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Contents

ACT ONE: 1919–1920

The Last Day of the Year	3
The Morning After	11
Prodigal Brother	18
Circling and Re-circling	23
Entreaties	31
So First, the Primroses	37
Under Beds	41
A Sleeping Woman	44
Cristabel and the Stories	49
Waiting, Wanting	52
The Boxing Day Hunt	58
His	67
They Won't Let Him	70
Afterwards	72
The Vegetable	73
All Off	79
Things	83
A Hunter's Moon	87
Maudie Kitcat's Diary	93

ACT TWO: 1928–1938

Whale Fall	97
The Arrival of the God Poseidon	109
Welcome to Chilcombe	122
Facts Learnt by the Children	137
Through the Bluebell Woods	141
Black Flag	154
Rehearse	161
The Mysterious Travelling Ways of Voices at Night	163

<i>The Iliad</i>	168
Noises Off	178
To London	180
Maudie Kitcat's Diary	195
Picture It	196
Wings and Bones	202
Enter the Whale	212
Cuttings Kept in a Scrapbook by the Children	218

ACT THREE: 1939–1941

Parties	225
D to C	238
C to D	240
D to C	242
C to D	244
Blackout	246
Postcard	253
Note on Pink Notepaper with a Box of Turkish Delight	254
Christmas Card	255
C to D	256
Notebook Pages	258
Incomplete Letter	263
C to D	266
A Nightclub in Piccadilly	269
Note on Pink Notepaper with a Bouquet of Roses	275
Exhibition Catalogue	277

ACT FOUR: 1942–1943

Captives	283
Flossie's Diary	295
Tempo Rubato	298
The Sun and the Moon	306
D to C	318
Blank Piece of Paper	320
Vignettes	321

Copyrighted Material

Outgoings	325
Night Flight	336
A Sober Cannibal	338
Coffee, Tea	347
Captain Potter	355
New Recruits	360
Full Moon	371
Awake	380
Claudine, Gilberte	382
<i>Sous Terre</i>	389
Shadow Play	395
The Christmas Committee	399
Riven by a Tempest	405
C to D	409

ACT FIVE: 1944–1945

Higher Tiers	413
My Dear Lads	419
<i>Les Enfants Perdus</i>	428
Let's Face the Music and Dance	436
The Knight of Swords, The Star	445
The Americans	448
An Apartment in Paris	457
Antigone	468
We	476
The Island	490
August	506
What Remains	517
Empty Houses	526
Uniforms	527
Victory Pageant	533

ENCORE

C to D	545
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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	547
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ACT ONE

1919–1920

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The Last Day of the Year

31st December, 1919

Dorset

Cristabel picks up the stick. It fits well in her hand. She is in the garden, waiting with the rest of the household for her father to return with her new mother. Uniformed servants blow on cold fingers. Rooks caw half-heartedly from the trees surrounding the house. It is the last day of December, the dregs of the year. The afternoon is fading and the lawn a quagmire of mud and old snow, which three-year-old Cristabel stamps across in her lace-up leather boots, holding the stick like a sword, a miniature sentry in a brass-buttoned winter coat.

She swishes the stick to and fro, enjoying the *vvpv* *vvp* sound it makes, uses it to spoon a piece of grubby snow to her mouth. The snow is as chilly on her tongue as the frost flowers that form on her attic window, but less clinging. It tastes disappointingly nothingy. Somewhere too far away to be bothered about, her nanny is calling her name. Cristabel puts the noise away from her with a blink. She spies snowdrops simpering at the edge of the garden. *Vvvvp vvp*.

Cristabel's father, Jasper Seagrave, and his new bride are, at that moment, seated side by side in a horse-drawn carriage, travelling up the driveway towards Jasper's family home: Chilcombe, a many-gabled, many-chimneyed, ivy-covered manor house with an elephantine air of weary grandeur. In outline, it is a series of sagging triangles and tall chimney stacks, and it has huddled on a wooded cliff overhanging the ocean for four hundred years, its leaded windows narrowed against sea winds and historical progress, its general appearance one of gradual subsidence.

The staff at Chilcombe say today will be a special day, but Cristabel is finding it dull. There is too much waiting. Too much

straightening up. It is not a day that would make a good story. Cristabel likes stories that feature blunderbusses and dogs, not brides and waiting. Vvvp. As she picks up the remains of the snowdrops, she hears the bone crunch of gravel beneath wheels.

Her father is the first to disembark from the carriage, as round and satisfied as a broad bean popped from a pod. Then a single foot in a button-boot appears, followed by a velvet hat, which tilts upwards to look at the house. Cristabel watches her father's whiskery face. He too is looking upwards, gazing at the young woman in the hat, who, while still balanced on the step of the carriage, is significantly taller than him.

Cristabel marches towards them through the snow. She is almost there when her nanny grabs her, hissing, 'What have you got in your hands? Where are your gloves?'

Jasper turns. 'Why is the child so dirty?'

The dirty child ignores her father. She is not interested in him. Grumpy, angry man. Instead, she approaches the new mother, offering a handful of soil and snowdrop petals. But the new mother is adept at receiving clumsy gifts; she has, after all, accepted the blustering proposal of Jasper Seagrave, a rotund widower with an unmanageable beard and a limp.

'For me,' says the new mother, and it is not a question. 'How novel.' She steps down from the carriage and smiles, floating about her a hand which comes to rest on Cristabel's head, as if that were what the child is for. Beneath her velvet hat, the new mother is wrapped in a smart wool travelling suit and a mink fur stole.

Jasper turns to the staff and announces, 'Allow me to present my new wife: Mrs Rosalind Seagrave.'

There is a ripple of applause.

Cristabel finds it odd that the new mother should have the name Seagrave, which is her name. She looks at the soil in her hand, then turns it over, allowing it to fall on to the new mother's boots, to see what happens then.

Rosalind moves away from the unsmiling girl. A motherless child, she reminds herself, lacking in feminine guidance. She wonders if

she should have brought some ribbons for its tangled black hair, or a tortoiseshell comb, but then Jasper is at her side, leading her to the doorway.

‘Finally got you here,’ he says. ‘Chilcombe’s not quite at its best. Used to have a splendid set of iron gates at the entrance.’

As they cross the threshold, he is talking about the coming evening’s celebrations. He says the villagers are delighted by her arrival. A marquee has been erected behind the house, a pig will be roasted, and everyone will toast the nuptials with tankards of ale. He winks at her now, bristling in his tweed suit, and she is unsure what is meant by this covering and uncovering of one eye, this stagey wince.

Rosalind Seagrave, née Elliot, twenty-three years old, described in the April 1914 edition of *Tatler* magazine as ‘a poised London debutante’, walks through the stone entranceway of Chilcombe into a wood-panelled galleried room that extends upwards like a medieval knights’ hall. It is a hollow funnel, dimly lit by flickering candles in brass wall brackets, and the air has the unused quality of empty chapels in out-of-the-way places.

It is a peculiar feeling, to enter a strange house knowing it contains her future. Rosalind looks around, trying to take it in before it notices her. There is a fireplace at the back of the hall: large, stone and unlit. Crossed swords hang above it. There is not much in the way of furniture and it does not attract her as she hoped. A carved oak coffer with an iron hinge. A suit of armour holding a spear in its metal hand. A grandfather clock, a moulting Christmas tree, and a grand piano topped by a vase of lilies.

The piano, she knows, is a wedding present from her husband, but it has been put to one side beneath the stuffed head of a stag. Around the walls droop more mounted animal heads, glass-eyed lions and antelopes, along with ancient tapestries showing people in profile gesticulating with arrows. As blue is the last colour to fade in tapestry, what were once cheerful depictions of battle are now mournful, undersea scenes.

To the right of the fireplace is a curving wooden staircase leading to the upper floors of the house, while on either side of her, worn Persian rugs lead through arched doorways into dark rooms that

lead to more doorways to dark rooms, and so it goes on, like an illustration of infinity. The heel of her boot catches on a rug as she steps forward. They will have to move the rugs, she thinks, when they have parties.

Jasper appears beside her, talking to the butler. 'Tell me, Blythe, has my errant brother arrived? Couldn't be bothered to show his face at the wedding.'

The butler gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head, for this is how Chilcombe is run, with gestures so familiar and worn down they have become the absence of gestures – the impression of something that used to be there; the shape of the fossil left in the stone.

Jasper sniffs, addresses his wife. 'The maids will show you to your room.'

Rosalind is escorted up the staircase, passing a series of paintings depicting men in ruffs pausing mid-hunt to have their portraits done, resting stockinged calves on the still-warm bodies of boars.

