



A

**DANGEROUS
BUSINESS**

A NOVEL

**JANE
SMILEY**

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF
A THOUSAND ACRES

ALSO BY JANE SMILEY

Fiction

Perestroika in Paris

The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: Some Luck, Early Warning, Golden Age

Private Life

Ten Days in the Hills

Good Faith

Horse Heaven

The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton

Moo

A Thousand Acres

Ordinary Love and Good Will

The Greenlanders

The Age of Grief

Duplicate Keys

At Paradise Gate

Barn Blind

Nonfiction

The Man Who Invented the Computer

Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel

A Year at the Races

Charles Dickens

Catskill Crafts

For Young Adults

Gee Whiz

Pie in the Sky

True Blue

A Good Horse

The Georges and the Jewels

Riding Lessons

Saddle and Secrets

Taking the Reins

A Dangerous Business



JANE SMILEY



ALFRED A. KNOPF New York

2022

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

Copyright © 2022 by Jane Smiley

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

www.aaknopf.com

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smiley, Jane, author.

Title: A dangerous business / Jane Smiley.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022007952 (print) | LCCN 2022007953 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525520337 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780525520344 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3569.M39 D36 2022 (print) | LCC PS3569.M39 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20220224

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007952>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007953>

Ebook ISBN 9780525520344

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover image: Folio Images/Offset/Shutterstock

Cover design by Gabriele Wilson

ep_prh_6.0_142009288_c0_r0

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Also by Jane Smiley](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

Chapter 21

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

I would like to dedicate this novel to all the copy editors who, over many years, have steered me down the path to an understandable and readable book.

“Between you and me, being a woman is a dangerous business, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

—MRS. PARKS

TWO MONTHS AFTER her husband died on November 12, 1851, Eliza Ripple stopped writing letters to her mother back in Kalamazoo. The reason was both simple and complex. Her mother had written her three letters, all of them lamenting and lamenting and lamenting Peter’s demise, but, apart from the shock (which was perfectly understandable, given that he was shot in a bar fight in Monterey), Eliza was more relieved than upset. They had been married for a little over two years—she was eighteen when her father handed her over to Peter, who was thirty-eight. Eliza had hardly known Peter at the time, as he was new to Kalamazoo, visiting a cousin he had there. He had presented himself as prosperous and well mannered, an experienced traveler with connections and funds. Eliza had offended both of her parents by becoming fond of a boy her age, from Ireland (County Cork), who worked in a lumber mill, though not the one her father owned, was tall and handsome, spoke with a lilt, hadn’t a penny, and was, of all things, Catholic. All of the members of her family, staunch Covenanters, were convinced that the Irish, especially those from Cork and Dublin, were soulless sinners. Her father had pointed to a freed slave who’d run across the Ohio River to Cincinnati, and then made his way north, and said, “Better Josiah Grant than that bog trotter.”

Peter never told her parents he was a Covenanter, or even a Presbyterian, but he had the right name—Cargill—and was happy to be married in their little church in Kalamazoo. And the only thing Eliza could think of while the ceremony was taking place was the sight of Liam Callaghan standing on the corner of Lovell Street and Park Street, the red autumn leaves fluttering above him, staring at their carriage as they drove to the church.

Perhaps her parents assumed that Peter would settle down in Kalamazoo, buy himself a sturdy house, and produce the grandchildren her mother was ready for, but once the snow melted off in the spring, Peter was already preparing himself for California, the gold rush, his future wealth. And whatever wealth he had was all in the future—by the Christmas after they were married, Eliza knew perfectly well that the wealth he had wooed her parents with was a mirage. And Eliza, of course, was to come along as his servant. That was clear, too. It was not that Eliza's parents disagreed with the idea that Eliza was born to be Peter's servant, but they did not act out their beliefs. In actual fact, her father was her mother's servant, and had been as long as Eliza could remember—they slept in different rooms, he was to knock if he wanted to enter (because, if he came in suddenly, he would give Mother a headache), he was to let her decide what was to be done with the house or the garden or the horses or Eliza. At the end of each month, when he brought home his profits from the mill, he handed them to Mother, who divvied up the money to pay the bills and then sent him to the bank with what was left. Eliza was their only offspring—more evidence for Eliza, once she was married, that Mother called the shots. These sorts of things would never happen with Peter. Part of the reason Eliza didn't mourn him, and part of the reason she was now earning her living (and a good living!) in Monterey, was that he had made it clear that he intended to put it to her, whether she liked it or not, once or twice every day. Then, when she felt the quickening, he took her to a woman on South Pitcher Street, in Kalamazoo, who gave her some concoction and kept her overnight. She never saw the remains. After that, he regularly pulled out, and also bought a few rubber things that he used. When he got her to Monterey, he found a doctor who gave her her own rubber thing, a pessary, which she was to wash and insert and take care of. If there was anything that she was thankful to Peter Cargill for, it was the knowledge that enabled her to not be impregnated again.

