"If she were alive today,
Madame Restell might be
described as a 'badass' . . .
Restell's story deserves
a place in history—and now
it finally has one."
—KATIE COURIC

MADAME RESTELL

THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF OLD NEW YORK'S MOST FABULOUS, FEARLESS, AND INFAMOUS ABORTIONIST

JENNIFER WRIGHT

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New York

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FOR MY DAUGHTER, MADELINE

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PROLOGUE

WINTER, 1878

ALTHOUGH IT WAS 10:45 P.M. WHEN MADAME RESTELL OPENED the front door of her Fifth Avenue brownstone, her face seemed unsurprised by what she saw: a strange man in a black suit, shivering on her landing, the harsh puffs of his breath lingering between them in the cold January air. After all, how many men like him had found themselves hovering upon her doorstep over the past forty years? These men knew of Madame Restell's reputation as a woman of skill and discretion. Perhaps this man had just come from supper with his mistress, who had informed him of some unwelcome news. Or he might have been a husband whose wife was in the kind of ill health that would prevent her from having more children. Perhaps he already had more children than he could afford to feed.

"May I speak to Madame Restell?" he asked.

"Do you wish to see her professionally?"[1] Her voice lilted with a hint of its original West Country accent.

He nodded. The woman beckoned him inside.

Winding her way through her drawing room, Restell walked—according to the man observing her—with "a stride that was firm, for all advancing years, and a bearing that flaunted a callous defiance."[2] She hardly resembled the part of "hell's representative on earth," as her nemeses liked to call her; rather, the elderly Restell looked more like the regal grandmother she was.[3] She had been beautiful once, even her harshest critics acknowledged, like Countess Ellen Olenska moving among the glamorous circles of Victorian New York. Gone now were the luxurious frocks and diamonds that had accentuated Restell's once curvaceous figure. In their place—albeit still glittering with jewels—lay a black silk mourning dress, worn in memory of the husband she'd lost the year before.

At sixty-six years old, Madame Restell had begun to strike people who

saw her as a “careworn woman.”[4] Her brown hair, impeccably styled as ever, was now flecked with gray; yet, after all these years, her elegance hadn’t dimmed. Her dark brown eyes remained as keen and piercing as ever.

And neither did her magnificent Fifth Avenue brownstone look—as some protesters had been known to shout from the street—as though it were “built upon a mound of baby skulls.” The house itself, mere feet from the construction site of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, imposing with its Corinthian columns, looked like the home of someone as refined as they were powerful. The interiors were as sumptuous as any of the rooms in Edith Wharton’s novels, full of oil paintings, artistic bronzes, and statues. The marble floors were covered with Turkish rugs. Marble columns flanked the stairways. Ladies could gather around two pianos to play and sing in the evening if they so desired.

Restell and her newest guest made their way downstairs to her basement office, where she and her granddaughter Caroline, by then her apprentice, conducted their business. She invited him to take a seat.

The stranger was still shivering, face pinched with anxiety beneath his great beard and mutton chops. A scar on his left cheek gave him a particularly pitiable air. Once settled, he informed her that he’d seen her advertisements and wanted something to prevent a woman from giving birth.

Restell asked him whether the woman he’d come for was married or unmarried. “If unmarried, it’s a case of needing immediate action,” she told him sternly. “If married, there’s less necessity for hurrying.”[5]

This was Madame Restell’s indirect way of making sure all her clients actually wanted an abortion. She lived down the street from an orphanage; sometimes, she told female patients that she could help them find a family to adopt the baby if they wished. Indeed, in cases where the pregnancy was especially advanced and abortion seemed unsafe, she pressured her patients to opt for adoption over an operation. Some did. Most did not.

The man before her refused to say anything more about the pregnant woman he represented. Restell assured him that she did not need to know her name. He muttered only that it was a “delicate situation.”[6]

Knowing the grave urgency that this understatement typically conveyed, Restell gave the man some pills, telling him that the directions were inside the bottle as it was illegal—and therefore unsafe—to have them on the outside.

“It is not infallible,” she advised him. “No medicine is. In nine cases out of ten, however, it is effective.”[7] If the medicine did end up working, it would act by Thursday.

