

Karen Joy Fowler: Standing Room Only
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Story

On Good Friday 1865, Washington, DC, was crowded with tourists and revelers. Even Willard's, which claimed to be the largest hotel in the country, with room for 1200 guests, had been booked to capacity. Its lobbies and sitting rooms were hot with bodies. Gaslight hissed from golden chandeliers, spilled over the doormen's uniforms of black and maroon. Many of the revelers were women. In 1865, women were admired for their stoutness and went anywhere they could fit their hoop skirts. The women at Willard's wore garishly colored dresses with enormous skirts and resembled great inverted tulips. The men were in swallowtail coats.

Outside it was almost spring. The forsythia bloomed, dusting the city with yellow. Weeds leapt up in the public parks; the roads melted to mud. Pigs roamed like dogs about the city, and dead cats by the dozens floated in the sewers and perfumed the rooms of the White House itself.

The Metropolitan Hotel contained an especially rowdy group of celebrants from Baltimore, who passed the night of April 13 toasting everything under the sun. They resurrected on the morning of the 14th, pale and spent, surrounded by broken glass and sporting bruises they couldn't remember getting.

It was the last day of Lent. The war was officially over, except for Joseph Johnston's Confederate army and some action out west. The citizens of Washington, DC, still began each morning reading the daily death list. If anything, this task had taken on an added urgency. To lose someone you loved now, with the rest of the city madly, if grimly, celebrating, would be unendurable.

The guests in Mary Surratt's boarding house began the day with a breakfast of steak, eggs and ham, oysters, grits and whiskey. Mary's seventeen-year old

daughter, Anna, was in love with John Wilkes Booth. She had a picture of him hidden in the sitting room, behind a lithograph entitled "Morning, Noon, and Night." She helped her mother clear the table and she noticed with a sharp and unreasonable disapproval that one of the two new boarders, one of the men who only last night had been given a room, was staring at her mother.

Mary Surratt was neither a pretty woman, nor a clever one, nor was she young. Anna was too much of a romantic, too star- and stage-struck, to approve. It was one thing to lie awake at night in her attic bedroom, thinking of JW. It was another to imagine her mother playing any part in such feelings.

Anna's brother John once told her that five years ago a woman named Henrietta Irving had tried to stab Booth with a knife. Failing, she'd thrust the blade into her own chest instead. He seemed to be under the impression that this story would bring Anna to her senses. It had, as anyone could have predicted, the opposite effect. Anna had also heard rumors that Booth kept a woman in a house of prostitution near the White House. And once she had seen a piece of paper on which Booth had been composing a poem. You could make out the final version:

Now in this hour that we part,

I will ask to be forgotten never

But, in thy pure and guileless heart,

Consider me thy friend dear Eva.

Anna would sit in the parlor while her mother dozed and pretend she was the first of these women, and if she tired of that, she would sometimes dare to pretend she was the second, but most often she liked to imagine herself the third.

Flirtations were common and serious, and the women in Washington worked hard at them. A war in the distance always provides a rich context of desperation, while at the same time granting women a bit of extra freedom. They might quite enjoy it, if the price they paid were anything but their sons.

The new men had hardly touched their food,

cutting away the fatty parts of the meat and leaving them in a glistening greasy wasteful pile. They'd finished the whiskey, but made faces while they drank. Anna had resented the compliment of their eyes and, paradoxically, now resented the insult of their plates. Her mother set a good table.

In fact, Anna did not like them and hoped they would not be staying. She had often seen men outside the Surratt boarding house lately, men who busied themselves in unpersuasive activities when she passed them. She connected these new men to those, and she was perspicacious enough to blame their boarder Louis Wiechman for the lot of them, without ever knowing the extent to which she was right. She had lived for the past year in a Confederate household in the heart of Washington. Everyone around her had secrets. She had grown quite used to this.

Wiechman was a permanent guest at the Surratt boarding house. He was a fat, friendly man who worked in the office of the Commissary General of Prisons and shared John Surratt's bedroom. Secrets were what Wiechman traded in. He provided John, who was a courier for the Confederacy, with substance for his covert messages south. But then Wiechman had also, on a whim, sometime in March, told the clerks in the office that a Secesh plot was being hatched against the president in the very house where he roomed.

It created more interest than he had anticipated. He was called into the office of Captain McDavitt and interviewed at length. As a result, the Surratt boarding house was under surveillance from March through April, although it is an odd fact that no records of the surveillance or the interview could be found later.