Cristabel watches from a corner. She has tucked herself behind a wooden umbrella stand in the shape of a little Indian boy; his outstretched arms make a circle to hold umbrellas, riding crops and her father's walking sticks. She waits until the new mother is out of sight, then runs across the hall to the back staircase, which is concealed from view behind the main staircase. This takes her down to below stairs, the servants' realm: the kitchen, scullery, storerooms and cellars. Here, in the roots of the house, she can find a hiding place and examine her new treasures: the stick and the crescents of soil beneath her fingernails.

On this day, below stairs is a clamorous place, the tiled kitchen echoing with activity. The servants are excited about the evening celebrations, anxious about hosting the wedding party, and full of gossip about the new wife. Cristabel crawls under the kitchen table and listens. Items of interest spark like lightning across her consciousness: favourite words like 'horse' and 'pudding'; voices she recognizes surfacing in the melee.

Her attention is caught by Maudie Kitcat, the youngest kitchen

maid, saying, 'Maybe Miss Cristabel will be getting a little brother soon.' Cristabel hadn't seen a little brother get out of the carriage, but perhaps one would be coming later. She would like a brother very much. For games and battles.

She also likes the kitchen maid Maudie Kitcat. They both sleep in the attic and practise their letters together. Cristabel often asks Maudie to write the names of people she knows in the condensation on the attic windows, and Maudie will comply, squeakingly shaping the words with a single finger – M-A-U-D-I-E, D-O-G, N-A-N-N-Y, C-O-O-K – so Cristabel can trace her own small finger along them or rub them out if they have displeased her. Sometimes, Maudie will visit her in the night if Cristabel has one of the dreams that make her shout, and Maudie will stroke her head and say shhh, little one, shhh now, don't cry.

In the kitchen, Cook is saying, 'An heir to the estate, eh? Let's hope Jasper Seagrave's still got it in him.' Bellows of laughter follow. A male voice shouts, 'If he can't manage it, I'll step in and have a go.' There is more laughter, then a crash, something thrown. The sound of servants roaring at this incomprehensible exchange is a thunderous wave washing over Cristabel. She decides to use her stick to write her letters, tracing a circle in the flour on the flagstone floor, round and round. O. O. O. O. Time away from her interfering nanny is rare, she must not waste it. O. O. O.

O for 'oh'. O for 'ohnoCristabelwhathaveyoudonenow'.

Upstairs on the first floor, Rosalind sits at the dressing table in her new bedroom, although she hardly can call it new, for everything in it appears to be ancient. It is a room of aggressively creaking floorboards and fragile mahogany furniture lit by smoke-stained oil lamps: a collection of items that cannot bear to be touched. She hears laughter coming from elsewhere in the house and feels it as a rising tension in her shoulders. A maid stands behind her, brushing out Rosalind's ink-dark hair, while another unpacks her cases, carefully extracting items of lingerie that have been folded into perfumed satin pads. Rosalind is aware of being examined, assessed. She wishes she could open her own luggage.

Rosalind checks her reflection in the dressing table mirror; composes herself. She has the pert face of a favoured child. Wide eyes, an upturned nose. This is complemented by her self-taught habit of clasping her hands beneath her chin, as if delighted by unexpected gifts. She does this now.

She has done well, despite everything; she must believe this. There had been sharp talk in London. Intimations of unwise dalliances. Suggestions she'd ruined her chances fraternizing with one too many beaux. But all those men had gone now. One by one, all the charming boys she had danced with and strolled with and dined with had disappeared. At first, it was awful, and then it was usual, which was worse than awful, but less tiring. After a while, it was simply what happened. They left, waving, on trains and went into the ground in places with foreign names that became increasingly familiar: Ypres, Arras, the Somme.

The years of the war became an aching monotonous time, with Rosalind perched on a stiff armchair, trying to finish a piece of embroidery while her mother intoned the names of eligible young men listed in *The Times* as dead or missing. There were stories in the newspapers about 'surplus women' – millions of spinsters who would never marry due to the shortage of suitable husbands. Rosalind cut out magazine pictures of society brides and glued them into a scrapbook: an album of lucky escapees. She was fearful she would become a black-clad relic like her widowed mother, a woman alone, fussing over teacups and miniature monkey-faced dogs, entrapped by knitting baskets and petulant footstools.

Even when the Great War ended, there was nobody left to celebrate with. The handful of passable men who did come home spent parties swapping battle stories with hearty girls who had been in uniform, while Rosalind stood against a wall, her dance card empty. So when she met Jasper Seagrave, a widower looking for a young wife to provide a son and heir, it seemed a space had been made for her, a tiny passage she could crawl through into the orange blossom light of a wedding day, where a house of her own would await her.

And here she is. She has made it through. A winter wedding, not ideal, but still a wedding. Despite the sinus problems of the groom.

Despite his insistence on the jolting carriage ride. Despite the view from the rattling carriage windows jerking backwards and forwards like scenery waved about by amateurish stagehands. Despite the clamping, clawing feeling in her heart. It could all be rectified.

Rosalind lifts her new diamond earrings to her ears. She watches in the mirror as one of the maids lays out her ivory chiffon peignoir, arranging it with respectfully covetous hands on the four-poster bed, which has a high mattress like the one in the story of the princess and the pea. Outside the darkening window, there is the crackle of a bonfire, the murmur of voices as the villagers arrive, and the rich, burnt smell of roasting meat.

Cristabel is standing in the garden by the fire, closely observing the suckling pig hung over the flames on a spit, a red apple jammed in its rotating mouth. She holds her stick in her right hand. Her left hand is in her coat pocket, fingers running over other newly acquired treasures found below stairs: a scrap of newspaper and a pencil stub. It is a kind of reassurance, to have these small things she can touch.

She can hear her nanny crashing through the house looking for her, her angry nanny voice running ahead of her like a baying pack of hounds. Cristabel knows what will happen next. She will be taken upstairs to her bedroom without supper as a punishment for disappearing. The candle will be blown out and the door locked. The attic will become shadowy and endlessly cornered: a shifting blackness raked by the slow-moving searchlight of the moon, a great lidless eye.

Cristabel runs her thumb backwards and forwards over the stick's rippled bark, as she will later on, when she is lying in her narrow bed – as a way of turning over the time when she is not allowed to make a silly fuss. When she was a little baby she made a fuss, and her nanny made her wear the jacket with the arms that tied round to stop her climbing out of bed. She does not intend to make a fuss again.

Beneath her pillow, she keeps various sticks, several stones that have faces, and an old picture postcard of a dog owned by a king, which she found under a rug and named Dog. She can line them up,

feed them supper, have them act out a story, and put them to bed. She can protect them and stroke their heads if they have shouting dreams, and make sure they don't get out on the cold wooden floor.

She crouches down next to a patch of snow, uses her stick to write her letters. O. O. O. She hears her nanny saying: 'For pity's sake, there she is. Digging in the snow, getting herself filthy.'

Cristabel likes the word snow. She whispers it to herself, then continues her work, her daily practice: shaping letters, making words, taking names.

S-N-O.

The Morning After

1st January, 1920

New year, new decade, new house, new husband. New as a new pin. Didn't her mother always say something about new pins? Rosalind feels pinned beneath the sheets of the marital bed. There is a rigidity to her spine that recalls the dinosaur skeletons in the London museums. She is fixed in place. An exhibit. White-capped maids come and go, lighting the fire and drawing the curtains, as busy and remote as gulls. Through the window, Rosalind can see bare trees flailing.

Jasper has said it may take time for her to adjust to the role of wife. He says she is young and that being with a man is new to her. (An image flits into her mind – an August evening near the boat shed with Rupert, his moustache scratching against her neck like wire wool – she shakes it away.) Jasper believes she will become familiar with her marital duties in time. She will become familiar with the unfamiliar. She is holding herself very still because it does not seem possible for these unfamiliar acts to exist in this room, alongside such steadfastly ordinary items as her silver hairbrush, the bedside lamp.

The maids bring her breakfast, balancing it on a tray on her eider-down so she is presented with an unappealing display: a heap of gelatinous scrambled eggs cupped by the curving gristle of a sausage. She covers the tray with a napkin and reaches for her glass atomizer: pff, *psffffff*, and Yardley Eau de Cologne hazes the air.

The maids pass and call, pass and call. Rosalind hears her own voice producing suitable words for them. 'Not much appetite. Thank you so much.' The maids take the words and the uneaten food away with them. There is a discreet spiral staircase hidden

behind a Chinese screen in the corner of the room that allows them to come and go without using the door.