In the middle of their conversation, another caller knocked on the door. Madame Restell went upstairs to see who it was, and the man later reported that he could not help but be curious upon hearing a female voice. He listened to their conversation, catching certain phrases. The woman said something about her husband having been away for two months. She already had two children. She’d been… “indiscreet,” as she put it.

Before long, Madame Restell returned. With a sigh, she remarked, “Poor little dear… she has been unfortunate, and has come for relief. Many such ladies come here for such relief.”[8] Restell’s remark was likely intended to reassure her other customer: She knew what she was doing. The only people Restell saw more of than anxious men were distraught women.

Restell told the man once more that the pills she had given him ought to be safe. She also reminded him that if they did not have the intended effect, he should bring his lady friend by the house for an appointment that would cost him $200—or $5,000 in today’s currency. That would be a surgical abortion.

Thanking her, the man clutched the pills to his chest and headed back out into the cold night air. Restell never expected to see him again. But if she had pulled back one of her lace curtains and gazed after him as he departed, she might have noticed his lips flicker into a victorious smile. As it happened, he would return to the steps of her lavish abode. But not with a lady friend.

Two weeks later, on February 11, 1878, Restell’s gentleman caller came back, this time with a group of policemen and a warrant for her arrest.

“You’ve brought quite a party with you,” Madame Restell deadpanned as she opened the door.[9]

Ever the dramatist, Anthony Comstock relished in his big reveal: He was no anonymous, terrified sinner requesting Restell’s services on behalf of a mistress, but in fact the head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. That society attempted to ban all that they considered obscene—whether it was pornographic pictures or birth control pills. Its members also attempted to jail anyone who defied them. Comstock was

the very man who had created the 1873 laws that forbade using the US Postal Service to send out anything even *mentioning* birth control, let alone supplying it. Many before him claimed that Madame Restell was too powerful to pursue. But who was laughing now?!

To his annoyance, Restell seemed to find the affair absurd. She was not dissolving into the puddle of tears he had expected.

Madame Restell knew about Comstock. Of *course* she knew about him. Likenesses of him ran in the papers regularly. She shook her head upon realizing who he was, remarking, impassively, “You [are] Mr. Comstock? I thought he was dark complexioned.” For a moment, her sangfroid gave way to the sensational interest of a tabloid media connoisseur as she asked, “Are you the man who was injured in the face by the prisoner?” He was. A New Jersey pornographer had not responded to Comstock’s interference with the same bemusement Madame Restell was exhibiting.

Comstock had already developed a reputation as somewhat of a controversial figure, and his treatment of Madame Restell would lead to questions about his character as well as hers. In mere months, newspapers would begin wondering whether he “transcend[ed] his duty by leading innocent people into temptation in order that he may convict them.”[10]

But Madame Restell was no innocent. She knew the risks inherent in her line of work. A policeman had been patrolling outside her mansion for years in an attempt to intimidate her. He had not done so. So why should these men?

Comstock’s officers began their search of the premises. Restell casually told them to go ahead, insinuating that they’d find nothing to convict her. Less casual was the woman they found recuperating in one of the lace-curtained bedrooms upstairs: upon seeing them, she burst into tears, announced that her husband was rich, declared that she was the mother of four children, claimed that she was only there on behalf of a friend, and wailed that she was going to kill herself if they arrested her. She was also wearing a veil to protect her identity.

Amid this commotion, two new women arrived at the door. Restell calmly sent them away, gesturing to the policemen and remarking, “You must excuse me, ladies. These gentlemen are acting in a very officious manner and will not allow me to see you.”[11]

Comstock ushered them in nevertheless and proudly declared that he was searching for evidence of *abortions*. At that, the twosome turned pale and ran out the door.

As the officers continued to search, making their way to her basement, Restell informed them that they were merely searching her wine cellar. As for the pills and powders they found, she was adamant that they were no more than could be provided by any druggist. Still, the men seemed satisfied that they'd found enough medicine and contraceptives to arrest the infamous Madame Restell on the grounds that she was distributing articles used for "immoral purposes."

"Where am I to go?" she inquired.

"Before the judge!" Comstock said.

"With these men?" Her eyes said: *hell* no.

"How, then?"