Anna would surely have enjoyed knowing this. She liked attention as much as most young girls. And this was the backdrop of a romance. Instead, all she could see was that something was up and that her pious, simple mother was part of it.

The new guest, the one who talked the most, spoke with a strange lisp and Anna didn't like this either. She stepped smoothly between the men to pick up their plates. She used the excuse of a letter

from her brother to go out directly after breakfast. "Mama," she said. "I'll just take John's letter to poor Miss Ward."

Just as her brother enjoyed discouraging her own romantic inclinations, she made it her business to discourage the affections of Miss Ward with regard to him. Calling on Miss Ward with the letter would look like a kindness, but it would make the point that Miss Ward had not gotten a letter herself.

Besides, Booth was in town. If Anna was outside, she might see him again.

The thirteenth had been beautiful, but the weather on the fourteenth was equal parts mud and wind. The wind blew bits of Anna's hair loose and tangled them up with the fringe of her shawl. Around the Treasury Building she stopped to watch a carriage sunk in the mud all the way up to the axle. The horses, a matched pair of blacks, were rescued first. Then planks were laid across the top of the mud for the occupants. They debarked, a man and a woman, the woman unfashionably thin and laughing giddily as with every unsteady step her hoop swung and unbalanced her, first this way and then that. She clutched the man's arm and screamed when a pig burrowed past her, then laughed again at even higher pitch. The man stumbled into the mire when she grabbed him, and this made her laugh, too. The man's clothing was very fine, although now quite speckled with mud. A crowd gathered to watch the woman—the attention made her helpless with laughter.

The war had ended, Anna thought, and everyone had gone simultaneously mad. She was not the only one to think so. It was the subject of newspaper editorials, of barroom speeches. "The city is disorderly with men who are celebrating too hilariously," the president's day guard, William Crook, had written just yesterday. The sun came out, but only in a perfunctory, pale fashion.

Her visit to Miss Ward was spoiled by the fact that John had sent a letter there as well. Miss Ward obviously enjoyed telling Anna so. She was very near-sighted and she held the letter right up to her eyes to read it. John had recently fled to Canada. With the war over, there was every reason to expect he would come home, even if

neither letter said so.

There was more news, and Miss Ward preened while she delivered it. "Bessie Hale is being taken to Spain. Much against her will," Miss Ward said. Bessie was the daughter of ex-senator John P. Hale. Her father hoped that a change of scenery would help pretty Miss Bessie conquer her infatuation for John Wilkes Booth. Miss Ward, whom no one including Anna's brother thought was pretty, was laughing at her. "Mr. Hale does not want an actor in the family," Miss Ward said, and Anna regretted the generous impulse that had sent her all the way across town on such a gloomy day.

"Wilkes Booth is back in Washington," Miss Ward finished, and Anna was at least able to say that she knew this, he had called on them only yesterday. She left the Wards with the barest of good-byes.

Louis Wiechman passed her on the street, stopping for a courteous greeting, although they had just seen each other at breakfast. It was now about ten a.m. Wiechman was on his way to church. Among the many secrets he knew was Anna's. "I saw John Wilkes Booth in the barbershop this morning," he told her. "With a crowd watching his every move."

Anna raised her head. "Mr. Booth is a famous thespian. Naturally people admire him."

She flattered herself that she knew JW a little better than these idolaters did. The last time her brother had brought Booth home, he'd followed Anna out to the kitchen. She'd had her back to the door, washing the plates. Suddenly she could feel that he was there. How could she have known that? The back of her neck grew hot, and when she turned, sure enough, there he was, leaning against the doorjamb, studying his nails.

"Do you believe our fates are already written?" Booth asked her. He stepped into the kitchen. "I had my palm read once by a gypsy. She said I would come to a bad end. She said it was the worst palm she had ever seen." He held his hand out for her to take. "She said she wished she hadn't even seen it," he whispered, and then he drew back quickly as her mother entered, before she could bend over the hand

herself, reassure him with a different reading, before she could even touch him.

"JW isn't satisfied with acting," her brother had told her once. "He yearns for greatness on the stage of history," and if her mother hadn't interrupted, if Anna had had two seconds to herself with him, this is the reading she would have done. She would have promised him greatness.

"Mr. Booth was on his way to Ford's Theatre to pick up his mail," Wiechman said with a wink. It was an ambiguous wink. It might have meant only that Wiechman remembered what a first love was like. It might have suggested he knew the use she would make of such information.

