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## Karen Joy Fowler: Standing Room Only

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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*

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