Soon she must attend to things. She must dress appropriately and do what is expected of her. She must be a – what was it Jasper said? His voice so horribly loud in her ear in the darkness, like the voice of a giant – she must be a sport. Rosalind looks up at the tapestry canopy hanging over the bed to find the pattern she had studied last night. It is hidden in the larger design, a sort of lopsided face looking back at her, repeated many times over.

The maids reappear, swooping about with garments and undergarments; they want to dress her and make her beautiful. Men used to tell her she was beautiful. They admired her and talked of their beating hearts, and she felt this as an exultation, an adoration. She never believed that what they called love would involve such obscene exertions. Brute weight and panting effort. A pile of flesh smelling of port and tobacco, pressing the air from her body until she could not breathe. And the pain: pure white pain, flashing like stars behind her eyelids. No, this has nothing to do with love.

A maid approaches. ‘Mr Seagrave has gone to Exeter on horse business, ma’am. He hopes you enjoy your first day in Chilcombe.’

Rosalind nods. She has no words left. She is blank as paper in her stiff sheets.

The maid comes closer, crossing the creaky floorboards. ‘We met yesterday, ma’am. You may not remember. I’m Betty Bemrose. I’m to be your lady’s maid.’ Rosalind glances down to find that, most surprisingly, the maid has placed a hand on her own. ‘Perhaps a bath, ma’am? You look wrung out.’

Rosalind looks at Betty’s concerned face beneath her white maid’s cap. It is round and freckled, and there is the unexpectedly reassuring pressure of her hand.

Betty continues, ‘There are some bath oils, ma’am. Believe you brought them with you. That’d get you back on your feet.’

‘Rose,’ Rosalind says. ‘There is a rose oil.’

‘Lovely.’

‘A dear friend gave it to me. He was an officer. Died in France.’

‘So many gone,’ says Betty, heading into the adjoining bathroom.

'My sister's husband was lost at Gallipoli. They never even found him. I had them bring up some hot water for you earlier, ma'am, so I only need add the oil.'

'My friend – he had freckles like yours.'

'No!'

'He was charming.'

Betty reappears in the bathroom doorway. 'When you're having a bath, I'll get the bed linen changed. Put some more coal on the fire. We only light the upstairs fires when there's people staying so they do take their time to get going.'

'He took me to The Waldorf once. Have you heard of it?'

'Can't say that I have, ma'am.'

'Simply everybody goes there.'

Betty comes to the bed and gently pulls back the covers. 'Let me help you, ma'am.'

Rosalind grips the young woman's arms and allows herself to be navigated to the adjoining room, where a cast iron hip-bath waits in front of a low fire, holding a shallow layer of still water, scented with roses.

Sitting on a step outside the kitchen door, Cristabel grips her stick firmly in her fist and writes in the dust: B-R-U-T-H-E. B-R-O-H-E-R.

'Try again,' says Maudie Kitcat, passing with a basket of dirty bed linen. 'You are near enough getting it though.'

The new Mrs Jasper Seagrave, bathed and anointed, leaves her bedroom and makes her way downstairs. She is unsure what is expected of her. Her husband is away, and she does not know how to find out when he might return. A letter from her mother has arrived, reminding her of the importance of establishing her authority with the staff, and Rosalind fears enquiring about her husband's whereabouts will not improve her standing in the eyes of the household.

However, she does make authoritative decisions on several matters: that sausages are repellent and fit only for dogs; that a modern bathtub must be installed; that the Christmas tree should be thrown

out, along with the lilies (her mother always says lilies remind her of very *obvious* women). Also: a gramophone is to be purchased post-haste, and her husband's sullen daughter should have a French governess. *You*, writes Rosalind's mother in a forward-leaning hand, *are a new broom in the household! Brisk and firm!*

Despite her mother's instructions, Rosalind finds it difficult to issue orders to the male staff, many of whom, such as Blythe the butler, are old enough to be her father. But it seems apt that she, the young bride, should be unknowing. Hadn't she read in *The Lady* that 'men can't help but respond to the feminine charms of the innocent ingénue'? 'Be elegant,' continued the magazine, 'and a little spoiled, but not bored.'

Rosalind leans on the piano near a framed photograph of her new husband. She likes the words 'new husband', they have an exciting feel to them, like a gift box rustling with tissue paper. She likes to use the words even as she avoids looking at the photograph. *New husband. Elegant, not bored.*

The day passes. Other very similar days pass.

Rosalind subscribes to magazines and cuts out pictures of items necessary to her new life – hats, furniture, people – or notes them in a list. Next door to her bedroom is a small room, a boudoir, containing all the lady of the house might need: a decorative table at which to serve tea, a roll-top writing desk, an ivory letter opener. Rosalind sits at the desk and sifts through her magazine cuttings like a miner panning for gold.

With the help of Mrs Hardcastle the housekeeper, she orders a few essentials – silk pillowcases, hand creams – and waits for them. If she stands on the gallery landing, she can look down into the entrance hall, known as the Oak Hall, to see if anything is arriving. She discovers saying 'I'm having a little wander' will usually remove hovering servants. But if they continue to linger, she will then feel obliged to embark on a little wander.

Chilcombe is only modestly sized, nine bedrooms in all, but has been built and added to in such an arcane way that each part seems difficult to reach. Its residents and staff must make long excursions

along convoluted corridors with a variable camber, sloping like a ship's deck. There are often unexpected steps, sudden landings. The windows are narrow as arrow slits and the stone walls damp to the touch.

Rosalind would go out, but the outside world seems unapproachable. In London, the outdoors had been tidied up into parks. At dusk, the lamplighters with their long poles would light the gas lamps lining the pathways, golden circles flickering into life across the city. But in Dorset, the darkness descends so completely it is like falling into a coal cellar. There are no bandstands or statues. Merely ominous woods and a few acres of estate land, home only to ancient trees with fencing round their trunks, as if each were the last of its kind. One wizened oak is so decrepit its branches are propped up with metal staves. Why do they not let it die? Rosalind wonders, for it is very ugly; a bark shell of itself, strung up like a man shackled to a dungeon wall.

The back of the house overlooks a courtyard edged by brick outbuildings: a laundry, tool sheds and stables. Adjacent to the outbuildings is a walled kitchen garden tended by a gardener trundling back and forth with a wheelbarrow. Sometimes there are dead pheasants or hares hanging from the door handles. There are murmured, laughing conversations between servants. Rosalind watches from a landing window, careful not to be seen.

There is a village about a mile away, Chilcombe Mell, but when Rosalind and Jasper passed through on their journey from the train station, she had seen only a handful of thatched cottages, a few shops, a church and a pub. It seemed a half-abandoned place; the buildings all slumped together at the base of a valley as if they had slithered downwards in an avalanche. Beyond the village is a ridge of high land running parallel with the coast, a steep escarpment topped with straggly trees and prehistoric burial mounds. It is known as the Ridgeway and shuts out the world quite succinctly. Who will ever find her here?

Jasper had told her, during their courtship, that the Ridgeway was thought to be the hill the Grand Old Duke of York had marched his 10,000 men up and down. 'Why on earth did he do that?' she'd

replied, knowing that this was not the desired response. His wooing of her had largely consisted of him presenting her with historical facts in the way a cat continually brings its owner dead mice, despite their perplexing lack of success. Even at the beginning of their relationship, there had been this awkwardness: a sense of tight smiles and small unpleasant acts of disposal.

When, one morning, there is a knock on the door of her boudoir, Rosalind is quick to respond, expecting Betty bringing her latest purchase. Instead, it is a stout, bearded man in tweed plus fours. Rosalind's surprise is considerable, as she has managed to entirely divorce the physical being of Jasper Seagrave from the words 'new husband'.

'Hear you've been shopping,' says Jasper.

'A few items. Heavens, why did you knock? Does a husband need to knock?'

'If you prefer, I won't.'

'It merely seems –' Rosalind finds she has envisaged a different reunion between husband and wife. Shouldn't he sweep in, declaring he has missed her terribly? Shouldn't there be trinkets? Wouldn't that make this all much better?

'Taking Guinevere out this afternoon,' says Jasper. 'Don't suppose you fancy coming along?'

'Is that a horse? Isn't it raining?'

'Not much. No matter. See you at dinner.'

'I've never been good with horses –' and here she hesitates, uncertain how to address him, 'Jasper. Dear.'

Jasper tugs his beard, then leans forward to plant a bristly kiss on her cheek. 'No matter,' he says again, before heading downstairs.

She calls for Betty to draw her bath before dinner. Betty natters away as she lays out Rosalind's eau-de-Nil silk evening gown – long lines, finely pleated, beaded side-seam – and Rosalind is grateful. It helps settle her mind, which has become agitated since Jasper's arrival. She reclines in the perfumed water and enjoys Betty's talk as background noise: a sister's engagement, plans for her upcoming birthday.

