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Some Old Lover's Ghost

Judith Lennox

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HARPER PERENNIAL

Dedication

To Iain, with love

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

For two days, frost had fringed the reeds and the grass with a silvery filigree. Filaments of ice on every leaf and branch reflected the remains of the dying sun. Ice clung to the walls of the dike. Around the stems of the plants at the water's edge an opaque, whitish glaze hid the rotting vegetation beneath. But where the current ran free a mist rose, small curling wisps like steam from a boiling bath, as though the black heart of the water ran warm.

The dike gouged a channel through the flat East Anglian landscape. To either side of the fields fell away, vast and featureless, their boundaries marked by a pathway of twin ruts or a straggle of stunted bushes. The sun touched the church tower and the bare branches of the trees that surrounded it, and then moved slowly to the empty land beyond, delineating the long ridges left by the plough. All was still: no breeze rustled the frozen grass or flicked aside a swirl of dead leaves to reveal the bare bones of the earth beneath.

As he walked along the bank of the dike, his breath made grey clouds in the chill evening air. It seemed to him that though this land had been stolen from the sea by man, and though the marks of man's stubbornness and ingenuity were visible in the deep scars of the dikes and waterways, yet there was never a sense of ownership, only of borrowing. The low horizon, the vastness of the sky, reduced humanity to small, bustling insignificance. If a god existed then that god interceded, through flood and tempest, only as a reminder of impotence. When the landscape itself was impermanent, then what chance had fragile bones and flesh? Others had believed they had mastery of this place; others had been expelled by the greater armies of water and tide.

Looking ahead, he saw the house that stood by itself a mile or so from the church. As the rays of the setting sun touched them, the panes of glass in the windows flared with red and gold light, and the four-square walls lost their dreariness, so that the house seemed to come alive again. He stood still, remembering, the words *if only* searing his frozen heart just as the dike seared the cold earth. Then the sun sank below the horizon, and the house retreated into the shadows.

He turned back, retracing his footsteps. It was quite dark now, a thin filament of cloud covering the face of the moon, the stars not yet bright. Conscious of the water to one side of him he moved carefully, wishing he had brought a torch or lantern. Just the thought of falling into the dike – a cracking of ice and then no sound at all – made him shudder. Drowning was the worst death: the water in your lungs, your mouth, your nostrils, choking you. Like being buried alive.

The sound of a step, and a gasping breath where he had believed himself to be alone, made him almost lose his footing. His heart lurched against his ribcage, and he looked to left and right, wide-eyed, half expecting the swirls of steam that rose from the water to have acquired shape and substance, to have become small ghosts, the will-o'-the-wisps that haunted the Fen.

But then the cloud thinned, and the moonlight showed him the dog, scrabbling at the sloping wall of the dike. Paws clawing the iron-hard earth, wet nose sniffing for secrets.

Stooping, he gathered pebbles and flung them at the creature until it yelped and ran into the darkness.

CHAPTER ONE

After Toby had gone, I took the bouquet of flowers he had given me and flushed them one by one down the lavatory. Their petals floated on the surface of the water, smooth and pink and perfumed. Then I went to the dreary little room at the end of the corridor, and stared out of the window. It was raining, a dark, thin October drizzle that sheened the streets beyond the hospital. The television was on, but I didn't hear it. I heard only Toby's voice, saying, *I don't think we should see so much of each other, Rebecca.*

I had been unable to stop myself whispering, 'Please, Toby. Not *now*.' I had seen him flinch. Then he had said, 'It just hasn't felt right for a while. But because of the baby—' and he had reddened, and looked away, and I had heard myself say coolly, 'Of course. If that's how you feel.' Anything rather than become an unwanted, burdensome, pitiable thing.

I turned away from the window. *EastEnders* was on the television, and a very young girl in a shabby dressing gown was curled in front of it, smoking. She offered me a cigarette, and I accepted one, though I hadn't smoked since university. On the side of the packet was written a slogan, SMOKING CAN DAMAGE THE HEALTH OF YOUR UNBORN CHILD, but that didn't matter any more. My poor little half-formed child had been, like the flowers, disposed of. I lit the cigarette and closed my eyes, and saw petals floating on the water, pink and foetus-shaped.

After I was discharged from hospital I went back to my flat in Teddington. I rent the ground floor of one of the many Victorian villas that line the streets of west London. The rooms – kitchen, bathroom, and bedsitting room – had a dusty, unfamiliar look. There was a heap of letters by the front door, and the answerphone was blinking frantically. I disregarded both and lay down on the bed, my coat wrapped around me.

I thought of Toby. I had first met Toby Carne eighteen months ago, in South Kensington. There had been a sudden heavy rain shower, I had had no raincoat, and when a gentleman had drawn level with me and offered to share his umbrella, I had thankfully accepted. I said 'gentleman', an old-fashioned term, because Toby had looked, to me, every inch the gentleman – Burberry and black city umbrella; short dark hair just touching his collar; old but expensive leather briefcase. I had guessed him to be around ten years older than me, and I had walked beside him, forgetting to dodge the puddles, hypnotized by his sudden smile and by the unmistakable interest in his eyes. When he suggested going for a drink to escape the rain, I accepted. By the time we parted, he had my name and telephone number. I had not expected him to phone, but he did, a few days later. I'd made him laugh, he explained. I was refreshing, different.

Toby had been my adventure. He had come from another world, and I had believed that our relationship would transform me. And it had, for a while. With Toby, I had lost weight, had worn smarter clothes, and had my long hair lightened. I had worn high heels and had not tripped over them, and I had bought expensive make-up, the sort that stays where you put it on. I had visited Toby's parents' house in Surrey, and had pretended that I was used to soft chairs whose cushions did not fray, and bathrooms with matching towels. Together we had visited

Amsterdam, Paris, and Brussels; together we had dined in expensive restaurants and been invited to fashionable parties. He introduced me to his lawyer friends as ‘Rebecca Bennett, the biographer’; they tended to look blank, which he noticed after a while. He suggested I write a novel; I explained that I needed the solidity of history. He proposed, late and drunk on one glorious summer’s night, that we try for a baby, and when, a couple of months later, I told him that I was pregnant, he toasted the infant with the best champagne, but did not suggest that we move in together. And when, several weeks after that, I began to lose our baby at a dull but important dinner party, he seemed put out that I had chosen such a time and such a place.