Of course, the gold venture led nowhere. Once—say, ten years before—Monterey had been “somewhere,” but now that status was conferred upon San Francisco, two days' travel up the coast. Monterey was a handsome and pleasant town, but there was no gold in the hills nearby, ships found the bay too big and the winds too variable, and the inland

areas were intimidating, to say the least. There were fertile and productive places to farm, but they were cut apart by sharp peaks and deep slopes. There was plenty of lumber, but getting the pines and the oaks to a river was a fearsome task. There weren't many women—Eliza counted perhaps eight or nine fellows for every woman—and everyone got along well enough (Spanish, Portuguese, Rumsen, Ohlone, British sailors, American settlers, even the priests and the Presbyterians), but maybe that was because the more ruthless and ambitious fellows went elsewhere, as had the fellow who shot Peter—here one night, gone the next day, no one even knew his name, and his face, such as it was, had been covered with hair, so, Eliza assumed, all he had to do to hide himself was shave his mustache and his beard and clip his mop. There were no constables in Monterey—Eliza had heard about a “sheriff,” but there was more talk about vigilantes. “Vigilante” was a Spanish word that Eliza hadn't known before coming to California. What it meant was that, if the community cared about the killing, some of them got together and snared the killer. No one, it appeared, had cared about Peter, and for that Eliza gave thanks.

And then, at Peter's interment in the public graveyard, a woman he knew, and had introduced Eliza to as Mrs. Parks one time when they were taking a walk up Pacific Street, approached her and said, “Dear, if you find yourself in embarrassed circumstances, don't hesitate to come to me. I think I can help you.” She pressed a bit of paper into Eliza's hand, with her name and address written on it in ink. Simpleminded as she was, Eliza had gone to her two weeks later for a bit of a loan, and understood, when she stepped through the door of a rather large establishment with a nice veranda in the front, that the place was a house of prostitution. She had swallowed her fears and offered herself, and the first fellow who came to her treated her much more kindly than Peter ever had. Of these things, her mother knew nothing. She also did not know that Eliza had changed her name, on the advice of Mrs. Parks, from Cargill to Ripple, a name that amused her and also reminded her of something pleasant. All the girls in Mrs. Parks's establishment had pleasant names—Carroll, Breeze, Skye, Berry (Ann, Olive, Harriet, Amelia)—and all of them English, too, even the girl who spoke mostly Spanish. They had been carefully trained in how to use the pessary and in how to discern whether a fellow might have an

infection—sores or blisters on the prick, an ooze that stank or was an odd color. They kept themselves clean, and if a fellow was a mess, they pointed him to a basin of water that Mrs. Parks kept in their chambers. None of them lived at the establishment—only Mrs. Parks lived there, in a back room on the ground floor. But the others did make enough money to support themselves. That very first morning, Eliza had walked away with an entire dollar, a gold coin, which the fellow had given her. She handed it to her own landlady, who, looking at the coin, knew better than to ask where Eliza had gotten it. That was another way in which Monterey was agreeable—no one pried, no one asked unpleasant questions. Perhaps the reason for that was that there were few churches, and most of those Catholic. Down the road, in Carmel, there was a mission, but not a mission in the sense that, like the Covenanters, they were always talking in your face about whether you were saved.