"In my own carriage. It's at the door. At least I am entitled to that courtesy."[12]

Once assured she could travel to court in her famously lavish carriage, drawn by two gray horses and driven by a purple-clad coachman, she agreed without objection. Just before leaving, she asked if she could "take oysters." After all, she complained, "I've had no lunch, yet."[13]

The police agreed that they would wait until a lovely lunch was served and accompanied her into the kitchen.

Gazing at the men icily, she lowered one oyster after the other into her mouth and swallowed each one down. She'd spent a lifetime ensuring she had enough money to afford such delicacies. Now, she would need her energy for what lay ahead.

This is the story of one of the boldest women in American history: a self-made millionaire, a celebrity in her era, a woman beloved by many of her patients and despised by the men who wanted to control them. An immigrant who came to the Lower East Side of Manhattan lured by the promises of the American Dream, Madame Restell soon found herself a widow attempting to raise a toddler.

It didn't take Restell long to learn how horrifically hard single motherhood was in the mid-1800s. "Why," she wondered, "should women have no say over if and when they became mothers?" Before long, she was producing pills made of tansy seeds, which could induce miscarriage. Then she learned how to perform surgical abortions, offered on a sliding scale so as to accommodate poorer women while still allowing her to amass a fortune.

Restell's profession eventually took her from the fringes of Five Points to the heart of Fifth Avenue. She became one of the era's savviest businesswomen, writing editorials in the big city newspapers and publicizing services her competitors merely whispered about. Her adversaries were at least as upset about the idea of a woman making that much money and consuming that much attention as they were about the very idea of abortion. Each time they advanced an argument decrying abortion—women would become prostitutes! Men wouldn't know if their wives had been faithful! The white race would be decimated!—Madame Restell published another rebuttal.

Her pen wasn't always enough to keep her on the right side of the law, but she didn't let that slow her down. When Restell was finally arrested and sent to jail, for a year, she began using the warden's office for her work affairs. She employed three prisoners to act as her servants—they did her washing, cleaned her cell, and made sure she was supplied with fresh fruit (she preferred peaches). However, she never forgave the police for her imprisonment. She later cut ties with her own daughter after said daughter—to her horror—married a cop.

The only thing Madame Restell hated more than cops were the moralizers determined to destroy her business. When the Catholic Church spoke out against her, she outbid the archbishop of New York for the land he wanted to build his house on. There, she built a mansion, and from it she doled out birth control to her many patients. She did not ask for any man's opinion, for she was not interested in hearing it.

Restell was a businesswoman, a scofflaw, an immigrant, and an abortionist. She made men really, *really* mad. She deserves a place in the pantheon of women with no fucks left to give. But, despite her impact, she has been largely lost to history. Most Americans don't know her name at all, and those who do have a less-than-accurate impression of who she was. Every existing record of her life reduces her somehow: to *only* an activist, *only* a villain, *only* a campy show woman, *only* the tragic victim hounded to death by Anthony Comstock.

Madame Restell was so much more than any one thing. She was unrestrainable. Unapologetic. A survivor. The kind of woman who has always existed in America, and always will.

CHAPTER ONE

SHE WAS NOT FRENCH.

And she was not even called Madame Restell—until much later.

The heroine of our tale entered this world in 1811 as Ann Trow. The "lucky star" under which one of her future clients claimed she was born hung over a small English town called Painswick. Those who would later allege she was sent by devilish agents could hardly have picked a more perfect birthplace.

Today, Painswick, with its Cotswold stone cottages, is known primarily as being "the epitome of an English town." It is one possessed of an idyllic beauty, standing on a hill overlooking one of the Five Valleys of Gloucestershire, a land of rivers and streams. Anne Boleyn and King Henry VIII once hunted in its woods; ironically, Boleyn's eventual executioner, William Kingston, also hailed from the region.[1] In 1643, during the First English Civil War, King Charles I and Royalist forces stayed in Painswick for a time. According to a walking tour guide, "tradition has it that [King Charles I] went up to the Beacon and, seeing the beautiful valley to the east, said, 'This must be Paradise.' Since then that valley, and the hamlet on its western side to the north of Painswick, have been called Paradise."[2]

Yet there was also another side to the splendor of Painswick. During Ann Trow's childhood, the townspeople possessed an unusual fondness for pagan customs, celebrating a yearly festival to the Greek satyr god Pan. Until around 1830, citizens of Painswick staged an annual procession in honor of this pagan god, who was most typically associated with sexuality.