I had considered my remaking, which he had begun and I had colluded with, to be permanent. With one sentence – *I don’t think we should see so much of each other* – he had reminded me of what I really was. My ‘difference’ had become tiresome or, worse, embarrassing. And I hadn’t made him laugh for ages.

In the days after I came home from hospital, I did not leave the flat. I drank cups of tea and ate, when I could be bothered to eat, the contents of ancient forgotten tins that gathered dust at the back of the kitchen cupboard. I neither answered the telephone nor opened the post. The dull ache in my belly, a memento of the miscarriage, slowly faded. The panicked feeling, the sense that everything was falling apart, persisted. I slept as much as I could, though my dreams were punctuated by nightmares.

Then Jane turned up. Jane is my elder sister. She has two little boys aged one and three and a cottage in Berkshire. A mild but persistent mutual envy has always been a part of our relationship. Jane hammered on the door until I opened it, then took one look at the frowns and squalor and at me, and said, ‘Honestly, Becca, you are hopeless.’ I burst into tears, and we hugged awkwardly, the products of a family not much given to displays of physical affection.

I spent a week with Jane, and then returned to London. You must begin to pick up the threads, she said, as she saw me onto the train. But it did not seem to me that there were any threads left to pick up. The life I had planned had been Toby and the baby and a continuation of the career I had struggled for throughout my twenties. I had lost both Toby and the child, and, though I sat dutifully at my desk and stared at my word processor, I was not able to write. I could think of nothing worth writing about. Any sentence I attempted to assemble was clumsy and meaningless. Ideas flickered through my head and I scribbled them down in my notebook, but the next morning they always seemed shallow, empty.

Jane and Steve invited me to stay with them at Christmas. The noise and enthusiasm of the little boys filled in the gaps made by my mother’s death, four years ago, and my father’s cantankerousness. Back in London, Charles and Lucy Lightman dragged me off to a New Year party. I’ve known Charles Lightman for years. He and his sister Lucy both have pale green eyes and the sort of fine, light brown hair that keeps to no particular style. Charles and I met at university, but now he has his own production company, Lighthouse Productions, which specializes in television programmes with an archaeological or historical interest. The previous summer we had worked together on a documentary, *Sisters of the Moon*.

At the party, the ritual beginnings of courtship – the *What do you do?* and the *Shall I get you a drink?* – seemed forced. In the bathroom, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror

Round face, short mousy hair (I'd had it cut a few weeks before, and could no longer be bothered colouring it), light blue eyes expressing a dazed bewilderment and defencelessness that seemed to me inappropriate to my thirty-one years. I stared in disgust at my ineffectual reflection, and then grabbed my coat and went home. But I thought, as I curled up in bed to escape the sounds of revelry on the street outside, that I was doing better. It was weeks since I had cried myself to sleep, weeks since I had felt a stab of pain at the sight of a dark-haired man, or a baby in a pram. I was teaching myself not to feel. I was teaching myself well.

A fortnight later, I put up in the local shop an advertisement offering tutoring in A level history. I'd taught before, but had thankfully abandoned teaching after the modest success of my biography of Ellen Wilkinson. But every spark of creativity seemed to have died, and my account was badly overdrawn at the bank. I had several replies to my advert, yet, as I arranged time slots in my diary, I felt a qualm of nervousness, a fleeting suspicion that, faced by these unknown students, I would be dull, uninspiring, inaccurate.

In the middle of February, Charles, bearing a Chinese takeaway and a bottle of red wine, called at my flat. *Sisters of the Moon* was to be broadcast at nine o'clock that evening. Looking around with some amazement, he said, 'But you're always so organized, darling,' and I felt fleetingly embarrassed by the heaps of unwashed dishes, the balls of dust gathering in the corners of the room.

Charles and I sat on my bed, watching the television, eating lemon chicken and egg fried rice. My name was on the credits, and I had already seen the preview, of course, but now the programme seemed alien, nothing to do with me. Someone else had interviewed those frail old ladies, someone else had consigned to her tape recorder those sad tales of abandonment and betrayal. *Sisters of the Moon* told the story of a group of women, victims of the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. The Act had allowed local authorities to certify and incarcerate pregnant women who were destitute or, in the eyes of a judgemental male authority, immoral – unmarried mothers, in other words. The Act was not repealed until the 1950s, and by then the asylum was those women's home, and the outside world a changed, incomprehensible place.

Researching the programme, I had met Ivy Lunn in an old people's home in Nottingham. She had been almost ninety years old, and as bright as a button. I had taken her out to tea, a treat which had evoked in her a mixture of delight and trepidation. When, over scones and jam, she had relaxed a little, she had told me her story. At the age of fourteen, Ivy had obtained a position as a scullery-maid in a house in London, just after the end of the First World War. One morning, the eldest son of the house had come into the bathroom as she was cleaning the tub. She had felt his hands below her waist, pulling up her skirt. She had been afraid to cry out when he had raped her, afraid afterwards to tell anyone. She had understood neither what he had done, nor the possible consequences of it. She had known only that he had hurt and degraded her. When her pregnancy had begun to show, Ivy's mistress dismissed her. When Ivy tried to explain what had happened, it was made clear that all the responsibility was hers. The son was returned to public school, and Ivy was sent to the asylum. Sitting there on the bed, Charles's arm slung around my shoulders, I remembered that I had cried when Ivy had told me her story. I had sat in that chintzy little café and wept tears of pity. Ivy had comforted *me*. And yet now, all these long months later, I felt nothing.