Now it was April 1852. Eliza had heard nothing from her mother in two months and she had almost fifty dollars in the bank. Mrs. Parks was strict about payment—the customers paid her when they came in, she maintained the books and the bank account. If they wanted to leave another payment for the girl when they left, that was fine with her. She was often paid in gold dust, but she paid her girls in dollars, which was fine with Eliza. Just now, she was not far from Mrs. Parks's establishment, and had just eaten a nice helping of mutton stew for her midday meal. She got up from her chair in the eating house she preferred, which was officially "the Bear Up," but which everyone called "the Bear," nodded to the owner, an agreeable man who sometimes betook himself to Mrs. Parks's, waved to Rupert, her usual server, and walked out into the street. The fog had lifted; there was a considerable breeze. She put her hand on her bonnet to keep it from blowing off, and decided to check on what she might have to do later in the day.

Mrs. Parks was sitting on her veranda with a friend of hers, Mr. Bauer. She gave Eliza a welcoming wave and stood up as Eliza mounted the steps. She of course knew what Eliza was after, and took her inside, where she checked her book. The fellow's name was Elijah Harwood, he would come at nine, and he requested that he might take Eliza to his house on Jefferson Street, keep her there for the night, and bring her back in the

morning. Mrs. Parks looked at Eliza and lifted her eyebrows. Eliza said, “I’ve seen some lovely houses on Jefferson Street.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Parks. “You may try it if you like. Some girls feel a little uncomfortable.”

Eliza thought of Peter. He was the only fellow who had ever made her feel uncomfortable. Mrs. Parks said, “He is a rather elderly man. And not, shall we say, blessed. From what I understand, he does his best, but it wears him out. If he does it here, he’s afraid he won’t have the strength to return home.”

Eliza said, “I suppose that going to his house is the kindest thing to do.”

Mrs. Parks smiled. “Indeed. And the most lucrative.”

So it was set, then. She did not ask Olive, who was also there, if she had been to the Harwood place. Olive was the friendliest of the other girls, and when Eliza had first started working for Mrs. Parks, she had exchanged a few words with her. Once, they had run into each other at the market and then walked along, chatting for a few minutes. Olive was two years older than she was, had grown up in western Massachusetts (which, Olive said, her father, who farmed, called “Massive Two Shits”), and liked music—she had grown up playing the flute (lessons every Saturday). But Mrs. Parks was strict about keeping all the girls apart: they were not to gossip about their customers, or say much to one another. Mrs. Parks told them that gossiping was like opening a door and leaving it unlocked—you never knew what might happen—so the girls were to be friendly but to avoid one another. They all lived in different boarding houses (two had houses of their own), and though all of them smiled or nodded to one another, they knew they were to keep to themselves. Eliza did not want to get fired, and neither did Olive, so, once in a while, they exchanged a word or two, and if they saw each other in town they were friendly, but they did not dare to become friends. Olive knew Eliza had come from Michigan, that she had no brothers or sisters (Olive had four of each), that she had been married (Olive had planned to marry, but the fellow had dropped her when a young woman showed up in Chicopee who was from a prominent Boston family—that chit had fallen for Olive’s suitor and swept him off to the city). Apples and milk were what Olive’s father produced on the farm.

Eliza hadn't learned how Olive got to Monterey or how she came to work in Mrs. Parks's establishment.

On the way back to her boarding house, Eliza reflected upon the fact that one of her ambitions, to see the inside of a nicer house in Monterey, was about to be realized. The houses in Monterey were not at all like those in Kalamazoo, another thing that Eliza enjoyed about them. Many of them were adobe, and if they were not, then their style mimicked those. There was one place not far from her boarding house whose owners, her landlady, Mrs. Clayton, had told her, came from Australia, of all places, and brought all of the lumber for their house with them. It was quite large. Mrs. Clayton was a decent woman, perhaps the same age as Mrs. Parks. She didn't say where she had come from, or what had happened to her husband. She did say that her son was stuck with some farmland he had bought in Texas. He wished to leave, but was too indebted. Mrs. Clayton's place was where Peter had settled Eliza, a rooming house that, at the time, he could barely afford, and when Peter had been buried in the public cemetery, Mrs. Clayton had gone along with Eliza to watch, even, Eliza thought, to say a little prayer, but she hadn't questioned Eliza in any way afterward, or since. Eliza was happy to stay there. It was not far from the wharf or Mrs. Parks's. Her room was small but neat. Mrs. Clayton did not pester her or look at her askance. At one point, Mrs. Clayton had even patted her on the hand and said, "We all do what we have to do, don't we?" And she knew how to cook. At first Eliza hadn't liked the salted fish, but she did now, as long as she had some milk to go with it. Other boarders came and went—there were three rooms for them other than Eliza's. She was the only regular boarder, and Mrs. Clayton never said a word if she was gone overnight. All in all, how could she write back to her mother and successfully pretend that she was unhappy or in mourning? And her mother's response would contain a request, or a demand, that she return to Kalamazoo.

