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Jubilee

Written by Eliza Graham

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ELIZA GRAHAM

Jubilee

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Part One

One

Rachel

Silver Jubilee day, 1977, and June 2002

By the time the kitchen clock struck seven I knew that my cousin wouldn't be coming back. I abandoned my rehearsal of the cool response I'd planned for her return: *I always knew you were just mucking about, Jess . . .*

While we waited for the men to finish searching the hedges and the white snaky curve of the Ridgeway path above us, I watched my aunt. Evie sat at the kitchen table twisting the fabric belt of her new dress as though she was trying to wring the anxiety out of herself. She caught me staring at her and managed to twist her features into something halfway to a smile. This attempt to reassure me made me feel even more frightened. 'Come back!' I shouted silently at my cousin. 'It's not a game any more.'

I was still clutching my Silver Jubilee mug with its Queen's head and coat of arms. I wished I could go upstairs and put the mug away but I felt bound to stay here at the table with

my aunt, as though any movement could jinx the search for Jessamy. We sat in silence, listening to the kitchen clock tick-tocking until the noise seemed to drill itself into my chest.

‘I’m going out,’ I blurted out after five more minutes had passed. ‘I’m going to check the stables again.’ I put down the mug and rose.

Evie gave a start. ‘No.’ She reached across and grabbed my wrist. ‘Stay there.’

I wriggled my wrist free. ‘Let me. Please.’

She ran her hands over her face. ‘Rachel, we’ve looked a dozen times. We’ve been all over the farm.’

‘There are places we hide . . .’

‘I know them all. The elm the lightning hollowed out.’ She sounded almost fierce. ‘The little hollows in the sheep field. Your father and I used to hide in them, too.’

She gave another of the strained smiles. ‘We’ve combed this place, every inch. And you and I need to stay here, in case she comes back. Imagine if she returned, cold, tired, scared . . .’ Her voice cracked a little on the last word. ‘And there was nobody here.’

I stared hard at the kitchen table. Jessamy and I had been making Union Jacks out of red, white and blue Plasticine and they still sat at the end of the table. I reached across for one of them and squashed it in my hand. Some of the blue Plasticine squelched into the white strips. I clenched my fist again. The red ran into the white and now it didn’t look like a flag at all. I kept on squeezing it until I held a dirty grey ball in my palm. ‘We need to check on the ponies,’ I said.

She put a hand to her mouth. In the field outside the

house stood a new chestnut, a surprise for Jessamy. Evie had arranged for him to arrive while we were at the Jubilee party.

Eventually I must have fallen asleep, the spoiled Plasticine still in my hand, because I came to with my head resting on the oak table. ‘. . . again in daylight,’ a man was saying.

‘Thank you.’ Evie’s voice sounded like a stranger’s: polite, detached.

But in the morning they found only half a dozen deflated Jubilee balloons and some crumpled Union Jack paper napkins, blown into ditches and hedges.

I returned to Winter’s Copse six weeks after the Silver Jubilee party, when my summer holidays began. My father, Evie’s twin brother, Charlie, had done what he could to protect me from the newspaper and television coverage of the disappearance but I’d caught a few glimpses of myself, huddled behind Evie as she stood in the kitchen doorway, before Dad could switch off the television. ‘Craven villagers are still perplexed by the disappearance of Jessamy Winter,’ the reporter started.

Whenever I could escape the insistent tones of a school teacher I let my cousin’s image drift back into my mind.

This evening Evie was making me tea: scrambled eggs on toast, and I was laying the table. I set three places. Evie turned from the range with the saucepan of eggs, and her eyes widened at the sight of the three table mats and sets of cutlery.

She let out a quiet moan. The saucepan in her hand dipped so that the yellow contents slopped on to the table. ‘Sorry,’ she said, raising her other hand to her mouth. ‘Oh God, I’m sorry, Rachel. It’s just . . .’ The words seemed to jam in her throat. She rocked herself backwards and forwards; more of

the scrambled egg spilled out of the pan, pattering to the scrubbed kitchen floor.