‘Your birthday – how old will you be, Betty?’

‘Twenty-three, ma’am.’

‘The same age as me.’

‘Wish I was the same size as you, ma’am. You’ll be pretty as a picture in this gown.’

Rosalind glances at her own white arms. ‘We may have to take the gown in, Betty.’

‘Have you been off your food again, ma’am? That’s a pity. I suppose you miss your London life. I know your mother writes to you often.’

Rosalind suspects her mother would disapprove of such intimate conversation with staff. She pictures her hunched over her writing bureau, scribbling: *A wife’s role is to submit to her husband! To be helpmeet, inspiration and guide!*

‘My mother writes every day,’ she says. ‘I’m her only child.’

‘She must be proud of you, doing so well for yourself,’ says Betty.

A wife’s role, thinks Rosalind. To submit. Elegant. Not bored. She spins these words in her mind through the silences of dinner in the dark red dining room and the waiting in the bedroom afterwards and the time after that, when she looks up at the canopy to find the lopsided face watching her in her wife’s role, and there is something in that which allows her a little distance while it goes on: the unspeakable intrusion, the nightshirt he never takes off bundled between their bodies like something he is trying to smother, and even though there is a part of her mind that fights, that baulks and resists, she does not move a muscle, she never cries out, she simply remains there, gripping the bed sheet with both hands, staring up past him.

How is she to believe it? That this violence is done to her nightly, and all around her, people sleep soundly in their beds, happy it is being done.

And a small finger in the attic traces B-R-O-T-H-E-R, B-R-O-T-H-E-R, B-R-O-T-H-E-R.

Copyrighted Material

Prodigal Brother

February, 1920

A distant *putt-putt-putt* is the first sign that the long-absent Willoughby Seagrave, Jasper's younger brother and only sibling, is returning to Chilcombe. Cristabel, crossing the lawn with her newly appointed French governess, stops to listen. It is an entirely new sound that reaches her ears from across the full distance of twenty centuries; one that has never been heard on the estate before. Cristabel drops the dead snail she is carrying in order to concentrate. The French governess also pauses. *Mon Dieu, petite Cristabel. C'est une automobile! Oui, Madame, c'est vrai.* It is a motor car.

As it approaches, the noise of the vehicle clarifies: it becomes a rattling, rapid *dug-dug-dug-dug*. To a few of the men cleaning out the stables behind the house, the sound is chillingly reminiscent of German guns. But to Maudie Kitcat and Betty Bemrose, the servants tripping over themselves to reach the front door first, it is the sound of glamour and escape, of day trips and freedom, of London and Brighton, of Swanage and Weymouth. It is the sound of the future. It is Willoughby Seagrave.

Betty and Maudie are both ardent fans of Willoughby. Between them, they make sure they receive the letters he sends to Cristabel, the wartime niece he has never seen due to his military service in Egypt. Betty was taught to read by her father, who runs the pub in the village, so she is able to read Willoughby's letters out loud to Maudie and Cristabel, and what letters they are, full of deadly scorpions, desert moons and nomadic tribes. All recounted in Willoughby's looping handwriting with its upward-rising dashes and lavish capitalization; his voice both confiding and dramatic (*Mark my words, little Cristabel – this was an Adventure of the Highest sort!*).

His letters always begin *My dearest youngest Lady*, then launch headlong into a continuation of an escapade from a previous letter, so his correspondence becomes a never-ending tale of derring-do (*You will no doubt remember I had leapt from the bad-tempered Dromedary, lest Muhammad think me a fearful wobbler, and together we were pursuing the Senussi on foot through the Dunes – my men following, fatigued but resolute!*). At the end of every letter, Cristabel commands, 'Again. Again.' And so they must.

Why Willoughby is still galloping about the desert while everyone else has come home from the war is not entirely clear to them, but they have seen a photograph of him in his cream uniform that Jasper has put in a drawer, and he is just as dashing as the film stars in Rosalind's magazines. Twenty-three-year-old Betty enjoys Willoughby's adventures in the same way she enjoys a gossipy newspaper story about the Bright Young Things and their London parties. But for fourteen-year-old Maudie, Willoughby is overwhelming. When Betty reads out his letters, a violent flush creeps over Maudie's face, colonizing her features.

Maudie, the youngest kitchen maid and Cristabel's companion in the attic, is an orphan with a tendency towards intensity. She once locked a delivery boy in the laundry after he teased her about her wayward hair. There are rumours her family were smugglers. There are rumours the delivery boy found a headless rat in his bicycle basket. Maudie has grabbed Betty's hand and is now scrambling with her towards the front door as the vehicle containing Willoughby and a pile of battered luggage roars up the drive. They cannot miss his opening scene. For this is the promise of Willoughby: he is a performance.

The noise is such that Jasper, breakfasting in the dining room, pauses mid-kipper, and asks, 'Are we being invaded?'

Rosalind, at the far end of the dining table, sets down her teacup and holds a hand to her throat. From outside comes the bang of someone slamming a car door, followed by the cacophony of all the rooks that nest in the surrounding trees taking to the sky at once.

Blythe the butler performs a neat half-bow and is about to seek out the noise-maker, but the noise-maker is already with them,

striding into the room, his face sooty with dirt, and a pair of driving goggles pushed on top of his wavy copper-coloured hair. Somehow, the space is jammed with people who weren't there a moment ago, a mass of them pressing in behind Willoughby, a crowd that includes Betty and Maudie, Mrs Hardcastle the housekeeper, the new French governess, and Cristabel, carrying a stick.

'Well,' says Willoughby, his voice warm and reassuring, with a slight laugh to it. 'Hello, everyone.'

His audience giggles and gabbles their replies, talking over the top of one another; nervous participants.

Cristabel pushes through the onlookers and solemnly raises her stick. Willoughby bows deeply as a pantomime prince, saying, 'You must be Cristabel. I can see your mother in you. What an honour to finally make your acquaintance.' Then he addresses Jasper and Rosalind, still seated at the table, 'Although, I heard a rumour in London that my brother is keen to extend his family – and why wouldn't he be?'

Rosalind blushes. Jasper opens his mouth but misses his cue, as Willoughby turns back to his audience.

'Betty Bemrose, I have missed you. How I longed for your capable hands in the desert. Nobody in Egypt darns a sock like you. I was threadbare and bereft.'

'Mr Willoughby,' replies Betty, bobbing up and down, both mortified and delighted.

Willoughby's tone moves so smoothly between registers, it is hard to determine whether he is starring in a romantic film, a Shakespearean comedy or a West End farce, and therefore difficult to know whether to be offended by him. Most give him the benefit of the doubt, as there is a line that curves upwards around one corner of his mouth that speaks of his pleasure in ambiguity and his enjoyment of all the benefits of all the doubts that have already been given to him – and his generous willingness to accept more.

Jasper sniffs. 'I presume from that terrible racket you've bought some ludicrous vehicle.'

'Wonderful to see you too, brother,' says Willoughby. 'I do have a ludicrous vehicle. Perhaps I could take you for a drive?'

'Might have told us what time you were arriving. Given us time to kill the fatted calf,' says Jasper, pulling his napkin from his collar.

'Spoil this lovely surprise? Heavens, no,' says Willoughby, although he is now smiling at the French governess. 'I rather fancy this young lady would enjoy a ludicrous vehicle.'

'Monsieur Willoughby –'

'I can see you as a racing driver, mademoiselle. Leather gloves on. Ripping along at thirty.' He pulls the goggles from his head and tosses them towards her. 'Give those a try.'

'Mr Willoughby, you'll be wanting a bath no doubt,' says Mrs Hardcastle, but Willoughby has taken the governess by the arm and is leading her back through the Oak Hall, saying, 'A quick spin. Just to get a feel for it.' Maudie's face, as she watches them pass, is as agape as a desert moon.

When Rosalind makes her way to the dining room window, she sees, in the pale light of a February morning: Willoughby, a French governess in driving goggles, an unsmiling housekeeper, and a child wielding a stick, all seated in an enormous open-top car that is chugging slowly along the drive, occasionally veering on to the edge of the lawn. This unusual activity is overlooked by Jasper, who is not quite smiling but not quite not, along with Betty, Maudie and a cluster of servants. Rosalind watches as the car accelerates, kicking up gravel, its French passenger screaming, and Willoughby shouting over his shoulder, 'We'll be back for lunch.'

Rosalind hears Jasper come in and retreat to his study at the back of the house. She wanders to the drawing room but cannot settle. She is disturbed by the servants, who are fluttering from room to room, window to window, like a flock of birds trapped in the house. In the end, she simply folds her hands, closes her eyes and waits. She is getting better at waiting.