By the time Eliza returned to Mrs. Parks's establishment, the fog had smothered the town once again, and Eliza had had to wrap herself, head to tail, in a shawl she had made over the winter. A carriage was outside. An older man was sitting in the front room. He perked up when he saw her come in, and Mrs. Parks got to her feet and introduced them formally. She

then followed them out the door, and helped Mr. Harwood down the steps, cocking her head toward Eliza, giving her to understand that she, too, was to help him about. Eliza nodded, took his hand. He untied his pony, got into the carriage. Eliza followed him, and they drove off. The pony knew exactly what he was doing, and took them straight to a certain house on Jefferson—he even went around to the back of the house, without being asked, and there was a boy there, evidently Spanish, who took the pony. Eliza followed Mr. Harwood through the back door—no steps. They walked to the front of the house. The first thing Eliza saw was innumerable tapers, all lit. From the odor, it was clear they were made from whale oil. Mr. Harwood said, “I do like light, my dear.” He was friendly. He took her shawl and laid it across a small table. It was then that Eliza noticed, sitting quietly in a chair, an older woman, neatly dressed, evidently the same age as Mr. Harwood. Mr. Harwood turned to Eliza, and said, “Ah, yes. Eliza Ripple. This is my wife, Mrs. Harwood.”

Mrs. Harwood lifted her hand, did not smile, continued to sit quietly while Mr. Harwood took Eliza to a room at the back of the house where there was a spare bedstead, a chandelier, and two hooks on the wall, one for her gown and one for his trousers. The tapers in the chandelier were lit. In Eliza’s experience, most men preferred light, as they could then get her to walk around, or hop around, or even dance around in front of them while they fondled themselves, and then, when they were ready, they would come over, lay her down, and finish their business. Few of them stroked her or even looked her in the face. The younger ones did run their hands over her bosoms or backside—if she got a stray compliment, it was for her backside. Mr. Harwood sat on the bed, as there was nowhere else to sit, and stared at her. She stood quietly for a while, then turned this way and that, then walked here and there. She put her hands under her bosoms, ran them down her sides. He said nothing, only watched her with a bemused look. It was as if she was being tested for a job or a position, and her new employer was weighing her virtues against those of other applicants. The tapers flickered. Finally, Mr. Harwood’s hand went to his crotch, rested there. She walked around again, then looked at him. He nodded, struggled to his feet, pulled down his underdrawers, stumbled as he did so, sat on the bed to get them off, sighed.

Eliza knew what she had to do—she sat beside him, stroked him gently on his leg, moving her hand up to his crotch, leaned against him. She tickled his prick, stroked it, remembering, as she sometimes did, how Peter had enjoyed referring to his own prick as “peter.” When she suddenly felt the chill of the room, he put his arm around her, and that did the trick. No, he was not blessed, but neither was he damned—his prick was a prick similar to most of those she had seen in the last year. He put it to use, then reclined on the bed for a while until he stopped panting. Eliza lay quietly, thinking of the two dollars she would receive, wondering if there would be breakfast, and then, apparently, dozing off: she did not remember, afterward, Mr. Harwood getting out of the bed or leaving the room.

She saw, when she woke up in the morning, that he had forgotten to take his shoes with him. They were not boots, but chestnut-brown low, tied, malleable footwear with a darker-colored leather over the tip. Eliza picked one up. The leather was soft—possibly calfskin. They were very elegant. She set the two together, against the wall, then put on her drawers, her chemise, her gown. It was hard to tell what time it was, but, judging by the growling of her belly, time for breakfast. The house was utterly quiet. That was what caused Eliza to feel uneasy. Maybe she had never been in a house where morning didn't start with shouts and calls and bangings and evidence that the day's work had begun. The room had a small window, facing away from Jefferson Street. She pushed the curtain to one side and peeked out, but there was nothing to see other than some cyprus trees draped with Spanish moss (that's what they called it), some grass, and three crows sitting on the back fence. Even they were silent. Eliza gave a little shiver and decided that, in spite of the remuneration, she wasn't coming back to Mr. Harwood. She sat quietly for a while. The silence lingered. If the window had been larger, she would have climbed through it and walked back to Mrs. Parks's place, which was near the theater, only a few blocks away. She thought she could get her money, tell Mrs. Parks about how strange all of this was, and then go have a bite to eat.