It was then that the fact of Jessamy's disappearance hit me with an almost physical violence. I stared at the stupid, wretched, third place I'd set and knew that she would never lift the knife and fork, never drink from the water glass again. She'd never ride that new pony still waiting for her. It was my birthday next week and I was going to be ten. Jess wouldn't be there when I cut my cake. If there was a cake. Perhaps there would never be cakes again.

These days, in my job as a freelance marketing consultant, I write copy and do a bit of simple design work. I work with sophisticated photo enhancement programs on the computer. It's possible to excise an image and replace it with something else: an unwanted wedding guest can become a tree or bush. But before you carry out the replacement you're left with a cut-out of the missing person's body, filled only with an amorphous grey vacuum.

As Evie's scrambled eggs splattered out of the saucepan I saw my cousin's outline at the third table setting, with a vacuum where her body – that vital, energetic mass – had been. And that outline followed me round my life as I progressed to all the places where Jessamy should also have been: university matriculations and graduations, weddings and funerals.

But eventually life filled in the vacuum so that I started to look through it. But nothing could fill in the vacuum for Jessamy's mother.

*

The Golden Jubilee was approaching; only weeks away now. Evie had already sent me the invitation to the village party, with its official Jubilee logo on the top. Twenty-five years since my cousin had disappeared. Everyone watched old film coverage of the Coronation and the Silver Jubilee on television. Parties were planned; bunting was ordered.

But for Evie the anniversary could only ever be that of the last time she'd seen her daughter.

Two

Evie

Coronation Day, 2 June 1953

The red jelly in the half-eaten trifle looked like drops of blood against the yellow custard and real cream on the top. Splashes of orange squash had stained the white tablecloths and the balloons tied to the fence had already started to deflate.

Evie clutched the table and closed her eyes for a second. A metal coil tightened round her head. When she opened her eyes again the jelly still looked like blood. She swallowed hard and looked away. The children were eating more slowly now, their eyes glazed as though they were inebriated, tin-foil crowns sliding down their heads. One or two would almost certainly be sick. Several of the adults also looked a little green, though that might have been the cask of best ordered especially for the party, rather than the food.

Sandwiches, cold sausages, cold beef, lemonade, tea, fairy cakes, buns, trifle, chocolate cake: a cornucopia to celebrate the new queen, the new hope, the modern age. All consumed within

an hour. Perhaps these new Elizabethans would never again feel that desperation to taste something sweet and rich in the mouth that Evie remembered from the years of rationing.

New Elizabethans. To distract herself from the spoiled food and her throbbing head Evie rolled the phrase silently round her lips. She liked the idea of being a New Elizabethan. The old Elizabethans had been a vivacious lot: explorers, pirates and poets. Perhaps their twentieth-century kin would be equally entertaining. Her headache seemed to subside. Feeling better, she looked along the table for her next chore. Some of the older folk were sitting back in their chairs, eyes slightly glazed. Hard to imagine them exploring and writing sonnets. But the children . . . Perhaps they'd live great lives. Perhaps she herself might be a writer. But if she'd been going to do something clever in her life she'd have made a start by now. It was too late now: twenty-three, married, with this—

‘Evie!’

Day-dreaming again. The earthenware teapot in Evie's hand was needed at the far end of the trestle table. Fiona Fernham gave her a fierce wave. ‘That tea will be good and stewed now. Give me the pot if you're just going to stand there staring at nothing.’ She gave Evie the kind of glare that one of her illustrious land-owning forebears might have given a retainer.

‘Sorry.’ Evie walked over and handed the pot to Fiona. If you were female and aged between sixteen and sixty and resident in the village of Craven you weren't granted a day of leisure to celebrate your new monarch's anointing at Westminster Abbey. It fell to you to decorate tables, drape bunting, shell hard-boiled eggs, cut sandwiches, refresh tea-pots, and walk backwards and forwards all afternoon bearing heavy trays.

Relaxation was only for the young, the old and the male. Still, at least these exertions meant there was no time to brood.

Matthew caught her eye and he gave her a long, slow wink. ‘Pay attention, Eve.’ His face was tender. He must have overheard the exchange. For all his softness she knew he wouldn’t have liked hearing her spoken to like that. She was a Winter, by marriage at least. The Winters were landowners, successful farmers, even through the gloomy interwar years.