The credits rolled, the closing theme faded, and Charles gave a whoop of delight. His gooseberry-green eyes were bright with exhilaration, and he talked very fast.

‘Stunning, don’t you think, Becca? Should be some bloody good reviews. I shall go out first thing and buy all the papers. We make a good team, don’t we?’ And he lunged forward and kissed me.

‘Coffee,’ I said firmly, disentangling myself.

‘I’ve an idea for another piece—’ he yelled, as I ground beans in the kitchen. ‘Public schools at the beginning of the century. You know, beating and buggery. I’m going to tie it in with the First World War, loss of Empire, all that—’

He rambled on while I poured boiling water into the cafetière, and put crockery on a tray. After a while, I stopped listening to him. To create a documentary that will make the viewer weep, you have to feel for your subjects. If Ivy Lunn, who had been raped and incarcerated and separated for almost a lifetime from her only child, was no longer able to move me, then I doubted whether anything could.

A week later, I had a telephone call from my agent, Nancy Walker. ‘*Terrific* news, Rebecca,’ she cried. ‘I’m *delighted*.’ Nancy always speaks in italics. She went on, ‘Sophia Jennings from Crawfords has just been on the phone. They’d like to meet up with you, talk through a possible project.’ I could almost hear her smile.

Crawfords is a successful and reputable London publisher. Nancy explained, ‘They’re planning to commission a life of Dame Tilda Franklin.’

Until a few years ago, every newspaper or television investigation concerned with child welfare had necessitated an interview with Dame Tilda. She had devoted her life to the welfare of children – adopting and fostering numerous orphaned infants, setting up psychiatric clinics to care for disturbed children, and organizing charities and helplines and safe houses for those abused or at risk. Loving, yet efficient; gentle, but incisive. When I thought back, I only vaguely remembered Tilda Franklin’s face – a fleeting recollection of charismatic beauty and a sense of intelligence and vigour behind the charm.

‘They want to talk to *me*?’ I said incredulously. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Apparently Crawfords first contacted Dame Tilda years ago, but she’s always refused. And then *she* telephoned *them*, insisting on *you*. She said that she won’t consider anyone else.’

There was a pause, as Nancy waited for me to comment. But I said nothing. I was, literally, speechless. I couldn’t think why Dame Tilda Franklin should want me to write her biography – and I was still inclined to believe that it was all a mistake – but nevertheless it was as though I had suddenly turned the corner of a very long, dark tunnel, and could see in the distance a pinpoint of light. I knew that I ought to tell Nancy that I couldn’t write any more, but for some reason – professional pride, I suppose – I did not.

‘*Fascinating* life ...’ added Nancy. ‘She did something terribly heroic in the war, I believe. Rebecca?’ A note of anxiety had entered her voice. ‘You are pleased, aren’t you?’

‘Delighted,’ I mumbled, but remembered too clearly sitting in front of the word processor, unable to write a coherent sentence. I said cautiously, ‘I’m not sure, Nancy. All those children ... Could I do justice to her? And it would be a lot of work ...’

‘That hasn’t put you off before,’ said Nancy briskly. ‘I’m sure you could make a *marvello* job of it. Think it over, Rebecca. Give me a ring, and I’ll arrange a preliminary meeting with Sophia.’

She added a few pleasantries, and then rang off. I sat for a while, staring at the wall. I should have explained, I thought, that I’d lost confidence in my ability even to write a shopping list. And that it really wasn’t my sort of thing, to write the biography of a saint. I prefer to show the skull beneath the skin. History only interests me when the glaze cracks and I glimpse clay.

How could I describe the happy families that Tilda Franklin had created, when that sort of security was something I had never really known? How could I write of the joy of caring for children, when my only attempt to create a new life had ended in miscarriage? I picked up the telephone, ready to dial Nancy’s number and tell her that there was really no point in my talking to the people at Crawfords, but I put the receiver back without touching the keypad. There was still that flicker of optimism, that small, muted return of the self-belief I thought I had lost for ever.

I grabbed my car keys and left the house and drove to Twickenham, where I walked watching the mist rise from the Thames. A wet, yapping dog ran along the bank towards me and shook himself so that drops of water spun from his fur like sparks from a Catherine wheel. The clouds had thinned at last, and I glimpsed the sun, a dim pearl of pink and orange. The water lapped at the toes of my boots, but I turned away from the river before the clouds could return to blot out the sunshine. And when I reached home, I made myself phone Nancy. ‘I’d go and talk to Crawfords next week,’ I told her.

Dame Tilda Franklin lived in the village of Woodcote St Martin, in Oxfordshire. Trapped on the M40 between hissing lorries and impatient sales reps, I almost wished I could turn back. But I forced myself to drive on, lurching and pausing with the queues of traffic, peering through the hypnotic sweep of the windscreen wipers.

I’d talked through the project with my prospective editor. She had suggested I speak to Tilda Franklin herself, and, if I was still interested in the commission, rough out some ideas. If Crawfords were happy with my suggestions, they’d pay a reasonable, if not over-generous advance.

It was a relief to leave the motorway, and to plunge into a countryside of rolling hills and narrow, curling roads, and hollows where mist gathered in pools. I had to stop several times to check the map. I longed for coffee. It was early, not yet nine o’clock, and the world was only half awake. After about half an hour, I reached Woodcote St Martin, a sprawling village with a green, and a duckpond, and a couple of shops. I stopped at the newsagent and asked for directions to Dame Tilda’s home, The Red House. ‘She’s not been well,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘She often has a touch of bronchitis at this time of year.’

The Red House stood a little apart from the rest of the village. I saw a gleam of silver river to one side of the building, and playing fields, their untenanted swings ghostly in the greyish light, to the other. The house was large and old, its gables pierced by stone windows. The walls were of dark red brick, and the roof-tiles were discoloured by lichen. Box trees, carved into huge globes and four-sided pyramids, walled the narrow path. The mist faded their dark

green leaves, and pearled their fantastic festoon of spiders' webs. Chill and solid, the green topiaried bushes enclosed me between them, cutting me off from the rest of the garden. I shivered: this was not the careful tangle of rose and aster that I had expected. These trees were vast and arcane, their shapes suggesting a symbolism unintelligible to me. I was relieved to escape them for the narrow gravel court in front of the house. When I looked down at myself, and saw the gossamer that clung to my jacket, I brushed it hurriedly away and rang the doorbell.