Two regiments were returning to Washington from Virginia. They were out of step and out of breath, covered with dust. Anna drew a handkerchief from her sleeve and waved it at them. Other women were doing the same. A crowd gathered. A vendor came through the crowd, selling oysters. A man in a tight-fitting coat stopped him. He had a disreputable look—a bad haircut with long sideburns. He pulled a handful of coins from one pocket and stared at them stupidly. He was drunk. The vendor had to reach into his hand and pick out what he was owed.

"Filthy place!" the man next to the drunk man said. "I really can't bear the smell. I can't eat. Don't expect me to sleep in that flea-infested hotel another night." He left abruptly, colliding with Anna's arm, forcing her to take a step or two. "Excuse me," he said without stopping, and there was nothing penitent or apologetic in his tone. He didn't even seem to see her.

Since he had forced her to start, Anna continued to walk. She didn't even know she was going to Ford's Theatre until she turned onto Eleventh Street. It was a bad idea, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She began to walk faster.

"No tickets, Miss," James R. Ford told her, before she could open her mouth. She was not the only one there. A small crowd of people stood at the theater door. "Absolutely sold out. It's because the President and General Grant will be attending."

James Ford held an American flag in his arms. He raised it. "I'm just decorating the President's box." It was the last night of a lackluster run. He would never have guessed they would sell every seat. He thought Anna's face showed disappointment. He was happy, himself, and it made him kind. "They're rehearsing inside," he told her. "For General Grant! You just go on in for a peek."

He opened the doors and she entered. Three women and a man came with her. Anna had never seen any of the others before, but supposed they were friends of Mr. Ford's. They forced themselves through the doors beside her and then sat next to her in the straight-backed cane chairs just back from the stage.

Laura Keene herself stood in the wings awaiting her entrance. The curtain was pulled back, so that Anna could see her. Her cheeks were round with rouge.

The stage was not deep. Mrs. Mountchessington stood on it with her daughter, Augusta, and Asa Trenchard.

"All I crave is affection," Augusta was saying. She shimmered with insincerity.

Anna repeated the lines to herself. She imagined herself as an actress, married to JW, courted by him daily before an audience of a thousand, in a hundred different towns. They would play the love scenes over and over again, each one as true as the last. She would hardly know where her real and imaginary lives diverged. She didn't suppose there was much money to be made, but even to pretend to be rich seemed like happiness to her.

Augusta was willing to be poor, if she was loved. "Now I've no fortune," Asa said to her in response, "but I'm biling over with affections, which I'm ready to pour out all over you, like apple sass, over roast pork."

The women exited. He was alone on the stage. Anna could see Laura Keene mouthing his line, just as he spoke it. The woman seated next to her surprised her by whispering it aloud as well.

"Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal, you sockdologizing old man-trap," the three of them said.

Anna turned to her seatmate who stared back. Her accent, Anna thought, had been English. "Don't you love theater?" she asked Anna in a whisper. Then her face changed. She was looking at something above Anna's head.

Anna looked, too. Now she understood the woman's expression. John Wilkes Booth was standing in the presidential box, staring down on the actor. Anna rose. Her seatmate caught her arm. She was considerably older than Anna, but not enough so that Anna could entirely dismiss her possible impact on Booth.

"Do you know him?" the woman asked.

"He's a friend of my brother's." Anna had no intention of introducing them. She tried to edge away, but the woman still held her.

"My name is Cassie Streichman."

"Anna Surratt."

There was a quick, sideways movement in the woman's eyes. "Are you related to Mary Surratt?"

"She's my mother." Anna began to feel just a bit of concern. So many people interested in her dull, sad mother. Anna tried to shake loose, and found, to her surprise, that she couldn't. The woman would not let go.

"I've heard of the boarding house," Mrs. Streichman said. It was a courtesy to think of her as a married woman. It was more of a courtesy than she deserved.

Anna looked up at the box again. Booth was already gone. "Let me go," she told Mrs. Streichman, so loudly that Laura Keene herself heard. So forcefully that Mrs. Streichman finally did so.

Anna left the theater. The streets were crowded and she could not see Booth anywhere. Instead, as she stood on the bricks, looking left and then right, Mrs. Streichman caught up with her. "Are you going home? Might we walk along?"

"No. I have errands," Anna said. She walked quickly away. She was cross now, because she had hoped to stay and look for Booth, who must still be close by, but

Mrs. Streichman had made her too uneasy. She looked back once. Mrs. Streichman stood in the little circle of her friends, talking animatedly. She gestured with her hands like an Italian. Anna saw Booth nowhere.