Evie flipped her apron at him and made a face to lighten the moment. Matthew’s mother sat beside him, a small dribble of tea falling down her chin. But her eyes were bright. Perhaps she was remembering the Coronations of the past: the Georges and Edwards. VE Day. And VJ Day, too, though that had been more muted because the boys weren’t home yet. All this remembering. There were things Evie preferred to forget. Her hand shook as she picked up an empty plate.

She didn’t feel sick, exactly. Just exhausted, with the occasional throbbing head and hot stabbing pains beneath her navel. Oh God, if only she could go home and curl up somewhere warm. But she couldn’t because people – she meant Fiona – would guess what was wrong with her. Pregnancy was the desirable condition for someone eighteen months’ married. To be incapable of keeping a baby until term was reprehensible, especially if your husband needed someone to hand his farm—

‘At least try and clear up that mess!’ Fiona was almost shouting now, pointing at the jelly splodges on the table as though Evie herself had spilled them on the cloth. Matthew used his knife to scrape up the worst of it onto his plate. ‘Oh not you, Mr Winter! I meant Evie.’ The coldness in Fiona’s

voice when she said Evie's name showed that the dislike was more than purely social.

'No trouble for me to help,' Matthew said in his slow, deep voice. 'You ladies have been working all afternoon.'

But Matthew was Male and not intended by Providence for drudgery. Evie eyed him. He looked calm enough but you could never tell. Sometimes too much noise distressed him. And large numbers of people eating at the same time were difficult for him, too. She noticed the crumpled-up paper napkin beside his plate and wondered whether he'd hidden half a bun in it. Sometimes she still found food hidden in drawers or placed behind the cushions on the parlour sofa. At first she'd thrown it away but now she simply left it where it was and never mind the mice.

Evie took a cloth from her pinafore pocket and dabbed at the red stains on the cloth. You could never get them out, not completely. Even after a boil wash pinkish tints would remain. She felt her husband's gaze on her and looked up to see Matthew regarding her with that expression that was peculiarly his own: half quizzical, half sad. She never knew sad for what, exactly. He'd lit a cigarette now that the meal was over and blew gentle puffs of smoke and his face was still soft as he watched her.

Matthew didn't know about the pregnancy yet. She hadn't been sure enough to raise his hopes. Or dash hers, she thought. But they were probably already dashed.

The children were on their feet now, clamouring for three-legged-races and egg-and-spoon. The fake sable-edged robes they'd worn for the pageant lay crumpled and trampled on

the grass. Evie looked at their pink cheeks and shining eyes. New hope. A fresh start. She had to look away.

I still have so much, she told herself briskly. Think of all those war widows. Or those women whose children were crushed to death by bombs in London, Bristol or Portsmouth. Or those even more wretched women all over Europe whose entire families were deliberately murdered.

She finished clearing the table and went to put the scraps in the swill bucket, hidden behind the hedge, the smell of the wasted food making her want to retch. The pigs would like it, though. When he'd first come home, Matthew had stared at the pig swill and she'd known he was thinking how men in the camp would have fought over it.

Philippa, who lived in the cottage next to the shop, was rinsing plates in a bowl of soapy water on an old table, her hands wrinkled by long immersion.

'Weren't we clever to miss the worst of the rain?' It had rained most of the morning.

Evie smiled and nodded, inhaling the smell of new grass to ease the nausea.

'How's Matthew?'

'This is a good day.' At least she'd asked outright. Some of the others gossiped about him behind their hands. 'He still hides food but the dreams don't seem as bad. This cool weather makes his bad foot ache, though.'

'Nearly eight years and still they're not right.' The woman's face suddenly took on a guarded expression, as though she'd said too much. Evie wished she hadn't stopped. But she couldn't ask her for details. Before the war Philippa had walked out with Jonathan Fernham, Fiona's brother, for a while, but when

he'd come back he'd done no more than occasionally partner her in mixed doubles or lead her round the village hall in a stiff foxtrot.

'Did you watch the ceremony on television, Evie? We went to my mother's to see it.' Philippa handed Evie another bowl to empty. Evie watched the jelly and cake crumbs slide off the bowl into the swill bucket, where they joined more cake crumbs and a pint of cream that had turned too much to be used at the party. In the war they'd have done something with all that food. Again her stomach protested.