Inside, I followed Dame Tilda's housekeeper through rooms and passageways. Portraits of children – painted, sketched and photographed – looked back at me from the walls. Children that Dame Tilda Franklin had cared for, I assumed. Infants and adolescents, girls with ribbons in their hair, boys in baggy corduroy shorts and sagging socks. Fading childhood scrawls, clumsily worked length of cross-stitch, a blurred snapshot of a boy, hair quiffed Fifties fashion, standing beside a gleaming motor scooter. The gilt frames of the pictures lit the dark oak-panelled interior.

The housekeeper led me to a room at the back of the house and tapped on the door. 'Miss Bennett is here, Tilda.'

The garden room was furnished with shabby, comfortable furniture, and plants – hoyas, plumbago, bougainvillea – crawling up the walls. A woman was standing in a corner of the room, secateurs in hand. She turned towards me.

'Miss Bennett? How good of you to come. I do apologize for suggesting such an unreasonably early hour, but I have a dreadful tendency to fall asleep in the afternoons.'

'Mrs—' But I remembered the damehood, or whatever one calls such things. 'I mean, Dame Matilda—' I floundered.

She put aside the secateurs. 'Call me Tilda, *please*. The "Dame" reminds me of the pantomime. And no-one has ever called me Matilda – so forbidding, don't you think?'

She smiled. Beauty lingers, and though Tilda Franklin was now eighty years old I could see its lineaments still in her high, delicate cheekbones, her straight, narrow nose. Her eyelids were blue-veined, almost transparent, and her light eyes were set deep into her skull. Her face was longish, carefully sculptured, and her spine even in old age was straight. Beside Tilda I felt short, sloppy, troll-featured. She wore a soft tweed skirt, a cashmere cardigan, pearls; I, a long black skirt and suede jacket that I'd always thought possessed a sexily crumpled allure. I should have worn my one good suit.

I asked her to call me Rebecca, and we shook hands. Her fingers were insubstantial and birdlike. I thought that if I gripped too hard the bones would turn to powder.

'You'll join me for coffee, won't you, Rebecca? Such a long journey. So good of you to come.'

She talked about the plants in the garden room until the housekeeper reappeared with a tray of coffee and home-made biscuits.

'The hoya is in flower already. It has a glorious scent, though only at night-time, of course. I have never understood how a plant can have fragrance at one time of day and not at another. Patrick, my grandson, tried to explain to me once.' She added, 'I am so pleased that you agreed to talk to me, Rebecca. Do you know why I suggested that you write me

biography?’

I mumbled cautiously, ‘I assumed you’d read my book.’

She shook her head. ‘I’m afraid I don’t read much these days. My eyesight – such a nuisance. I listen to the television, though. I saw your documentary.’

Everything about her – this house, her appearance, even the coffee cups – proclaimed her to be from another age. I couldn’t picture Tilda slumped on the living-room sofa, flicking channels on a remote control.

‘You saw *Sisters of the Moon*?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. And a few days later, I was in Blackwells, buying a birthday present for my granddaughter, and I saw your name on a book cover. Providential, don’t you think?’ She paused. ‘I found your television programme very ... very touching.’

I was horrified to notice that there were tears in her eyes.

‘Very touching, and very intelligent. No unnecessary sentiment. No sensationalism. You stood back, and let those women tell their stories. I admire that. It implies a certain wisdom, a sense of your own limited importance in the scheme of things. It implies also a sense of justice. I do believe in justice, you see, Rebecca.’ Her expression altered, and her light green eyes darkened. ‘People have forgotten those women, and they have forgotten the power that men like Edward de Paveley possessed. No-one should have such power.’

‘Who is – was – Edward de Paveley?’

‘Edward de Paveley was my father. He raped my mother, who was a maidservant in his house. When she became pregnant, he had her consigned to the workhouse, and from there she was sent to a mental institution in Peterborough.’

I was aware of a flicker of surprise. Looking at Tilda Franklin now, it was hard to believe that such a proud, elegant woman should have had so ignominious a beginning.

‘I am reckoned to have led an interesting life,’ Tilda added. ‘I have always guarded my privacy, though. But when I watched your programme I thought that could be interpreted as cowardice, rather than a lack of egotism. I have made a bargain with myself – I shall tell the story of my life in order that my mother’s story can be told.’ Tilda put aside her cup and saucer. ‘I would very much like you to consider writing my biography, Rebecca. I don’t expect you to give me an answer yet, of course. But you’ll think about it, won’t you?’

I mumbled something noncommittal. I couldn’t bring myself to confess to her that, though I had once been able to write, I was no longer able to do so. That Toby had taken, along with my self-respect, my art.

She seemed to take my silence for assent. ‘May I tell you a little more? Both my mother’s family – the Greenlees – and the de Paveleys lived in Southam, in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Fen villages were at that time very remote, very rural, little worlds of their own. My mother never travelled further than Ely, and that only occasionally. A wealthy landowner would have great influence in such a place.’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘My mother’s family had lived and worked in Southam for generations. My grandmother died young, and my grandfather – my mother’s father – was a labourer for the de Paveleys. They had two children – Sarah was the elder, and Deborah the younger. Their cottage was owned by the de Paveleys, and the

renting of it was dependent on my grandfather's continuing to work for the family. So when he died in 1912, the sisters lost their home as well as their father. Deborah, who was sixteen, went into service with the de Paveleys, but Sarah left the village to try her luck elsewhere.'

She paused. Looking outside, I noticed that the sun had broken through the mist. It caught the facets of the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, so that pinpoints of coloured light – blue and orange and violet – danced across the walls.