She went back along the streets to St. Patrick's Church, in search of her mother. It was noon and the air was warm in spite of the colorless sun. Inside the church, her mother knelt in the pew and prayed noisily. Anna slipped in beside her.

"This is the moment," her mother whispered. She reached out and took Anna's hand, gripped it tightly enough to hurt. Her mother's eyes brightened with tears. "This is the moment they nailed him to the cross," she said. There was purple cloth over the crucifix. The pallid sunlight flowed into the church through colored glass.

Across town a group of men had gathered in the Kirkwood bar and were entertaining themselves by buying drinks for George Atzerodt. Atzerodt was one of Booth's co-conspirators. His assignment for the day, given to him by Booth, was to kidnap the Vice President. He was already so drunk he couldn't stand. "Would you say that the Vice President is a brave man?" he asked and they laughed at him. He didn't mind being laughed at. It struck him a bit funny himself. "He wouldn't carry a firearm, would he? I mean, why would he?" Atzerodt said. "Are there ever soldiers with him? That nigger who watches him eat. Is he there all the time?"

"Have another drink," they told him, laughing. "On us," and you couldn't get insulted at that.

Anna and her mother returned to the boarding house. Mary Surratt had rented a carriage and was going into the country. "Mr. Wiechman will drive me," she told her daughter. A Mr. Nothey owed her money they desperately needed; Mary Surratt was going to collect it.

But just as she was leaving, Booth appeared. He took her mother's arm, drew her to the parlor. Anna felt her heart stop and then start again, faster. "Mary, I must talk to you," he said to her mother, whispering, intimate. "Mary." He didn't look at Anna at all and didn't

she would speak again until she left the room. She would have stayed outside the door to hear whatever she could, but Louis Wiechman had had the same idea. They exchanged one cross look, and then each left the hallway. Anna went up the stairs to her bedroom.

She knew the moment Booth went. She liked to feel that this was because they had a connection, something unexplainable, something preordained, but in fact she could hear the door. He went without asking to see her. She moved to the small window to watch him leave. He did not stop to glance up. He mounted a black horse, tipped his hat to her mother.

Her mother boarded a hired carriage, leaning on Mr. Wiechman's hand. She held a parcel under her arm. Anna had never seen it before. It was flat and round and wrapped in newspaper. Anna thought it was a gift from Booth. It made her envious.

Later at her mother's trial, Anna would hear that the package had contained a set of field glasses. A man named Lloyd would testify that Mary Surratt had delivered them to him and had also given him instructions from Booth regarding guns. It was the single most damaging evidence against her. At her brother's trial, Lloyd would recant everything but the field glasses. He was, he now said, too drunk at the time to remember what Mrs. Surratt had told him. He had never remembered. The prosecution had compelled his earlier testimony through threats. This revision would come two years after Mary Surratt had been hanged.

Anna stood at the window a long time, pretending that Booth might return with just such a present for her.

John Wilkes Booth passed George Atzerodt on the street at five p.m. Booth was on horseback. He told Atzerodt he had changed his mind about the kidnapping. He now wanted the Vice President killed. At 10:15 or thereabouts. "I've learned that Johnson is a very brave man," Atzerodt told him.

"And you are not," Booth agreed. "But you're in too deep to back out now." He rode away. Booth was carrying in his pocket a letter to the editor of The National Intelligencer. In it, he recounted the reasons for Lincoln's death.

He had signed his own name, but also that of George Atzerodt.

The men who worked with Atzerodt once said he was a man you could insult and he would take no offense. It was the kindest thing they could think of to say. Three men from the Kirkwood bar appeared and took Atzerodt by the arms. "Let's find another bar," they suggested. "We have hours and hours yet before the night is over. Eat, drink. Be merry."

At six p.m. John Wilkes Booth gave the letter to John Matthews, an actor, asking him to deliver it the next day. "I'll be out of town or I would deliver it myself," he explained. A group of Confederate officers marched down Pennsylvania Avenue where John Wilkes Booth could see them. They were unaccompanied; they were turning themselves in. It was the submissiveness of it that struck Booth hardest. "A man can meet his fate or make it," he told Matthews. "A man can rise to the occasion or fall beneath it."

At sunset, a man called Peanut John lit the big glass globe at the entrance to Ford's Theatre. Inside, the presidential box had been decorated with borrowed flags and bunting. The door into the box had been forced some weeks ago in an unrelated incident and could no longer be locked.