The driving party returns to Chilcombe three hours later, dust-covered and bearing streaks of what looks like strawberry jam. Cristabel is fast asleep, still clutching her stick, and being carried by Mrs Hardcastle. Rosalind is in the Oak Hall to meet them.

‘Goodness,’ she says, ‘somebody take that child upstairs and give her a good wash. I can hardly bear to look at her.’

She hears her mother in her voice and finds it reassuring. The disruption of Willoughby’s arrival has allowed her to step into a role that has thus far eluded her: the lady of the house. She straightens her back as the windswept motorists troop past. The French governess has a pink carnation tucked behind one ear. At the rear of the party, Willoughby lingers in the doorway, holding his motoring cap in his hand, ruefully stroking his moustache.

‘Why don’t you come in?’ Rosalind asks.

‘I fear I’ve made a dreadful first impression.’

‘It certainly isn’t usual for guests to take half the household off on a jaunt.’

‘No. It isn’t on,’ he says.

‘Whatever must the villagers think. Seeing you careering about like that.’

‘Do you care what they think?’

Rosalind frowns. ‘Of course.’

He shrugs. ‘I believe they rather enjoyed it. We stopped at the pub so they could have a good look at the motor.’

‘You went to the pub in the village?’

‘We did. Do you object?’

‘No. Yes,’ says Rosalind. ‘I mean, I might not have objected. Had I been asked.’

‘That’s what I hoped. Can we start again? On a proper footing this time. After I’ve had a bath. I’ll be so shinily clean and perfectly mannered you won’t recognize me.’ He smiles and it is the blinding burst of a photographer’s flash powder.

‘That sounds – acceptable,’ says Rosalind.

‘You are a good egg. I knew you would be.’

‘Did you? Why did you think that?’

But he is already moving past her, pulling his shirt from his trousers and bounding up the stairs two at a time, calling, ‘Is there hot water for me, Betty?’

Rosalind is left waiting by the door, holding her unanswered questions, her handful of lines.

Circling and Re-circling

March, 1920

Chilcombe is different with Willoughby in it. Even before Cristabel opens her eyes, she can sense a tingling shift in the air. She creeps out of bed at the same dark hour as Maudie, before anyone else is awake, and while Maudie heads to the scullery to begin her morning chores, Cristabel tiptoes down to the kitchen and heads outside to find Willoughby's motor car.

Maudie has told her the only good thing about getting up horribly early is that the last day has gone, but the new one not yet begun, and in that gap, the house belongs to Maudie. Cristabel feels the truth of this as she steps out under a deep blue-black sky, where the only sound is a blackbird's chirruping call, a run of silver stitches through the darkness. This breathless, shadowy world is full of possibility. Everything she touches now will be hers.

The motor car has been parked by the stables and covered with a tarpaulin, which is easy enough to climb under. Hoicking up her nightgown, Cristabel clambers into the driver's seat and examines the steering wheel, the polished wooden dashboard, and the glass-covered dials, very tappable. She moves the steering wheel from side to side. She says, 'Hold on to your hats, ladies.'

Sometimes, she looks at the back seat to see where she was when Uncle Willoughby gave her a jam tart, to be eaten with fingers, no plate or napkin, as he drove through puddles, making everyone shriek. 'Just for you,' he had said, 'no sharing allowed.'

'I don't share,' she replied, and he laughed so much she hadn't bothered to explain she wasn't given things, so she couldn't. She likes to hear him laugh. That irrepressible sound, bursting through the ordinary run of things like a cannonball. Cristabel kneels up on

the leather seat and reaches for the rubber bulb of the brass car horn.

Rosalind wakes early, jolted from sleep by a loud noise from outside. Surely Willoughby isn't leaving already? Whenever he is with them, the house has a sense of exciting, preparatory activity – as if it were the start of a holiday – but there is always the accompanying fear he might suddenly depart.

She has Betty dress her quickly in order to be at the breakfast table as fast as she can, but she is the first to arrive. Willoughby and Jasper appear an hour later, demanding large quantities of food. Rosalind rarely manages to eat anything at breakfast, or even say anything beyond the usual pleasantries, but watches as the brothers bicker while devouring whatever is placed in front of them, overlooked by portraits of stern Seagrave ancestors.

Jasper's method of feeding is base and agricultural, the resolute troughing of a man who has long since eaten his way past culinary enjoyment, whereas Willoughby eats like a flamboyant painter – sweeping swathes of marmalade across crumbling toast, pouring milk into his teacup from a jug held so high the liquid becomes a single thin torrent, and licking butter from his fingers while waving down Blythe to request more bacon.

'Sister-in-law Rosalind, the current Mrs Seagrave,' says Willoughby, helping himself to the last of the eggs. 'What are your plans for the coming weeks?'

'Willoughby,' growls Jasper, from deep within his kedgereedotted beard.

'Well –' says Rosalind.

'Because I'm off to Brighton for a few days, so you won't have to feed me, and you'll save on candles. I'm staggered you're still holding out against electrical lights, Jasper. My bedroom is black as the very grave.'

'Oil lamps are perfectly adequate,' says Jasper. 'I will not have unsightly cables strung across my land.'

'What are you doing in Brighton, Willoughby?' asks Rosalind. 'I've been to Brighton.'

'I'm to meet a man about an aeronautical adventure.'

Jasper sighs. 'Do be sensible, Willoughby. Our family funds are not a bottomless pit. As I keep telling you, there are good positions in the colonies for ex-military men. Saw your friend Perry Drake at the club last month – he's off to Ceylon to keep the locals in line.'

'Perry will be a credit to the Empire, I'm sure. But I don't want to do that. Mother and Father left me money to do whatever I want.'

'You can't fritter away your allowance on foolishness,' says Jasper.

'Why not?' says Willoughby. 'Don't you read the papers? The great estates are all being sold off. Why not spend our pennies on something enjoyable before we lose the lot? When's the last time you bought anything other than a horse? Why this pettifogging insistence on things being done as they've always been done?'

'I bought a piano. For Rosalind. For my wife.'

'Does anyone ever play it?'

'One has responsibilities –'

'The future's coming for you, brother, whether you like it or not,' says Willoughby. 'Talking of Perry, you've reminded me he met a chap in the army who would make a decent land agent for Chilcombe. Fellow called Brewer. Practical sort with a keen eye for a balance sheet. You'll need one of those soon.'

But Jasper is continuing along the conversational path he started on before there was any mention of land agents. 'One has responsibilities. We have staff who rely on us.'

Willoughby turns to Rosalind. 'Let me tell you about my aeronautical adventures, Mrs Seagrave. A newspaper is offering an obscene amount of money for the first aviator to fly non-stop from New York to Paris.'

'Wouldn't that be dangerous?' asks Rosalind.

'One might lose one's hat. But it's exhilarating up there, gazing down on the clouds. A white feather bed stretching all the way to the horizon.'

'Fatuous nonsense,' says Jasper.

'I've never been in an aeroplane,' says his wife.

'I'll fly down here. Land on the lawn,' says Willoughby.

'You'll do no such bloody thing,' says Jasper.

'Cristabel would be delighted,' says Willoughby.

'You should not be encouraging a love of aviation in an impressionable young girl.'

'Might be a little late there, Jasper. I've ordered a toy aeroplane for her and, do you know, I found one of those wooden swords we had as boys hidden in the stables – I've cleaned that up for her too.'

'Heaven's sake, Willoughby, that was my sword,' says Jasper.

'You couldn't land an aeroplane on the lawn, could you?' says Rosalind.

Willoughby smiles. 'Is that a dare?'

'I will not allow you to flap around on my lawn like a pheasant,' says Jasper.

'Eagle, surely.'

'I will not be provoked at my own breakfast table, do you hear?' barks Jasper, yanking the napkin from his collar.

'Everybody can hear, brother.'

Jasper stamps from the room, slamming the door. The tableware rattles: a thin silvery peal of cutlery versus crockery. Willoughby leans across the table to pull his brother's breakfast plate towards him. They hear a shout from the hall – 'The child's left her bloody twigs everywhere!' – Cristabel's voice crying, 'Retreat to the barricades!' then the sound of small feet running up the stairs.

Rosalind waits for the table to compose itself. 'Willoughby, surely we won't have to sell off Chilcombe? Jasper says it's been in the Seagrave family for generations.'

'You're a Seagrave now. What do you think?'

'I'm never sure what I think.'

'You need to have a son, then you can start to sound more confident. Two sons, ideally. An heir and a spare. No need for blushing, dear sister.'

'Don't you care what happens?'