'I saw it.'

The girl polished a plate with her drying-up cloth. 'Those gorgeous dresses. Imagine having all that silk and taffeta.'

Evie nodded, although she hadn't paid much attention to the Queen's costume.

'Like something from a film.' Philippa wrung out the cloth. 'A life of glamour. That's what the Queen has. Not like us.' She put her hands to her lower back. 'Though you don't need the posh frocks and jewellery.'

Evie put a hand to her face.

'You've just rubbed jelly into your cheek. Here.' Philippa flicked it off with the cloth. She gazed at Evie. 'How do you do it, Evie?'

'What?'

'I remember you when you first came here, a scrawny little kid from south London. Nothing special. But now . . .' She didn't sound envious, only slightly reproachful. Evie had got her man, after all.

Evie shrugged. 'I don't think I'm all that special. My mother was pretty, as far as I remember. But by the time I'm

twenty-five I'll be a weathered old hag from all those winter nights in the lambing shed.'

Philippa turned back to the washing-up bowl, shaking her head. 'And Matthew adores you and you live in the prettiest house in the village.'

And only one thing was asked of her.

'Fetch me some more plates if the kids have finished with them. I'll freshen up this bowl first.' Philippa tipped out the soapy water onto the grass, where the suds gleamed like small crystal balls before popping.

'I'll fetch you some hot water from the urn.' Both women jumped at the voice. Martha Stourton stood at the hedge, unsmiling, watchful, her pale eyes huge in her face.

'Thanks!' Philippa answered.

Evie retreated behind the hedge. First Fiona Fernham and now Martha: this was going to be a day of avoiding women who didn't approve of her. The grass was nearly dry here now and she could risk her new frock for a minute's peace and quiet. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't brood today, she'd let the past go, fold back the memories and pretend they'd never been taken out again. She removed her pinafore and laid it on the grass to protect the full poplin skirt. 'There's enough material in that frock to clothe all the women in the village,' Matthew had joked when she'd put it on. Then his eyes had softened and he'd put his arms around her. 'It shows off your neat little waist. You're fit for a queen yourself.'

It might have been her imagination but the dress already felt slightly tight around the bust and stomach. Could she still be pregnant after yesterday? She felt the muscles around the

tops of her legs and in her pelvis tighten, as though they were trying to hold on to the foetus.

The grass was soft and springy from all the rain. It made a comfortable resting place. Nobody would see her here. From her pocket she retrieved her Woodbines and lighter. Mrs W didn't like smoking in the house. She could barely talk but her hands would flutter in her lap at the sight of a cigarette packet.

From here Evie was looking up towards the White Horse. Its front legs were hidden by the curve of the hill and it looked more like a kangaroo. Small black figures walked around beside it; not everyone was marking the Coronation, some had travelled out here to look at the horse, now restored again after its ignominious wartime camouflaging. Above the horse, hidden by the slope, the Ridgeway cut its way like an east-west scar across the Downs. Sometimes, when she walked up there, Evie could almost imagine a call blown on the breeze, or the treading of hooves behind her. She never turned round in case she saw the ghosts of the men and beasts who'd tramped the footway all those centuries ago. And she only ever walked on the eastern section of the path, never to the west of the White Horse.

Evie let her eyes close for a moment. Sleep had been elusive for the last few nights but wanted to snare her now. Her chin slumped onto her chest. The packet tumbled from her hand before she could even remove a cigarette.

'Taking a break?'

Her eyes flew open. Martha, back from fetching water. She sat up. Martha always made her feel guilty for taking a minute's break. If Evie sat on a hay bale or leaned against the fence posts for a sip of tea from the Thermos, that would be

the moment Martha conjured herself up from nowhere to suggest with just a flash of those green eyes of hers that Evie lacked commitment. 'Just wanted a rest.'

'I see.' Martha's eyes seemed to glide along Evie's body. Perhaps she'd guessed.

'I'll just finish this. Would you like . . .' She gestured at the cigarettes.

'Thanks.' Martha took one and lit it with her own lighter, standing beside Evie as she smoked.