It was early evening when Mary Surratt returned home. Her financial affairs were still unsettled; Mr. Nothey had not even shown up at their meeting. She kissed her daughter. "If Mr. Nothey will not pay us what he owes," she said, "I can't think what we will do next. I can't see a way ahead for us. Your brother must come home." She went into the kitchen to oversee the preparations for dinner.

Anna went in to help. Since the afternoon, since the moment Booth had not spoken to her, she had been overcome with unhappiness. It had not lessened a bit in the last hours; she now doubted it ever would. She cut the roast into slices. It bled beneath her knife and she thought of Henrietta Irving's white skin and the red heart beating underneath. She could understand Henrietta Irving perfectly. All I crave is affection, she said to herself, and the honest truth of the sentiment softened her into tears. Perhaps she could survive the rest of her life, if she

played it this way, scene by scene. She held the knife up, watching the blood slide down the blade, and this was dramatic and fit her Shakespearean mood.

She felt a chill and when she turned around one of the new boarders was leaning against the doorjamb, watching her mother. "We're not ready yet," she told him crossly. He'd given her a start. He vanished back into the parlor.

Once again, the new guests hardly ate. Louis Wiechman finished his food with many elegant compliments. His testimony in court would damage Mary Surratt almost as much as Lloyd's. He would say that she seemed uneasy that night, unsettled, although none of the other boarders saw this. After dinner, Mary Surratt went through the house, turning off the kerosene lights one by one.

Anna took a glass of wine and went to sleep immediately. She dreamed deeply, but her heartbreak woke her again only an hour or so later. It stabbed at her lightly from the inside when she breathed. She could see John Wilkes Booth as clearly as if he were in the room with her. "I am the most famous man in America," he said. He held out his hand, beckoned to her.

Downstairs she heard the front door open and close. She rose and looked out the window, just as she had done that afternoon. Many people, far too many people were on the street. They were all walking in the same direction. One of them was George Atzerodt. Hours before he had abandoned his knife, but he too would die, along with Mary Surratt. He had gone too far to back out. He walked with his hands over the shoulders of two dark-haired men. One of them looked up. He was of a race Anna had never seen before. The new boarders joined the crowd. Anna could see them when they passed out from under the porch overhang.

Something big was happening. Something big enough to overwhelm her own hurt feelings. Anna dressed slowly and then quickly and more quickly. I live, she thought, in the most wondrous of times. Here was the proof. She was still unhappy, but she was also excited. She moved quietly past her mother's door.

The flow of people took her down several

blocks. She was taking her last walk again, only backward, like a ribbon uncoiling. She went past St. Patrick's Church, down Eleventh Street. The crowd ended at Ford's Theatre and thickened there. Anna was jostled. To her left, she recognized the woman from the carriage, the laughing woman, though she wasn't laughing now. Someone stepped on Anna's hoop skirt and she heard it snap. Someone struck her in the back of the head with an elbow. "Be quiet!" someone admonished someone else. "We'll miss it." Someone took hold of her arm. It was so crowded, she couldn't even turn to see, but she heard the voice of Cassie Streichman.

"I had tickets and everything," Mrs. Streichman said angrily. "Do you believe that? I can't even get to the door. It's almost ten o'clock and I had tickets."

"Can my group please stay together?" a woman toward the front asked. "Let's not lose anyone," and then she spoke again in a language Anna did not know.

"It didn't seem a good show," Anna said to Mrs. Streichman. "A comedy and not very funny."

Mrs. Streichman twisted into the space next to her. "That was just a rehearsal. The reviews are incredible. And you wouldn't believe the waiting list. Years. Centuries! I'll never have tickets again." She took a deep, calming breath. "At least you're here, dear. That's something I couldn't have expected. That makes it very real. And," she pressed Anna's arm, "if it helps in any way, you must tell yourself later there's nothing you could have done to make it come out differently. Everything that will happen has already happened. It won't be changed."

"Will I get what I want?" Anna asked her. She could not keep the brightness of hope from her voice. Clearly, she was part of something enormous. Something memorable. How many people could say that?

"I don't know what you want," Mrs. Streichman answered. She had an uneasy look. "I didn't get what I wanted," she added. "Even though I had tickets. Good God! People getting what they want! That's not the history of the world, is it?"

"Will everyone please be quiet!" someone

behind Anna said. "Those of us in the back can't hear a thing."

Mrs. Streichman began to cry, which surprised Anna very much. "I'm such a sap," Mrs. Streichman said apologetically. "Things really get to me." She put her arm around Anna.

"All I want," Anna began, but a man to her right hushed her angrily.

"Shut up!" he said. "As if we came all this way to listen to you."

-for John Kessel