'I don't know exactly what happened. Only that Edward de Paveley came to my mother's bed and forced himself on her. And that my mother was thrown out of the Hall as soon as her pregnancy became obvious, and that she had nowhere to go but the workhouse. And I guess ... I guess that my mother pleaded with Mr de Paveley. Told him that the child was his. Asked for his help.'

I imagined a bleak, featureless landscape, striped by narrow bands of water. I saw a young woman, little more than a child, her body distorted by pregnancy. And a man – on horseback perhaps, or driving one of those boxy turn-of-the-century cars – pausing to speak to her.

'Whatever my mother asked of Edward de Paveley, he refused to help her,' Tilda continued. 'In the May of 1914 she gave birth to me in the workhouse, and then the order was signed confining her to the asylum. I have a copy of that order. Edward de Paveley was a magistrate, and his signature is on the committal certificate.'

She fell silent, and when I glimpsed the terrible sadness in her eyes I could only guess what it had cost her to lay bare to a stranger the secrets of what she had admitted was a very private soul. Then her expression altered: she seemed mentally to shake herself. 'I was born in the workhouse,' she explained, 'but I spent my infancy in an orphanage. Illegitimate children were taken away from their mothers as soon as they were born, of course. People weren't keen to adopt children such as myself, because it was thought that an illegitimate baby might inherit its mother's immorality.'

The unwanted child, I thought, would salve the horror of her own birth by devoting her life to the rescue of other abandoned children. Such a neat, circular story.

'I lived in the orphanage until I was about a year old. Then Sarah came back.' Tilda smiled. 'My Aunt Sarah. I have a picture.'

She opened the album that lay on the table. I looked down at the photograph. The face that stared back at me had that solemn, slightly uneasy expression common to so many portraits from the early part of the century. Something to do with having to sit still so long for the camera, I suppose. Tilda's Aunt Sarah had a stout, shapeless bosom covered by a high-necked blouse. I could see nothing of Tilda in her plain, strong face, nothing at all.

'Deborah was the pretty sister and Sarah was the clever one,' said Tilda, reading my thoughts. 'I haven't a photograph of Deborah, I'm afraid.'

'You said that Sarah went away after her father died. Where did she go?'

'Oh, anywhere and everywhere, I should imagine, knowing Sarah. She rarely settled in one place for long. By the time she came back to Cambridgeshire, my mother was dying. The regime was harsh in workhouses and asylums, and Deborah had never been strong.'

Tilda paused, and closed the photograph album. Just for a moment, her thin hand touched

mine. 'Sarah knew nothing of what had happened to her sister until she came back to the village. You must understand, Rebecca, how remote East Anglia was in the early part of the century. Very few people had telephones, and my mother had left school when she was ten to look after her father, and was more or less illiterate. Anyway, Sarah travelled to the asylum and spoke to her sister before she died. Deborah told her what had happened. I imagine ... imagine, sometimes, how Sarah must have felt. How it must have eaten away at her, the anger and the guilt.'

'Guilt?'

'At not being there when her sister needed her. Sarah was a strong person, Rebecca. Sarah would have thought of something. Sarah would never have allowed Deborah to go to the workhouse.'

'So Sarah adopted you?'

'Yes. She buried her sister, and adopted her niece. I don't remember the orphanage at all of course – I was a baby when I left it. But Sarah never tried to pretend that she was my mother. I have always admired her for that honesty. As soon as I was old enough to understand, she told me that I was her younger sister's child. Nothing more than that, naturally.'

Your father raped your mother. I saw the impossibility of explaining such an outrage. 'And you lived ...?' I prompted.

'All over East Anglia and southern England. Suffolk ... Norfolk ... Kent, mostly. Sarah did seasonal farmwork.'

I smiled. 'Like Tess of the D'Urbervilles?'

'A little like that. In the summer we helped with the harvest and picked hops in Kent. In winter, we'd take in sewing. My Aunt Sarah could sew beautifully. You couldn't see her stitches. She taught me to sew. She taught me everything.'

'Did you go to school?'

'Now and then, if we stayed in a village for more than a few weeks. Sarah taught me to read and to write, and she had a wonderful head for arithmetic. When I did go to school, I was always put in a class years above my age.'

It sounded a colourful, gypsy life, until I remembered that Tilda had been born in 1911, in that ominous year, and that she had passed her childhood in the haunted, febrile Twenties. I said tentatively, 'It must have been hard sometimes.'

'Oh yes. I have never since been cold as I remember being cold then. How the frost used to eat into my hands and feet. The clouds that formed in the air when I took my first breath in the morning. And I was teased by other children, of course. For being different.'

Her words were matter-of-fact, untinged by self-pity. She still sat as upright as that woman in the sepia photograph, the aunt who had rescued her from the orphanage.

'I am a little tired,' she said suddenly. 'So tedious to be old.' She turned to me, focusing her flinty grey eyes on me. 'Do you wish to know more, Rebecca? Shall I tell you about Joss ...?'

'Jossy?' I repeated.

‘Jossy de Paveley. Edward de Paveley’s daughter.’ Her expression altered, one of those abrupt changes of mood that I came to realize were characteristic of her. ‘She was my half sister, of course ...’

When her father was wounded in 1918, Joscelin de Paveley prayed each night that he would not recover. When he returned home, lurching on crutches from the Bentley to the front door, Jossy’s infant faith in God faltered, and never quite recovered.

Edward de Paveley’s experiences of war, his loss of a leg in the last months of bitter fighting, his near death and eventual recovery, did not, in forcing him to confront his own mortality, soften his autocratic character. To Jossy, the only lasting effect of the war that destroyed for ever Europe’s complacency was that her father had become slower, less mobile. He was, simply, easier to run away from.

Through the years of her childhood, Jossy and her father and Uncle Christopher in the steward’s house lived separate lives, planets orbiting the necessary sun of Hall and estate; their existences conjoined, but rarely touching. Uncle Christopher’s sphere was the fields and dikes and tenant farms, Jossy’s was school and the old nursery.