'Funny how peaceful it gets as soon as you step just a few yards away from the crowds.' Might as well try for some conversation, Evie thought, difficult as it was with Martha.

'Especially now the silver band's stopped.' Martha took a draw of the cigarette. 'Bit different from London.'

She liked to refer to Evie's early childhood in the city, as though underlining her incomer status.

'I don't really remember London.' She forced a note of neutrality into her words. 'I was so young when I came here.'

'Ten.' Martha made it sound like a contradiction.

'I should be getting back. Philippa needs the plates cleaning.' She was gabbling.

'I saw you up on the hill earlier on, Evie. Didn't you want to watch the ceremony on television? Matthew bought you a set, didn't he?'

The last sentence made it plain what Martha thought of such uxoriousness. 'He thought his mother would like to see it.' She felt her cheeks burn and turned her head so that Martha wouldn't see and forced herself to stare at the trees and the distant lettuce-green Cotswold hills to the north. But the older

woman simply stared at her for another second before drifting away towards the tables.

Evie stayed where she stood, giving herself another minute, just until the worst of the pain subsided. Should she tell Matthew now? He looked so happy, sitting with his mother at the trestle table, enjoying the celebration. If she told him, he'd worry. Wait another day.

She should have told him this morning, when it had started.

She'd come inside to join Matthew and Mrs W. She wasn't really that bothered about watching the Coronation but it had started to rain again. Just like D-Day had been, cold and wet, not like early summer at all. Matthew moved up on the sofa so there was room for her, grimacing slightly as he moved his left foot. 'Tea's just brewed, Evie. Here, let me pour you a cup.'

'No, you stay there, I'll do it in a moment.' She looked at the square wooden cabinet, received with such pride and anticipation just days ago. The picture wasn't bad, smaller than the cinema but you could make out the shining brass on the horses' harnesses and the details on the carriages. Shame you couldn't see the colours, though. So many people on the streets: thin faces, and tired-looking, still, some of them. The war had only finished eight years ago, after all. Perhaps the cheers and shouts were a release of emotion. People looked at that young woman in the carriage with her smooth skin and they thought she was drawing a line under it all.

Evie considered whether this would ever be possible. She gave her husband another little smile and looked back at the television screen

'Just look at those arches they've put up over the Mall,'

Matthew marvelled. 'It's like something from ancient Rome.' The Queen's coach was coming closer. The camera angle changed and Evie saw the backs of the spectators' heads, then the sides of their faces as the camera moved round to get a clearer shot of the monarch. What did she feel, this young woman, as she saw all those people? Perhaps she was flattered, gratified. Or perhaps she was secretly terrified, longing to run away and spring on one of the horses they said she adored.

How many tens or hundreds of thousands of them were in London to see this procession? Little children, old people, middle-aged women in their best hats, soldiers in uniform. Happy, smiling faces.

Mrs W's shawl had fallen off her lap. Evie rose to retrieve it for her, moving closer to the television screen just as the camera changed its angle, focusing on the crowd instead of the coach, so their faces were close to Evie's eyes. How extraordinary that she could look at these excited strangers while sitting in their own parlour, eighty miles away from the Mall.

A cramp squeezed her abdomen. And she felt the back of her neck prickle with cold sweat even though the coal fire was lit in the grate.

A cool tingle ran down her spine. It was going to happen again and there was nothing she could do to stop it, to hold on to what might have been a child. Somehow she managed to pick up the shawl and tuck it round her mother-in-law's lap.

'Robert.' Evie had to strain her ears to pick up the word. The old lady raised a finger and pointed towards the screen. Evie glanced at the television and saw only the blurred black and white faces of thousands of strangers. A quick glance at

Matthew's relaxed expression told her he couldn't have heard his mother murmur his brother's name. Evie sat back again and forced herself to breathe slowly. Mrs Winter was confused again; she couldn't possibly have made out an individual in that throng.

Robert was dead. That's what they'd told Matthew when he'd come home from the hospital. Your brother died in a barn fire. He fell asleep and left a cigarette alight and the dry hay caught fire. He is buried underneath one of the yews in the churchyard.

'There,' said Robert's mother slowly again. