

Title (up to 20 words) - Something Bigger

Strapline (up to 40 words) - Suffragettes; the word that's been whispered all round London for the past few months. When Ruth, an upper class young woman, is confronted by one, she is forced to rethink the ideas and beliefs she has been brought up on.

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

I study the ivory archway towering before me. The gleaming marble is etched with swirls, no doubt painstakingly engraved by London's finest craftsmen. Mother yanks me by my elbow; my moment of reflection appears to be a moment too long for her, as she is already swishing her way towards Mrs Thomson's house. I quicken my pace, reaching her just as she anxiously pulls a stopwatch from the leather pouch she wears tied to her waist.

"It will not bode well to be late," she murmurs, half to herself. I resist the urge to snipe back, *yes it will.*

Although mother hasn't actually told me yet, I know why we're going to Mrs Thomson's. People only go to Mrs Thomsons for one particular thing. Everyone knows it.

My stomach swoops at the thought. It was inevitable, of course. I'd only hoped it wouldn't happen so soon. I am eighteen. Born into a respectable family.

Of course I would be expected to marry soon.

"Come, Ruth," mother calls, heading to the gates of Swallow Manor. Mrs Thomson stands there waiting, dressed in violet silks that are ill-suited to the summer's heat. The smile that adorns her face seems more an accessory than something natural, like the way someone may wear a brooch or ring.

She spreads her arms wide. "Welcome. Come inside!"

The prospect of having to sit and listen to Mrs Thomson and mother talk about my impending marriage makes me feel nauseated, and so I turn to mother, making one last ditch effort to escape.

"Why don't I just wait outside for you?" Mother's already beginning to shake her head, and so I hurriedly change tack. "Or I could go to Portobello Road and get the wine you wanted for father." I can sense her wavering. If there's one thing mother cares about, it's making my father happy. "Go home straight afterwards," she relents finally. I nod, and hurry off before she can change her mind.

The walk to Portobello Road is a short one, and I find myself there before I know it. I'm just starting to start tunelessly humming, when I spot the group crowding the road.

I tense instantly; I know who they are. The flags they bear - white, green and purple- are infamous in London. I've heard the things mother and her friends whisper about them.

Suffragettes. If there's one thing mother has drilled into me, it's to avoid them at all costs. I duck my head down, and head to the wine vendor. Fumbling, I get my coins out, and hand them over with my eyes lowered. Relief courses through me, and I'm just thinking I've escaped unnoticed, when-

"Do you not care about your rights?" I look up, startled. A woman, holding the same white, green and purple flag as the others, watches me. A suffragette. There's no judgement on her face, only curiosity. I bristle nevertheless.

"Of course I do."

"Then why are you so determined not to meet anyone's eyes?"

I freeze. 'I won't be part of a terrorist organization,' I stutter, parroting the words I've heard father say so often when he gets into one of his rants. The suffragette raises an eyebrow.

"Does it make me a terrorist to want something better for myself, to want something better for my sisters and daughters?"

I don't have an answer. She speaks after a moment.

"Come to one of our meetings. We meet at the theatre at sunrise."

'Why would I?' I blurt out. She smiles for the first time in our conversation.

"Don't you want to be part of something bigger?"

I swirl my fork around my empty plate. Although I've tried to, I can't seem to get the conversation with the woman - the suffragette - out of my head. The words she said, about being part of something bigger, have echoed in my head a seemingly infinite number of times.

The room is silent other than the gentle scrapes of cutlery against plates. Father, who has returned from work early to dine with mother and I, puts his knife and fork down.

"I've waited long enough," he says with a grin. "How did it go?"

"Brilliantly," mother declares. "Margeret says she's got three prospects in mind already!"

My father's grin widens. "Isn't this exciting, Ruth?"

"Not particularly."

Silence falls. Mother and father wear twin looks of shock, and I wouldn't be surprised if my own face showed a similar expression. The words had just burst out, as if on their own accord. I swallow hard.

"Don't be silly," mother chastises, after a beat of silence. "Of course you are!"

I consider nodding my head and mumbling an apology about how I'm just tired, but no; I'm done with pretending.

"I don't want to marry." My words are firm and clear.

Father laughs. "Don't be ridiculous."

I glare. "I'm not."

"Don't speak to your father like that," mother scolds. "Have some respect." I lift my chin defiantly.

"I'll respect him when he respects me." Mother gasps, and father's face turns a deep shade of crimson.

"Get out of my sight. I will not hear a word more of this nonsense."

I rise to my feet, and stalk out the room. Outside, Linda and Emily, our two maids, stand bent over laundry, their mouths wide open. I ignore them, and race up the stairs to my bedroom, almost dripping over my skirts in the process. My breathing is deep and staggered as I move in front of the mirror.

I almost don't recognise myself; my eyes glint and my cheeks are ruddy.

For the first time in my life, I look truly alive.

I won't delude myself; I know the path ahead won't be easy. But I also know that continuing on the path I'm on right now, continuing the rest of my life blindly doing what I'm told, would be infinitely harder.

What was it the suffragette had said?

I was going to be part of something bigger.