'Mrs Seagrave, I'm the spare. None of this is mine, as far as the eye can see.' Willoughby gestures widely, then returns to Jasper's leftovers.

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Blythe the butler enters, adjusting his white gloves. 'Will you be requiring anything else, sir?'

'Nothing at all,' says Willoughby. 'Have someone bring my car round.'

'Off so soon?' says Rosalind, but Willoughby is already leaving, taking Jasper's toast with him.

Breakfast with both Seagrave brothers in attendance often ends in this way, with food thievery and napkins thrown to the ground and dramatic exits, and the current Mrs Seagrave left alone at the dining table, staring at the sugar bowl for want of anything else to do. Whenever Willoughby goes, she feels she has missed a chance. She is eager to show him that she too is familiar with the wider world, conversant with the latest society news. She wishes she knew how to capture his interest, how to slow his bright carousel long enough that she might join in.

The more she studies him, the more Rosalind notices that the rules of behaviour do not seem to apply to Willoughby. His attendance at meals is haphazard; his handkerchiefs are Egyptian silk and jewel-coloured. He never joins the household when they dutifully troop off to Chilcombe Mell church on Sunday mornings, but Rosalind has seen him chatting cheerfully to men from the village. Jasper chastised him about it once and Willoughby replied he'd fought alongside such men and wasn't about to start talking down to them now.

After her afternoon rests, Rosalind often opens her bedroom curtains to see Willoughby's tall figure disappearing into the trees at the edge of the lawn, with Cristabel trotting at his side clutching a wooden sword. Betty tells her that they go down to the beach, that Willoughby is teaching his niece to catch crabs. She wonders who has allowed this. She wonders what the French governess she has employed is doing.

She has the sense there are no boundaries in Willoughby's life. It is so enviably free in contrast to her own, so adroitly nonchalant. Rosalind's life, first with her widowed mother and now with Jasper, seems an endless succession of Sundays: clock-marked, rule-bound

days of manners and luncheons. How thrilling to discover that the rigid particularity of things – fish knives, tablecloths, topics of conversation – is as arbitrary as deciding that one day should be called Sunday and treated differently to all the rest. If Sunday is only Sunday because we call it Sunday, then why not call it Friday instead?

One morning, she meets Willoughby in the Oak Hall. He is on his way out; she is having a little wander. He nods towards the list she holds in her hand.

‘Anything of importance, Mrs Seagrave?’

Rosalind looks down at the list. ‘Oh. It’s nothing.’

Willoughby frowns. ‘Is it a shopping list? I’m off to London today.’

‘No, this is my list of the shops I want to visit. When I go to London.’

He takes the list from her hand. ‘Do you need anything from these shops?’

‘I won’t know until I visit them. I don’t know what’s in them as I’ve only read about them. In magazines. They are new shops and I want to see everything they have. Then I’ll choose. A hat perhaps. Or a bracelet. Something unique. I have very particular tastes.’ These nine sentences are the most she has ever said to him.

‘Right you are.’ He glances at the list, hands it back to her, then leaves the house with a wave.

Two days later, Betty brings a parcel to Rosalind. ‘Came in the second post for you, ma’am.’

Inside, Rosalind finds a beribboned gift box from the hat shop that was at the top of her list. It contains an illustrated colour catalogue describing every style of hat they sell, along with a note in looping handwriting that reads: *For Mrs Seagrave & her Very Particular Tastes. W.* It hums in her hands.

Rosalind wanders the gallery landing, absent-mindedly touching her throat, watching dusty columns of light fall through high windows into the hall, where the grandfather clock ticks and tocks. In her boudoir, she cuts pictures from her magazines, lets them float to the floor. She goes through her catalogue, circling and re-circling.

The catalogue. The note. The catalogue. The note. Her turn coming round.

It becomes a habit then. Whenever Willoughby leaves for London, he visits Rosalind beforehand to enquire whether he should pay a visit to one of her shops.

Willoughby is practised in the art of being attentive to women, but he enjoys this diversion, primarily because of the specificity of Rosalind's requests – 'A soliflore scent from an established French house, but not eau de toilette, it should be eau de parfum or nothing at all' – so unexpected, coming from his brother's demure young wife.

He enjoys too the ceremonial return to Chilcombe: carrying in a pile of boxes and watching as Rosalind examines their contents, intent and focused as a jeweller, her acceptance or rejection of items entire and irreversible. It is the only time he sees her make decisions without deferring to Jasper, and he finds it captivating.

Sometimes, he will pick out an item himself, testing his eye against her own. He will tell her the shop manager suggested it, and wait for her reaction. It amuses him that his choices are consistently rejected; he feels sure if he offered them as gifts, she would claim to adore them.

Only one of his secret purchases – the new Guerlain women's scent Mitsouko – passes her test. She tips a drop on to her wrist, sniffs it, then screws up her nose. 'Awfully heavy.' But as he is about to re-seal the elegant square bottle, which has as its stopper a glass heart, she takes it back from him. 'No, I'll keep it. It's not altogether vulgar.' When he leaves, her face is at her wrist, breathing it in, with an absorbed expression.

These moments come back to him at odd times. Her delight at the arrival of the items, her glee in the unwrapping. The lilac veins in her wrists. The shadows beneath her eyes. How she stared. She seemed to be looking at more than a few items in gift boxes: it was as if she saw the whole world in miniature; the eye of the botanist trained on the microscope.

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One afternoon, Willoughby passes Cristabel on the gallery as he is carrying a stack of parcels to her stepmother.

Cristabel brandishes her wooden sword and says, 'Halt, stranger. I'm waiting for a brother. Is he in there?'

'Afraid not,' Willoughby replies. 'Both hands used on a broadsword, by the way.'

'He will be here soon. Maudie told me what wives do.'

'Darling girl, don't listen to the maids' silly chatter.'

'Maudie isn't silly. Why don't you have a wife?'

'I haven't found one that wasn't already taken. Besides, they seem like hard work. Expensive too. I prefer to spend my money on motors.'

'When will I have a motor?'

'When you stop frowning at your favourite uncle. We'll go for a spin tomorrow, shall we? You can bring that French governess of yours. I do enjoy her company.'

'I can't bring her.'

'Why ever not?'

'New mother has sacked the governess.'

'*Quel dommage.*'

'Maudie says new mother doesn't like anyone prettier than she is.'

'Maudie isn't silly at all, is she? What is this ferocious scowl for now?'

'I'm not pretty. But new mother still doesn't like me. But I don't care about that.'

'You shouldn't. Pretty girls can be terrifically dull. Remember, two hands on the hilt. Weight on the back foot. Better.'

Entreaties

March, 1920

Weymouth is full of sand. A chilly easterly wind is blowing across the wide expanse of the bay, skittering over the white tops of waves and whisking fine sand from the beach, so it gusts in stinging flurries towards the seafront hotels, neglected after years of diminished wartime trade. A line of vacant faces squinting out at a battleship-grey sea. To Jasper, the seaside town feels deserted, a final outpost.

He walks the length of the Esplanade, a broad walkway curving along the beach. In the previous century, it was promenaded upon by royalty, but now there are only wounded Anzacs – soldiers from Australia and New Zealand stationed in the Dorset town to recuperate, pushed along in blanketed wheelchairs, with empty sleeves or trouser legs tucked up and neatly pinned. Jasper considers it a cruel twist of fate that brave men used to the Southern Ocean's azure seas should wind up on England's insipid South Coast, the ocean's limpest handshake.

Scattered among the leftover Anzacs are a few early season visitors, gripping their hats on this blowy day, and down on the beach a handful of children are paddling, skinny limbs pinkening with the cold. A pair of old-fashioned bathing machines stand empty at the water's edge. A sign saying 'Back Soon' is propped against the striped tent housing the Punch and Judy puppet show.

At the far end of the Esplanade, there is a red-brick terrace of guest houses, backing on to the town's harbour. Ships' masts are visible above the rooftops, like a series of crucifixes. The penultimate building has a wooden billboard propped by its front door, which proclaims it to be the residence of MADAME CAMILLE, MYSTICAL PSYCHIC adviser to KINGS AND QUEENS, TELLER OF

FORTUNES – SHE SEES ALL! SHE KNOWS ALL! This is followed by a chalk illustration of a single eye.

Brushing sand from his beard, Jasper knocks on the door. A young boy lets him in and points up a dark staircase. Madame Camille has a narrow room on the first floor. Something red and gauzy has been draped over a standard lamp, giving the space a rouged, infernal glow. Madame Camille herself is seated at a baize card table by a window overlooking the harbour, her hands resting on a glass ball. Jasper presumes it is meant to be a crystal ball, although it could be a ship's buoy scooped from the harbour for all he knows.