The de Paveleys’ house was called the Hall (it may have had another name once, but that had been forgotten centuries ago). The nearest village was called Southam. Both Southam and the Hall were built on small, separate, shallow islands of clay. In wet winters, floodwaters licked at the shells and seedlings in Jossy’s garden.

Jossy’s life was governed by her desire to avoid her father, to escape the contempt in his gaze and the cold sarcasm that brought tears to her eyes. Occasionally, disastrously, the orbits collided. Once he tried to teach her to ride. The lesson lasted less than an hour. Jossy slumped in the saddle as her father shouted at her and beat his riding whip against his fallen leg. To someone else she might have attempted to explain that though she adored the pony, she was a little afraid of it. To her father, who was never afraid of anything, she knew that would be futile. When she realized that he would sell the pony, whom she had begun to love, Jossy started to weep, which made him angrier. The whip stung her knuckles as they gripped the reins, and Edward de Paveley railed against the fate that had given him only one spineless daughter.

Jossy divided her time between school, where she was reasonably happy, and home, where her happiness was dependent on avoiding her father. She had her own small kingdoms – the nursery, where she taught school to her dolls and gave them tea parties, and the garden, with the old swing. She had her mother’s desk in the morning room, where she wrote her stories and drew. She invented companions for herself, sketching pictures of her imaginary family. There were three sisters – Rosalie was the eldest, Claribel the youngest, and Jossy herself was in the middle. Their father was dead, and their mother was a glamorous, shadowy creature.

Jossy realized, when she was eleven or so, that her father would not remarry. Having told one day with a friend who lived in Ely, she overheard Marjorie’s mother say to another lady, ‘I told Marjorie to invite poor little Joscelin de Paveley. I knew Alicia, her mother. The father won’t marry again – I’ve heard that his wound won’t let him.’ Jossy had struggled to hear more, but Mrs Lyons’ voice had lowered to a whisper. Jossy was not at all surprised to hear

that her father's false leg prevented him from remarrying. It was to her a source of revolt and fascination. The echo of his uneven step on the stone flags of the Hall was the sound of fear. She had overheard Cook say to Nana that the master's leg had been blown off at the hip. Once, stumbling clumsily in a passageway, she had touched her father's false leg. It had repulsed her, a dead thing attached to a living body.

Jossy had a tendency to be plump, and hair and eyes that she described to herself as muddy brown coloured. When she was fifteen, she began to rinse her hair with lemon juice and, in the many hours spent gazing into the mirror, almost succeeded in convincing herself that she was becoming fairer.

When she was nineteen, Jossy left school. She'd had two tries at her school certificate, and had failed both, but then most of the girls at her school failed their school certificate. The holding pen for the dim daughters of the rich, her father called it. On the day she left school Jossy expected something extraordinary to happen, some sort of acknowledgement that she was now a grown woman, a young lady. She would become suddenly beautiful. She would run the Hall with such smooth efficiency that even her father would be impressed. And she would meet, of course, the Gentleman.

She spent hours imagining the Gentleman. He was tall, dark, fleet-footed. He drove a car and rode a horse with fearless competence. He had a mysterious, troubled past, and he cared for Jossy more than for anything in the world. They would meet in romantic circumstances. Escaping from the noise and heat of a ball, she would wander into the garden, where he would catch sight of her. He would be momentarily struck off his guard by her beauty. They would dance alone, whirling down paths studded with daisies, the scent of lilies perfuming the air, and the only light the soft gleam of the moon ...

But nothing changed. Mrs Bradley and Cook continued to run the Hall, and Jossy's hair, in spite of the lemon juice, remained a defiantly muddy brown. She attended dances and parties at her friends' houses, but the boys were gauche and spotty and talked about cricket and motor cars. Nana still made Jossy's dresses, which were not the sinuous clinging satin gowns pictured in the magazines that Jossy bought. Her days were divided between the nursery and the morning room and the garden, but without term-time to break up the tedium. Her outings were to church and to her cousin Kit, in the steward's house. The days seemed very long. She kept her faith, though: she knew that he'd come. Two years after she had left school, Jossy and Paveley still waited for the Gentleman.

I sat back from the word processor. I felt exhausted but exhilarated. Four pages. I had driven home from Oxfordshire and, not even bothering to take off my coat, I had written four pages. And it had been easy. I felt as though someone had slackened the rope around my neck, the rope that had been choking me for months.

It was odd, though, that I had written it as a story. Rebecca Bennett usually wrote dispassionately, objectively, sifting the facts. Yet one can never be sure of the past, it twists and turns like the coloured facets of the crystal chandelier in Tilda Franklin's garden room.

Afterwards I went out to meet Charles Lightman. Over risotto and a bottle of Pinot Grigio he talked about his latest idea.

'Changing patterns of work – the death of the industrial revolution, darling. Showing ho

similar the lives of contemporary teleworkers are to their pre-industrial forebears.’ Charles gestured with his fork. ‘Craftsmen – they had spinner’s elbow or something, and hardly ever travelled more than a few miles from their homes.’ The fork stabbed the air again. ‘And no people have RSI and can only go anywhere if they can afford to run a car. Neat, eh, Rebecca?’

I said, ‘What about the public schools? I thought you were going to—’

‘A bit *tired*, don’t you think, darling?’ Charles shrugged dismissively. ‘This would be so much more *relevant*.’

I told him my news, and he frowned, placing Tilda’s name.

‘Saviour of widows and orphans—’

‘Just orphans.’

‘Is there enough meat in it for you?’

The waiter poured coffee. I frowned. ‘I think so. Though it all seems so long ago ...’

‘Well ... Ellen Wilkinson ...’ Charles added, rather pompously, ‘The task of the biographer is to make his subject relevant to the present day.’

