicated, constructing an identity, even one you will discard. But still, it could be done.

“There were other things it could be. I was prepared. But not for this.”

“What?” she managed, between dry lips.

He brought his hands together, and the green light blinked out.

“Everybody was wrong. It is not you who is diseased, Miss Jane. You are the symptom of another’s ailment.”

A pause, while she looked at his bag.

“Is it not true?”

She didn’t answer. He sighed and continued.

“A recent discovery in my time. A tropical disease with rare recurrence in Europe or England, at least in this decade. There was an outbreak, a panic of sorts, in the last century. And one of your family, at least, has been exposed to a tropical vector.”

She was beginning to hate him.

“I’ve been studying her closely, your sister. And I can’t help but wonder about her fiance. A tragic character who died in the tropics, intent on making his fortune and bearing her off in triumph. But maybe he didn’t die there. Maybe he came back.”

He leaned forward, and now he was completely strange to her and her time.

“He came back and infected Cassandra before he died, correct? And in her it mutated, as it sometimes does, and she is able to live, although certain foods are an anathema to her, and she avoids strong sunlight. But she is only able to live by battenning off you.”

Quickly he grasped her wrist, needlessly quick, because she could never have avoided him. Gently and clinically he pulled back the loose sleeves she had taken to wearing, exposing the crook of her elbow.

He sucked the breath in through his teeth. Two deep punctures, dark and half-healed, in the pale flesh.

He let her go, retreated into his chair, and became almost ordinary again.

“You have a 30 percent chance of contracting the disease,” he said. “But you didn’t. You remained her source until the end.”

“Is there a cure?” she said, hopeful although she still hated him.

“No,” he said. “Sometimes cravings and secondary symptoms degenerate into madness and death. Sometimes the virus retreats into the tissues, remaining dormant for decades.

“But you will die. You did die. The only way to save you is to eliminate Cassandra.”

“No,” she whispered, and the beat in her chest did become painful now. “No, you cannot.”

“But I must,” he said, as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world, “or else she will kill you. Within the year, in fact.”

“I cannot lose Cassandra,” she said. “If you know everything about me, if you have made me your study, you know she is everything to me: mother, sister, child.”

“What could you create if you live? By now you have begun *Between Friends*. You will never finish it. But you could.”

For a painful beat she was tempted. Then she recoiled in disgust at her own sensations. “I would die a thousand times for Cassandra, Mr. Akins,” she said, giving him back his own false name. “And you will kill me a thousand times more if you take her.”

His face twisted in rage, so different from the bland expression he continually cultivated it was astonishing. In the hallway someone was passing. His fists clenched and he half-rose.

“No,” she said. He looked at her, panting as if he had run a race. Slowly his breathing slowed, and his composure returned. The footsteps in the hall faded.

The Gentleman from Chawton rose.

“I take my leave of you then, Miss Jane,” he said, with a bow that was, like the rest of him, a little wrong.

She held her breath as he left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

There was a soft clatter, china chinking together, perhaps. She heard him murmur politely to her sister. She heard Cassandra reply.

Then silence.

The front door opened and shut.

Another long, awful moment of silence, and then another soft clatter as Cassandra bumped into the hall table. She was always doing that.

The door opened and Cassandra entered, skirting the sofa and taking the other chair: gathering the knitting that waited there.

“I’ve sent for tea, Jane.” Her yellowish teeth looked very sharp today, and her cheeks were sunken.

Jane closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“You must keep up your strength.”

Jane felt a frisson only half of fear. “I know, Cassandra.”

Although the marks at the joint of her elbow were covered again she pulled her sleeve further down. It ached deep inside.

“A pleasant man, that Mr. Akins,” said Cassandra. “I do think he’s taken with you.”

“He won’t be back again,” said Jane.

Cassandra paused in her knitting, then resumed. Her needles clicked. Click. Click. Like the tick of a giant clock.

“What a shame,” said Cassandra, and her eyes were hungry, hungry, hungry.

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(5)

Fire exploded in the top spars, and Captain Charles Austen ducked as deadly fragments of Norfolk pine struck the deck. A warmth on his cheek told him one had gashed his face, but he felt nothing between the noise of battle and the smell of saltwater and gunpowder.