He sits down opposite her and places three coins on the table. Madame Camille's eyes flicker over them, quick as a lizard's tongue. She is thin-faced, with a fringed scarf draped over scraggly hair.

'You've come for someone you've lost,' she says, her accent unfamiliar. Irish perhaps. Or pretending to be.

Jasper is startled by the informality of her address. 'I have. My wife. My first wife, Annabel. I overheard a servant of mine saying you contacted her late husband, and I –'

'Annabel. A strong woman. They don't always want to be contacted, the strong ones. Reluctant to accept it themselves, you see.' Madame Camille rubs the glass ball.

'I see.' He isn't sure he does.

'Do you have an item of hers that still remembers her touch? Something she always kept with her?'

Me, he thinks. I still remember her touch. He frowns, then reaches into his pocket to find Annabel's accounting notebook, each page filled with the miniature Sanskrit of her pencilled numbers. Madame Camille takes the notebook, closes her eyes, breathes loudly through her nose. Outside, a paddle steamer lets go a brassy hoot from its funnel as it makes its way out to sea.

'I hear voices,' says Madame Camille.

Jasper whispers, 'Is she there? May I speak to her? I wanted to explain about Rosalind. A sense of duty compelled –'

'A spirited lady.'

'Is she cross with me?'

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Madame Camille frowns. 'She's distracted. Keeps searching about. Did she lose something dear to her? Jewellery? A set of keys?'

'Nothing springs to mind.'

'It can be the most unlikely item – a window left open – it bothers them awfully.'

'I keep the windows closed as a rule. May I speak to her now?'

'She's calling out, bless her heart.'

'For heaven's sake, why can't you tell her I'm here? Or at least give me some proof that this woman is truly my Annabel.'

Madame Camille half opens her eyes. 'Not in the business of proof, mister. I gives you what they gives me.'

'Ridiculous!' Jasper exhales, spittle ricocheting through his whiskers.

Her eyes are fully on him now, undiluted, sharp as a fox. 'Perhaps that's all then.'

'This is what I get for my money?' says Jasper, noticing at that moment the money he placed on the table is no longer on the table.

'It comes as it will,' she says, infuriatingly unconcerned.

From the corridor comes a deep masculine cough.

Jasper stands up and barrels furiously from the room, past the young boy who let him in, now accompanied by a large man in vest and braces with great hams for arms, and rushes back down the stairs, into the daylight, and the sudden shock of garish seaside life is nauseating: the limbless Australians, the discordant jangle of a pipe-organ in the pleasure gardens, and the nasal cries of Mr Punch grappling with his wife. *Thwack, thwack, thwack. That's the way to do it.*

Jasper hurries along the Esplanade, his face repeatedly crumpling in a kind of agony. How stupid to think he could talk to Annabel. Utterly idiotic to go to that fraudulent gypsy. He finds a handkerchief. Blows his nose loudly. Plonks himself down on a wooden bench. Looks out along the shore.

He is heartily sick of Dorset. Every morning, reading the newspaper, he will seek out advertisements describing land for sale in Cumberland, in the north of England, where he and Annabel had

spent their honeymoon. Hadn't honeymooned with Rosalind. Hadn't seen the point.

In Cumberland, everywhere you looked, you faced the kind of epic landscape that could make a man take up religion or watercolour painting. But Jasper is trapped on the crumbling bottom edge of England, constantly badgered by disgruntled tenants and staff, all wanting more from him when he has increasingly little to give. He thinks of the accounting notebook in his pocket, how it changes from Annabel's neat numbers to his own chaotic scribble, dotted with question marks.

Rising taxes have forced him to sell off two tenant farms and he is only clinging on to the last having agreed to fix the rent at pre-war rates. His own family are more of a hindrance than a help. Rosalind has eye-wateringly expensive tastes, and although she is due to inherit a hefty amount when her mother dies, said mother refuses to shuffle off. Meanwhile, Willoughby is burning through his allowance at a flagrant rate. Whenever Mr Bill Brewer, his new land agent, shows him the household ledger, Jasper can see – for the first time in his life – gaps, debts, vacancies. Just last week, his one remaining gardener had gone off to work in a Torquay hotel.

There are only a few of Jasper's original staff left. Barely a handful had returned from the war, and most had left something of themselves behind on the battlefield, if not a foot or an arm, then whatever it was that controlled their emotions. Jasper recognized the flighty look in their eyes as that of a horse after a thunderstorm: there could be no talking reason to them. They would have to come round in their own time, if they ever did.

In an attempt to balance the books, he had sold a few family portraits. He felt a twinge of sadness as Great-Aunt Sylvia was carried away, but then a diminuendo of that feeling, as if her solemn face were watching him from a train moving into the distance. When housed in Chilcombe, the portraits had been part of a reassuring continuum, but once given a price, something of them vanished. The train containing Great-Aunt Sylvia rounded a bend; the smoke from its chimney rose up and merged with the clouds.

Jasper blows his nose again, a mournful bugle call. The sea is still

grey, the wind still cold. Somewhere along the diminishing coastline lies his home. His ancient home containing a wife he doesn't love and a child he doesn't know how to love and an empty space where his love used to be.

Sometimes, when Cristabel wakes in the night, she cries, 'I'm up here!' as if answering a question about her whereabouts, but nobody in the house has asked the question, nobody in the house has called for her. From her tiny bedroom on the other side of the roof space, Maudie hears Cristabel shout out once, twice, then a mumbled version and then nothing, just the silence of children, held high in the pitch-black attic, listening, waiting.

Every morning, after breakfast, Rosalind will go to her writing desk to compose charming letters of invitation, hoping to begin the life she imagined when she said her wedding vows. Each missive she sends out she imagines as a plucky messenger pigeon flying over the great wall of the Ridgeway. Every letter includes an enticing mention of *Jasper's brother Willoughby – a war hero!* – and folding him into an envelope gives her a strange pleasure, as if she were sealing Willoughby inside her future plans. *Do come!* she writes. *Do!*

But replies to her entreaties are few.

One evening at dinner, she says, 'Jasper, perhaps we could consider taking a house in London for the season?'

'I stay at the club if I need a bed,' he replies.

'What about when your daughter comes out? It would be useful then.'

Jasper coughs. 'Long way off.' He pushes back his chair and leaves the room.

Left alone at the long table, Rosalind senses the scuttling approach of servants and lifts her smile in readiness.

'Everything satisfactory, ma'am?'

'Perfect. Thank you.'

Later, lying in her newly installed bathtub, Rosalind calls to Betty, 'The child, Jasper's child, how old is she?'

Betty's freckled face appears in the doorway. 'Just turned four, ma'am. Had her birthday last week, in fact.'

'Is she coming on all right, do you know?'

'I believe so, ma'am. They say she is a bright girl. Already learnt her letters. She's a funny one, Cristabel. The other day –'

'Could you fetch a towel, Betty?'

'Right away, ma'am.'

Rosalind swooshes gently to and fro, luxuriating in her new tub, until Betty arrives with the towel, then she heaves herself from the suction of water, rejoining gravity.

At her dressing table, she idly plays with the contents of her jewellery box while Betty brushes her hair. 'Betty, does the girl Cristabel resemble her mother? I've never seen a photograph.'

Betty pulls a face. 'Hard to tell, ma'am. Mrs Annabel, God rest her soul, had what you might call strong features.'

'Ah,' says Rosalind, meeting her own gaze in the mirror. The reassurance of her face. Its fine planes. Its surety.

Betty says, 'I've let out your red gown as you asked, ma'am. It was tight at the waist, wasn't it? Good to see you've got your appetite back.'

So First, the Primroses

April, 1920

Betty was the one to tell Rosalind. Pragmatic Betty with her numerous sisters and accumulated knowledge of what goes on within the mysterious, treacherous innards of women.

Rosalind was in her rose-scented bath, casting an assessing eye over her floating Ophelia body. 'I must stop eating rich desserts, Betty. I'm developing a paunch.'

Betty paused in her folding of towels. 'Well, ma'am. I was meaning to say. My eldest sister gets a bump there when she's expecting.'

'Expecting what?'

'Expecting a baby, ma'am. When she's in the family way.' Betty kept her attention on the towel in her hands. 'Forgive my impertinence, ma'am, but do you – have you noticed any change to – has your monthly visitor arrived of late?'

Rosalind said nothing. There had been the word 'baby' and then her ears had tucked themselves shut, neat as an otter's, so Betty's voice had become an unintelligible *wurble, wurble, wurble*. She held herself very still. There was something in her. They had put something in her. How dare they intrude upon her like that.