‘*Her* subject,’ I said automatically. I remembered the urgency with which I had written Jossy’s story, how the words had flowed from fingertip to keyboard, but now my relief was tinged with anxiety. Perhaps my recovery was only temporary. Perhaps the next time I tried to write, the paralysis would return.

‘And ...?’ Charles coaxed me.

‘And I’ve never written about a living person before. Ellen Wilkinson died in 1947.’

He shrugged. ‘Some of the women in *Sisters of the Moon* were still alive.’

‘Yes.’ I spiralled cream into my coffee. ‘It’s also that she’s *good*.’

Writing the life story of such a pillar of the community would be time-consuming, and would also be frustrating. Tilda herself had admitted her fondness for privacy – from which avenues of her life would she shut me off? She had been old and fragile, yet I had sensed the strength beneath the brittle exterior. She had travelled from the workhouse to the weathered, beautiful building that I had visited today. A weak person could not have done that. Her strength both fascinated me and intimidated me.

‘The dullness of saints.’ Charles’s voice interrupted my thoughts. ‘Why Satan’s the most interesting character in *Paradise Lost*.’

‘All those rescued orphans ... all the blobby little scrawls she’s framed and put on her wall ... they cut her off from me. How could I ever get through to her, Charles?’

I thought that Tilda’s goodness and beauty was like an armour. It diminished me, and made her untouchable. I’d look at her, and her armour would shine back, and I’d doubt my own reflection.

‘Perhaps,’ said Charles lazily, ‘you’ll discover something juicy. A gorgeously clanking skeleton in the cupboard. Wouldn’t that be something?’

I spent the weekend with Jane. On Sunday we wrapped the boys up well, and went for a long walk in the countryside. There were aconites like yellow stars in the hedgerows, and puddles

for Jack and Lawrie to splash in. Walking, Jane told me about the tedium of jumble sales and the exhaustion of interrupted nights, and I told her about Tilda. Go and see her again, talk to her a bit more, she said, very sensibly. You've nothing to lose.

So on Monday morning I telephoned Tilda, and on Tuesday I drove again to The Rectory House. We sat in the upstairs drawing room, by the fire. The room had originally been a solar: a large, semicircular window looked out over the front garden and caught what sunlight there was. Heat gathered in the room; surreptitiously I slipped off my waistcoat and rolled up my sleeves. The old always feel the cold.

But Tilda's mood had altered since the previous week. She was fractious and difficult, evading my questions or giving incomplete answers. She had become suddenly more frail, so that her skin had the absolute pallor of old age. Outside the wind flung fragments of branches and leaf, remnants of a storm. The howl of the wind, the snap of twig against window pane seemed to increase her nervousness. I mentioned Jossy's name, and Sarah Greenlees's, but she was monosyllabic, unforthcoming. Tilda's lack of response would, in a person who lacked her uprightness and grace, have been positively rude. I was aware of both anger and frustration. The biography had been her idea, after all, and not mine.

In an attempt to save a wasted day, I persuaded Tilda to let me see the photograph album again. I turned the pages for her and she glanced at them disinterestedly. One photograph in particular caught my eye – a man and a child, both strikingly good-looking. I was about to ask Tilda their names when she started and said, 'Isn't that someone coming up the path? Why don't you tell me who it is, my dear?'

I rose and looked out of the window, down to where the path was squeezed by the towering box topiaries. 'A man ... fair hair – tallish. Young.'

I heard Tilda whisper, 'Patrick,' and for the first time that day, she smiled. I remembered that on my previous visit she had mentioned a grandson called Patrick.

'Patrick,' said Tilda, when her visitor opened the door of the solar, 'why didn't you tell me you were coming? You could have had lunch.'

He hugged her. 'It was a spur of the moment thing. I'd a client to see in Oxford.'

Tilda turned to me. 'Let me introduce you to Miss Bennett. Rebecca, this is my grandson Patrick Franklin.'

We shook hands. 'I had a postcard from Dad this morning,' said Patrick to Tilda. 'From Ulan Bator.'

Tilda sniffed. 'Joshua courts unnecessary danger. He always has.'

'It runs in the family.' Patrick Franklin was wearing a leather jacket and jeans. Not client-visiting clothes, I thought.

'Ask Joan if she will make us tea, won't you, Patrick? Or have you not eaten? I'm sure that Joan would make you an omelette.'

I said quickly, 'I could have a word with your housekeeper on my way out, Tilda.'

She turned to me. 'But you mustn't go yet, Rebecca. We've hardly started.'

I had to stifle my impatience. 'You and Patrick will want to talk—'

‘Patrick and I have plenty of time to talk. It would be quite ridiculous for you to rush back to London already. Such a waste of a journey.’

But after tea, Tilda fell asleep, her mouth neatly closed, her eyes flickering behind her lids as she dreamed. Patrick Franklin tucked a rug over her, and turned to me.

‘She’ll snooze for ten minutes or so. It’s so damned hot in here, I really must escape for a while. Has my grandmother shown you the garden yet, Rebecca?’

The garden of The Red House, which I had glimpsed through the conservatory windows on my previous visit, had been an enticing tangle of paths and overgrown trees. I followed Patrick outside. It had stopped raining, but there was a dampness in the air, and the tug of the wind.

Patrick spoke as we descended the steps of the terrace. ‘Tilda told me that you’re a writer. I’ve written a biography of Ellen Wilkinson.’

‘Just the one?’

‘And a television programme.’

‘Oh yes, the mental asylums. Are you a journalist?’

When I shook my head he seemed relieved. ‘The Ellen Wilkinson biography was an expansion of my MA thesis,’ I explained. ‘I’ve written several articles for *History Today*.’ My achievements sounded thin and unimpressive. I didn’t mention my A level tutoring: it would have sounded pathetic.

We walked beneath dripping trees, beside crimson and lime-stemmed dogwoods. Crocuses shot purple and gold heads through the soil. The winding brick paths led us to a small circular clearing made of a whorl of moss-covered bricks. A stone nymph, bruised with lichen, stood on a plinth in the centre of the circle.