The mainsail lay half on deck, half trailing down the side. The crippled ship could not evade the French first rate, and their sole chance lay in fighting off the

boarders. The *Charmant*'s side was firmly bound to their own with a web of ropes and a phalanx of grappling poles.

Even now Bowdin hacked at the thick wood at the base of a hook, and then at the French sailor who was attempting to board. The boarder grinned, showing strong brown teeth, and raised his cutlass. Over Bowdin's shoulder Charles took careful aim and fired into the Frenchman's face. With a shriek he fell flailing into the water below.

The gunshot wouldn't kill him, but the ships grinding together certainly would.

Bowdin looked his thanks and splintered the pole apart. By now the French were swarming over the sides like ants up a honey-tree.

Akins, the bosun's boy, was staring at the *Charmant* and the French sailors, his eyes wide. He'd seen battle several times in his 9-year old life, but never so close, never so dangerous.

"Below, Akins!" Charles ordered. Akins flashed him a look.

"Find the surgeon and get a count of men down." The boy nodded and scrambled belowships. Charles had no use for the information, but the boy would resent being told to hide away for his own safety.

His men and the remaining lobster-coated marines were holding the line, but they couldn't much longer. Grappled as she was, the *Charmant* could sink the *Viper* with a cannonade to her exposed flank. It was odd she hadn't done so.

He thought he knew why.

First Lieutenant Aubry was dead. It went against the Captain's every instinct to leave the deck mid-battle.

"Bowdin!" he bellowed, in a voice accustomed to be heard over the worst Cape gale. "See that they hold for five minutes more!"

Bowdin nodded grimly.

His quarters had been disassembled for the guns, but the *Charmant*'s second volley had made them useless. Glimpses of blue, powder-tinged sky and brown-green sea showed through the fissures.

His sister, the younger Miss Austen, stood calmly at his little dispatch-table. A small, flat box was open before her; she was carefully sorting through the papers within.

“Bad luck, Charlie,” she said, without looking up. “Or fate, perhaps. They did not appear by chance.”

“We cannot hold, Jane,” he said. “They will soon overwhelm us.”

“You must surrender, my dear,” she said. “They will not relent.”

She caught the expression on his face and smiled. “They will kill all your men, one by one, to capture me. I could not countenance such a fine tenor as Bowdin to die on my account.”

She selected three papers, covered and cross-hatched with fine writing. Methodically she tore one to pieces and crumpled the fragments together.

“The rest shall serve as an obvious bluff, and this one less so.” Crouching near the joint between the deck and the siding she stuffed the papers between. “And these two...” she returned to Charles’ side, looking at the two remaining papers and frowning, for all the world as if they were in the sitting room at Steventon, and she parsing out a ball scene for *Between Friends*. “These must not fall into the Monster’s hands, nor his spymaster’s, not on any account.” She began to tear them into long strips. “Nor,” she added, as if it were the most casual thing in the world, “must I.”

She placed a strip in her mouth and chewed, methodically. If the ink was bitter she did not say.

She swallowed the pulped mass and smiled. “‘Twould go down better with a glass of wine, but no matter.”

“I should have refused to take you on board,” he burst out, unable to contain himself. “It was a mad scheme, to take you to the French coast. Wickham has betrayed you.”

“No. We had a fighting chance. And you had no choice, brother. Come now, were you to defy Admiralty orders you would be court-martialed at best. William Wickham has his reasons.”

She had not stopped chewing and swallowing the papers, chewing and swallowing. He watched with a morbid fascination.

Then, topsides, pistol shots and men shouting. Jane wiped the corner of her mouth.

“Surrender the *Viper*, Charlie,” she said, paling slightly. “I have all the means I need.” She pulled a tiny crystal bottle from her bodice. It hung cunningly on the chain she always wore, the chain he had brought her, and the amber cross, so long

ago.

He froze in horror as she unstopped the bottle.

“Go,” she whispered. “I cannot do it while you look at me so.”

So he turned and clambered to the deck, shouting defiance, imprecations, words of surrender, words he did not know, anything to drown the sound of the tiny thump of something hitting the floor in the cabin below.