There was a knock at the door of her room, and then the door opened. Why Eliza found this startling, she didn't know. Mrs. Harwood stepped into the room. She was wearing a navy-blue gown. Her hair was austere pulled back, and she was leaning on a cane. She said, “Girl, there are some

rolls on the kitchen table, if you care for one, and Raul will run you back to that place.” She hobbled out of the room, dragging her right foot. After a moment, Eliza followed her. The house was not only empty—even though it was nicely furnished, it seemed as if it had been abandoned. It was empty of smell, of sound. Even the light, the beautiful Monterey light, had been blocked out, by heavy curtains. Eliza went straight to the front entrance, taking no rolls, not looking for Raul. She didn’t feel at ease until she was halfway down the next block.

But she did get paid that day, and two days later, Mrs. Parks said that Mr. Harwood had asked after her—he hadn’t asked *for* her, only wondered whether she was well, whether she had “been able to put up with him.” Eliza replied that he was a pleasant fellow, evidently well meaning, but she said nothing about Mrs. Harwood or the house. Mrs. Parks turned and looked her in the eye. She said, almost sharply, “You need not go there again if you do not wish to do so, but let the other girls choose for themselves. He’s a kindly man, with plenty of funds, and I would not like to lose his business.” Eliza nodded. Mrs. Parks had never commanded her before. That, too, was strange, but, of course, understandable, given that Mrs. Parks’s establishment was one of several.

—

THINGS WENT ALONG as usual for the next few weeks, which is to say that some of her customers were young, some of them were old, some were sailors, some were rancheros, some fished in the bay, some worked in the cattle business—skinning, drying, butchering, tanning. As part of their fee, those fellows might bring Mrs. Parks a roast or a haunch. But they had to bathe before they came. If she wrinkled her nose, they were unwelcome. One man—prosperous-looking, but a stranger, at least to Eliza—brought his son in. He was a shy, small boy. Mrs. Parks stood the girls up in front of him, and he gestured slightly toward Eliza, perhaps because she was the youngest and the smallest, so she took him to her room. As she passed Mrs. Parks, Mrs. Parks lifted her right eyebrow, which meant, “Go slow.” But of course she would: no sense in frightening the boy. When they were in her room, and had closed the door, she sat on her bed and smiled. After a few moments, she said, “As you please.”

The boy shook his head.

Eliza sat quietly. Yes, there was some way in which the boy reminded her of Liam Callaghan, though he didn't look like him and was much more elegantly clothed. She stared at him, but only from under her brow. He glanced around and tapped his boots on the floor. It was in the color of his eyes, she realized—large, open, as blue as the sky. She said, “Are you Irish, then?”

He started, then smiled, said, “My ma is Irish. Her name is Maggie O'Rourke. She had to run off with her folks because of the hunger.”

“I had a friend that happened to.”

Another silence. The boy's breathing settled. He moved slightly toward her, reached out, and put his hand on her knee. Well, it took forever, went on step by step, until he did finally bring himself to enter her. Afterward, she stroked his back while he lay facedown on the bed, recovering. They talked a bit. It turned out that he was nearly seventeen, still waiting to grow, that he was being sent back east to go to a school and would be gone for three years, and that his father was a strong believer in giving his sons (all three of them) sexual experiences. The boy, whose name was James, said, “My brothers said they liked it.” This made Eliza laugh. James blushed, laughed, too, then said, “I liked it. I did like it.”

One thing about the father was that he was patient. He sat quietly, reading a book, the whole time, and never pestered Mrs. Parks about a thing, slowly drinking a glass of ale. And when she paid Eliza, Mrs. Parks gave her an extra quarter for her evening meal.

As she walked home that night, Eliza listened to the gulls calling all around the bay. The only thing she regretted was that she hadn't been able to discover what book it was that held the father's attention for such a long period of time.