The tradition appears to have originated with Benjamin Hyett, a member of the local gentry. In the mid-eighteenth century, Hyett erected a classically styled woodland pavilion, called Pan's Lodge, where he and his friends could celebrate "nocturnal orgies," according to the historian Timothy Mowl. Disinclined to let nobles have all the fun, it seems, locals soon got in on the action. *Gentlemen's Magazine*, in 1787, described the

town's festival as one that "would have disgraced most heathen nations," as it was filled with "drunkenness and every species of clamor, riot and disorder."[3]

So, Ann was born into an uncommon place with particular—and particularly libertine—customs. But she was far from the only woman to grow up with a similarly blasé outlook toward sex during the period of her youth. While eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society admired virginity, actual attitudes toward everyday premarital sexual activity at the time were more relaxed—both in Europe and even in supposedly puritanical America—than they're often portrayed as being in modern media.

As the historian Jack Larkin stated, "Into the 1820s, almost all Americans would have subscribed to the commonplace notion that sex, within proper social confines, was enjoyable and healthy and that prolonged sexual abstinence could be injurious to health. They also would have assumed that women had powerful sexual drives."[4] Premarital sex between couples was common. So common, in fact, that one pastor, in South Carolina in 1847, claimed that most brides—"except for two or three"—were pregnant when he performed their weddings.[5] In some northeastern American states, *bundling*—in which two sweethearts would snuggle, supposedly chastely, in bed, with the consent of their parents—was a common custom during courtship through the 1700s.[6] The "chaste" part of the practice, however, was notoriously misleading—which may help explain why, in the 1790s, one-third of rural New England brides were already pregnant by the time they walked down the aisle.[7] Women were seen as enjoying the practice of bundling as much as, if not more than, men. A poem from 1785 captures the spirit of the tradition:

> *Some maidens say that, if through the nation,*
> *bundling should go out of fashion,*
> *courtship would lose its sweets, as they*
> *could have no fun til wedding day.*

The concept is hardly that different from modern attitudes toward courtship. A 2002 study found that by the age of forty-four, 99 percent of Americans had sex. Ninety-five percent had premarital sex, making premarital sex nearly universal.[8]

As the lewd poem implies, many considered sexual impulses in women

to be natural, not shameful. Indeed, popular magazines advocated punishment for men who had premarital sex with women and then left them, but sympathy for the women, who were perceived as unfortunate victims in that situation.[9] It may seem incredibly obvious to say "you should sympathize with a woman who had sex with a man and got dumped after"—until you realize that there are still messages today likening women who choose to have premarital sex to worthless, chewed-up gum.

Ann had the strange fortune to live during a period of great change regarding sexual attitudes. In modern times, we're sometimes guilty of assuming that one sexual ideology dominated a previous century—thinking everyone from the nineteenth century was prudish, for instance. Or else we theorize that all of history is one long, uninterrupted upward trajectory from utmost prudery to utter hedonism. In truth, dominant attitudes regarding sex shift decade to decade. Consider the laissez-faire approach to sex during the early aughts with those considered acceptable a decade and a half later, in a #MeToo era. The attempted rapist character on *Gossip Girl* in 2007 who became the show's romantic hero in later episodes would not have been given that story line fifteen years later—indeed, in *Gossip Girl* 2.0, characters now ask, "Do I have your consent?" before sex.

Over the course of her life, Ann watched public sentiment slide from being moderately permissive toward female sexuality to being more constrained, culminating in a time when doctors were convinced that "good women" did not have a sex drive *at all*. The change must have felt a bit bewildering, especially to someone who grew up in a place where residents partook in "every species of clamor, riot and disorder."