‘Fancy Tilda agreeing that her biography should be written.’ Patrick’s palm rested on the nymph’s head. ‘I never thought she would. Various publishers have tried to persuade her over the years, you know. She’s sent them all away with fleas in their ears.’

I made my position clear. ‘Nothing’s definite yet. Tilda would like me to write it, but I’m not sure.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a big commitment. I’d have to be certain that I’m the right person to do it.’

Patrick’s eyes were bluer than Tilda’s. A small smile twisted the corner of his mouth. ‘Tilda seems to think you’ll do it. Though to be honest, I’d be relieved if you turned her down. I tried to persuade her to give up the idea, but she can be as stubborn as hell.’

Angrily, I wondered if that explained Tilda’s altered attitude today. Because of her meddling grandson, she was having second thoughts. ‘Why don’t you want her to? Because of me? Because I’m not sufficiently illustrious?’ I knew I sounded sarcastic.

Again, that lopsided grin. ‘Oh no. I should think you’re as good as anyone. Better than most, perhaps.’

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. I was sure it wasn’t a compliment. ‘Then ...?’

‘Tilda is old and frail. She thinks she isn’t, but she is. I’m afraid that it’ll be too much for

her. Digging up the past – reliving it. She’s had a hard life, in many ways.’

‘Is that why you’ve come today? To warn me off?’

His eyes, as he glanced at me, were cold. ‘I came here to check you out.’ His bluntness was unnerving. He began to walk back to the house, and I followed him, half running to keep up with his fast, lengthy stride.

‘Hell of a hard job, too, I should imagine.’ The words were flung over his shoulder, whipped away by the wind. ‘My grandmother isn’t always the most forthcoming of people.’

There’ll be other sources. Journals ... newspaper articles ... family ...’

He laughed. ‘Now there’s a challenge.’

‘What do you mean?’ I scuttled along the path, trying to catch up with him.

‘Some of us are rather peripatetic. And we’re a big family, if you include all the adopted and fostered children. And everyone is so ... opinionated.’

I thought that he was being intentionally irritating. His eyes met mine, challenging me. He was quite disgustingly good-looking. I was aware of his proximity, and of a tingle of excitement – I’d had a similar feeling when I started work on *Sisters of the Moon* ... a similar feeling when I’d first met Toby. Cross with myself, I pushed through the briars and old man’s beard, showering Patrick with raindrops.

Tilda was awake when we returned to the solar. The photograph album was open in front of her.

‘Rebecca, this is Daragh,’ she said, as though introducing us. She indicated the snapshot I had earlier noticed, of the dark-haired man and the child. Daragh’s hair was dark, ragged cut, and his deep-set, slightly tilted eyes laughed at me through the years. His features were an unusual mix of innocence and rapaciousness.

‘You must understand, dear,’ said Tilda hesitantly, ‘that there are things I don’t know. Things I can only guess at. Some of Daragh’s story ... Jossy’s ... But I have had forty years to think of what *might* have happened ... what *probably* happened ...’

I said gently, ‘All I can do is to gather up the pieces, fit them together, make a pattern. But some of it will inevitably be guesswork.’

Tilda nodded slowly. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes.’ And then, more firmly, ‘Patrick, you must leave us in peace. The scullery tap drips. There are washers in the cupboard beneath.’

She had become brisk and organizing again, though I noted an air of bravado about her, as if she had resolved some inner battle and come at last to a resolution. I swallowed my annoyance with her grandson, and tried to return myself to the past.

She said, ‘I want to tell you how Sarah and I came to live in the Fens. I didn’t know the name, of course, that I was related to the de Paveleys. Sarah never spoke to me about my father, and I never asked her – one didn’t, in those days. One respected one’s elders. Anyway, Aunt Sarah told me that she had rented a cottage in Southam.’

Southam, I remembered, was the Fenland village where the de Paveleys lived.

Tilda looked troubled. ‘You must remember, Rebecca, that Sarah had two reasons for hating Edward de Paveley. He had taken both her sister and her home.’

'Yet she went back. She went back to a place where she might see him every day.'

'He was ailing by then. Like many men of his generation, Edward de Paveley never really recovered from the war. And the Hall was over a mile away from the village.' Tilda began to leaf through the pages of the photograph album, and then she paused and frowned. 'Sarah changed when we came to live in Southam. She'd always been different – unconventional but when we moved into Long Cottage she became reclusive. She refused to mix with the other villagers. I know why now, of course, but I didn't then.' She stopped at a page. 'There she said, sliding the album along the table to me. 'That's our cottage.'

The black and white photograph showed me a small, low building, brick-built, thatched with reed.

'It was a farmhouse once, but much of the land had been sold off. There was still almost an acre of ground, though. I thought it was wonderful. In the spring, when the blossom blew from the apple trees, it looked like snow.'

I pictured Tilda, light-haired and grey-eyed, her skin clear and unlined, dressed in one of those drop-waisted frocks girls wore between the wars. 'How old were you?'

'I was seventeen. Sarah and I went to Southam towards the end of 1931.'

There was a knock at the door. Patrick peered round the jamb. I looked down at my notebook.

'I've fixed the tap,' he said, 'and Joan's sent up coffee.'

Tilda watched him lovingly as he carried the tray into the room and placed it on the table. When I glanced at my watch I saw that it was already four o'clock. I had arranged to go to my friend's for supper at six.

I refused coffee, and took my leave. Tilda said, 'I shall tell you about Daragh next time.'

I felt Patrick looking at me, but I evaded his eyes. I knew, though, that I had made my decision. Sentences were already forming in my head; I longed to sit and write. Tilda's story had entrapped me, weaving itself around me as finely and invisibly as the chains of gossamer that bound the box trees in The Red House's garden.

When I climbed inside my car, the grey plastic interior, the lights and switches and the jumble of crisp packets and fruit juice cartons, jarred me. They seemed to be from another world, or another time.

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