Betty looked at her. 'Ma'am?'

'I won't be joining my husband for dinner tonight,' Rosalind heard herself say, and was surprised at the civility of her voice. 'Would you be so kind as to let Mrs Hardcastle know? That will be all.'

Rosalind stayed in the claw-footed bathtub until the water went cold, only her face, knees and breasts poking above the surface: a pale archipelago. Floating in the filmy water, held up by it, she hung suspended above the rest of the house. She listened to the continuation of evening activity: the patter of servants on staircases; the chiming of the grandfather clock; a rook cawing outside, jawing companionably

on like an after-dinner speaker. Everything was as it should be, as it always would be.

When she sank a little, so her ears were submerged, she heard her own heartbeat very close by. Lying there, goosebumped and shivering, Rosalind wished, for the first time in her adult life, that she could see her mother, but then she remembered how her mother was, and wished instead she had been given a different mother. One like Betty's, perhaps, who ran the pub with her husband and was prone to being overly generous with the gin but was someone you could tell your troubles to. But how foolish to think in such a way. Your mother was your mother, whether you liked it or not. You had no choice in the matter. If she had a gin-swilling mother who worked in a village pub, where on earth would she be now? Certainly not in a claw-footed bathtub. Certainly not in possession of pure rose bath oil. And Rosalind watched the light on the bathroom wall shift in slow degrees from gold to peach to grey.

The following morning, a doctor came into her bedroom.

Rosalind presumed Betty had told Mrs Hardcastle about her body's new bulge, and this information had been passed on to both a doctor and to Jasper, as there was a posy of primroses on her breakfast tray. She was relieved by this, as she could not think how to tell Jasper herself. So first, the primroses, and then the doctor, all before she was out of bed. Now she was the carrier of a possible Seagrave son and heir, her husband would give her flowers and allow strange men into her room to examine her.

Dr Harold Rutledge was his name. A friend of Jasper's. Stout and ruddy as a toby jug. Rosalind kept her eyes on the canopy above the bed as he ran his hands over her abdomen, leaning close enough that she could smell last night's brandy on his breath.

'All seems tip-top. Plenty of rest, no horse-riding, but normal marital relations can continue,' Dr Rutledge said, then laughed, an oddly triumphant noise. 'Good old Jasper,' he added, pulling aside the top of her nightgown to press a cold stethoscope to her breast.

Rosalind wondered what he could hear through his metal instrument. She imagined a hollow hissing of reeds. She was aware of a

crowded, desperate feeling in her mind that only abated when she concentrated on a far corner of the canopy.

The doctor removed the stethoscope and closed her nightgown as casually as a man turning the page of a newspaper. 'Excellent, excellent,' he said.

Everybody seemed very pleased, and, despite the fact Rosalind didn't tell a single soul, everybody seemed to know, almost immediately. Village children appeared with bouquets. The butcher's boy arrived with a parcel of meat. Even the vicar in Chilcombe Mell church beamed benevolently at her from the pulpit while speaking of fruitfulness. It was as if they had been waiting for this all along.

She remembered how welcoming they had been when she arrived. Their eager hands opening doors, carrying bags, offering tea. They had pressed her clothes, poured her wine, and she had felt rather royal, as if she were someone of importance. But they hadn't wanted her at all, had they? They had wanted it.

Rosalind retired to her bedroom, pleading nervous strain, admitting only visits from Betty or Mrs Hardcastle or Willoughby, if he came with things from London. Jasper, surprisingly acquiescent, retreated, muttering, 'Whatever you wish.'

Dr Rutledge called occasionally to examine her expanding stomach. He advised she take up cigarettes, saying women were prone to hysteria when with child. 'Brain's starved of nutrients. Try a few every day after meals and you'll be right as rain.'

The cigarettes (provided by Jasper) (in a silver case engraved with her initials provided by Willoughby) were vile, but she persevered. There was something about the way they set her head spinning she almost enjoyed. She imagined herself with a stylish cigarette holder, at a party in Belgravia. She didn't like to look down at her body any more. She preferred the version of herself she was ordering clothes for: the society hostess with the twenty-one-inch waist.

Deep in her belly, the implanted creature grew. She did her best to ignore it, but she was hot and tired, a bloated vessel. At night, even with the windows wide open, she tossed and turned in her own sweat, her body generating heat like a smelting furnace. Every

morning she woke exhausted, with a sour metallic taste in her mouth, as if she had spent the night sucking coins.

Of course, they had not thought to tell Cristabel. The thought did not enter their minds. It remained outside their minds, along with most matters pertaining to Cristabel. Such thoughts were items left uncollected, of little value. And, as often happens, these forgotten items were picked up by servants.

Maudie Kitcat peered into Cristabel's attic bedroom one evening and said, 'You're to have a brother or sister, have they told you?'

Cristabel looked up from her bed where her collection of stones with faces were building themselves a home under her pillow to protect themselves against the ravaging attacks of the postcard of a dog called Dog. 'The brother?'

'Could be.'

The stones with faces came rushing out of their pillow shelter, their expressions twisted cries of joy and relief, and the postcard of a dog called Dog was tipped over, like a great wall.

Maudie watched, with her curiously fixed stare, and continued, 'Betty says if they don't have a boy, they'll keep going till they do.'

'Where is the brother living now?' asked Cristabel.

'In Mrs Seagrave's belly. That's why she's gone fat.'

Cristabel reached under her bed to grab a few sticks from her stick pile to build a little bonfire. She carefully leant the sticks against each other, then said, 'I didn't live in her belly.'

'You didn't.'

'I lived here. In this place. This is my place.'

'That's right.'

'The brother will live here too. With me. I will look after him.' She looked at Maudie who nodded, then walked away down the attic corridor.

Cristabel placed the postcard called Dog on the bonfire and put the stones with faces in a circle around it. There would be a great feast tonight. A postcard of a dog called Dog would be roasted with a red apple in its mouth. There would be fresh snow. And jam tarts. And everyone would have seconds. And no one would go to bed.

Under Beds

Under Cristabel's Bed

Feathers, sticks, sheep's wool, a seagull skull, a dried ball of glue,
one large lobster claw.

Three snails in a jar.

A trench lighter.

A wooden sword.

A toy aeroplane.

Drawings of soldiers, sometimes accompanied by dogs, camels
or bears, captioned: HOLD FAST FOR ENGLAND and BROTHERS
UNITE and LOYAL PALS and SHE-BEAR SUCKLED THEM.

Lists of names, some crossed out.

One toffee, half eaten, rewrapped.

Under Maudie's Bed

Four of Willoughby's letters to Cristabel.

An old piece of soap found in a guest bedroom.

A book about hunting African wild beasts taken from the study.

A pocketknife.

Lumps of chalk found on the Ridgeway.

A slate on which the letters of the alphabet are practised.

A diary.

A pencil.

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Under Rosalind's Bed

Shoe boxes containing the following:

Invitations and dance cards for events held during June and July 1914.

A napkin taken from the Café Royal, London, during the early hours of 17th July, 1914.

Six theatre tickets.

Two cinema tickets.

A daisy chain, pressed and dried.

Thirty-seven illustrations of bridal wear cut from magazines between 1913 and 1918.

One hundred and fifty-two magazine clippings depicting items including: Victrola gramophones, anti-wrinkle turtle oil creams, illustrations of correct dining etiquette, Sioux Indian ornaments, electrical reading lamps, croquet mallets, Turkish cigarettes, camphorated reducing creams, luxury hosiery, Royal Worcester teacups, and revitalizing health tonics to restore natural vigour to body and mind after times of great strain.

An article entitled 'Which Kind of Marriage Turns Out Best?' cut from *Woman's Weekly*, February 1919, following sections underlined:

*He has a horror of the lip-salving, opinionated girl of today. He
just wants a wife with one or two ideas in her head and a home
A woman who is loved has no need of ambition
A man may run straight – but a woman must!
Without passionate love
Magnetic spark*

Photographs cut from various women's magazines captioned:

*The tide of progress that leaves a woman with the vote in her hand
but scarcely any clothes on her back must now ebb and return her
to her femininity.*

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A free art plate of Florence La Badie, effervescent star of

Thanhouser Film Corporation.

Off to the Paris fashion parades in a giant aeroplane from Croydon!

Articles entitled:

'The Latest Ways of Warming Homes'

'A Loving Wife's Burden'

'Life Stories: At the Crossroads!'

An advertisement: *Maternity Corset: in all the latest designs, giving a*
QUITE ORDINARY APPEARANCE to the wearer – a physical as well as a mental
comfort. Spotted broche, ribbon trim, side lacing allows for adjustment.