There was a rough one, too. He didn't look rough—if he had, Mrs. Parks would have sent him on down the street. He had a ready smile, was well dressed. But as soon as he got Eliza into her room, he pushed her against the wall so that she smacked her head. Nor did he apologize. He stepped closer and raised his hands with a grin. She reached over to her bureau and grabbed a candleholder. She didn't smack him—that wasn't allowed—but she threw the candleholder at her door, and a minute or so

later, as Eliza was sidling away from the fellow, the door opened and Mrs. Parks appeared with her pistol in her hand. She walked over to the fellow, returned his funds, said he had the wrong place, and if he was into this sort of thing, he could go over to the brothel on Franklin Street. He backed out of the room and then ran out the front door. The best thing was that he stumbled down the steps and dropped his dollar coin, and when Mrs. Parks found it among the zinnias in the morning, she gave it to Eliza. Eliza hadn't known that there was a brothel on Franklin Street, and it turned out that there wasn't. Mrs. Parks had been talking through her hat, and she had done a good job of it.

Maybe a week later, Eliza was walking toward the general store that was across from Pacific House. She was looking about at horses and dogs and gowns and shawls, and she saw Mrs. Harwood come hobbling out of the door and down the steps. She also saw that Mrs. Harwood noticed her, but she was exactly as she had been before—stern, unmoved, indecipherable. Eliza watched her get into the carriage and go up toward Jefferson Street.

—

WHEN THE FIRST of “the girls” disappeared, no one thought a thing of it. Folks disappeared from Monterey all the time, mostly because there was more going on in San Francisco, or even San Jose. Or people took their families and moved down the coast because they thought they would find better hunting there, or some land with more rain. If they were lucky, they came back, gave up on the idea of owning their own farms or ranches, and went to work the way everyone else worked. In fact, Eliza knew that her mother would say that *she* had disappeared, and that thought was a bit of a prickle to her conscience, but not enough to get her to answer those letters her mother had sent. She thought there was a lot to be said for disappearing, and so she didn't think much of the disappearance of that girl, except to note the day, May 14, her very own birthday. Twenty-one now, and wasn't that strange?

But in the course of a few days of going to shops, eating here and there, sitting on a bench with a book in her hand, she noticed that people, especially women, spoke of this disappearance differently than they spoke

of others—there was no “That family was only here for a few months— they might have waited it out and found something more productive,” or “Good riddance! That fellow was always out of his head!,” or even “Well, you bet they went back to Ohio! Wouldn’t you, if you had the funds?” No, what she heard was “What it all comes down to is, those girls know what they are getting themselves into,” or “I, for one, think we’re better off! Luring our fellows into sin like that!”

Did the woman she overheard saying that know how Eliza herself made her money? Perhaps, though every time she left her rooming house, at least during the day, she made sure to dress modestly, never to eye any fellow, especially never to appear to recognize any of the men or the boys whom she had done business with. A brothel was not a secret, of course, but it had to pretend to be a secret. Mrs. Parks said nothing about the girl who had vanished, except that she worked for an establishment up by the Presidio, that she had been on the job only a few weeks, and that she said to the owner of that establishment that she’d come from Buffalo, New York. Unlike most of the girls, she had come on her own, by ship, and no one knew where she’d gotten the funds or what her original intentions had been. If Eliza had ever seen the girl, she couldn’t say. Twice, when she saw Olive in the open area of Mrs. Parks’s establishment, she tried to catch her eye and find out what she thought, but Olive avoided her gaze. Eliza did her best to put the girl out of her mind.

The talk went on, though. Monterey was curious about the girl, perhaps because there weren’t many women around. Someone heard that she had a relative in the U.S. Congress who had pushed hard for the Compromise. As Eliza remembered it, when California had become a state, no one in the delegation had voted to become a slave state, but lots of folks in Alabama and Texas were determined to have access to the Pacific, and had pushed to separate northern California from southern California. But the south was all Mexican (some people said “Spanish,” because that was their tongue, and anyway, California was not Mexico any more than Texas was), there were no slave owners, and Texas had some debts from when it was its own nation, so the government had paid those debts in order to persuade the Texans to shut up and leave California to decide for itself. At any rate, that’s what Eliza remembered, and Peter, for all his faults, was very much