Sexual permissiveness aside, Ann's upbringing was simple. Her father was a laborer who worked at the local woolen mill, as did her mother. Her schooling consisted of basics: she might have learned how to read, most likely from the Bible, so as to recite the catechism, though religion was not a large part of her upbringing. Judging from records concerning Ann Trows, who was born in Painswick during this period, Ann wasn't baptized until the age of 16, perhaps in preparation for her marriage.[10] While (male) country doctors sometimes came from humble backgrounds, certainly she and her family would have had no such aspirations for her. They never expected that one day she would go on to buy all her family members houses, in spite of the fact that from an early age it was clear that Ann possessed "an acute intellect and a determined will."[11]

Like many young girls from lower-class families, Ann was sent into domestic service at the age of fifteen. Servitude at the time was a brutal business, no matter how charming BBC shows persist in making it seem. Dismiss any *Downton Abbey* notions you might have about this period of Ann's life. Young Miss Trow was not serving tea to nobility.

Instead, she worked for a middle-class butcher's family. Given her age, and the fact that she was unskilled, and came from a poor family, it's likely that she was a maid of all work. As such, she'd be required to do any and all chores around the house. Her day would begin before dawn. She might awake in an attic—which would be freezing during the winter—and creep downstairs at around 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. to make sure all the fires were lit before the family came down for breakfast. Then she would spend the day scrubbing floors, carrying water into the house from a well, emptying chamber pots, dusting the rooms, changing the beds, polishing the brass, scrubbing the laundry, cleaning the rugs, and serving the family's meals. Her work would continue until after nightfall—perhaps around 9:30 or 10:00 p.m., at which point she'd collapse, exhausted, only to begin again the next day.

Domestic drudgery of the lower orders was work that most of us would find physically and emotionally exhausting. However, Ann was naturally someone who enjoyed being busy. There were to be few periods of her life where she appeared to relax, and she always seemed a bit bewildered by those who enjoyed a life of idleness. She was also tireless.

Ann would never forget this time in her life. Nearly a lifetime later, her servants would live in nicer conditions than those of her neighbors, and she'd go out of her way to help them. And, just as she'd never forget the grim physical work that accompanied being a maid, she'd remember, too, the sexual peril inherent in being a teenage girl living in a near stranger's house.

Despite most households' insistence that maids not have gentlemen callers, her work as a servant would hardly have insulated Ann from sexuality, both her own and that of her peers. Many ladies took great care to keep their female staff from meeting with men from outside the house. But they often forgot about the men inside the house, especially those within their own families.

If well off, these men could assault household maids with little or no repercussions, legally or socially. And they would. This was sufficiently common in the eighteenth century that the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift

advised the household maid “to get as much out of her master as she possibly can and never allow him the smallest liberty, not the squeezing of your hand, unless he puts a guinea into it.… [N]ever allow him the last favor for under a hundred guineas.” He urged particular caution around the family’s eldest son, as, from him, the maid would “get nothing from him but a big belly or the clap, and probably both together.”[12]

Swift meant for readers to take his comments humorously, as any maid would have known that there was not much room for negotiation. If a maid did have sex with a male member of the family who desired her, she risked becoming pregnant and losing her job. People may have been happy to marry women of their own class whom they’d already impregnated, but if they impregnated a maid, they weren’t going to keep paying her to dump out their chamber pots. If she refused sexual favors, however, she was likely doomed anyway: She could be fired immediately. Most chose the former option, compliance. A memoir written by an anonymous wealthy man, most likely Henry Spencer Ashbee, who grew up during the mid-1800s, *My Secret Life*, stated, “As to servants and women of the humbler class… they all took cock on the quiet and were proud of having a gentleman to cover them. Such was the opinion of men in my class of life and of my age. My experience with my mother’s servants corroborated it.”[13] The author further discusses impregnating some servants and, perhaps fortunately for them, procuring abortions.

Ann may or may not have experienced these assaults herself, but even so, she was likely well aware of their prevalence. If none presented in her household, she would certainly have heard stories about other maids who had been seduced or outright raped by their masters. Young girls hoped to follow the example set in *Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded*—the popular novel of the period in which a young maid thwarts her master’s near constant attempts to rape her (at one point he leaps out of her closet; at another, he kidnaps her) only for him to marry her. Ann may well have even read about these experiences in the popular advice guide *A Present for a Servant-Maid*. Published in 1744 and still referenced throughout Ann’s own era, the manual was divided somewhat evenly between good recipes and warnings about the terrible men who would try to sleep with the help. That list included their masters, male servants, sons of the household, and guests. As for what to do, the manual suggested it was probably best to keep away from men as much as possible, to remind married men of their wives, and to avoid smiling at single men, as it would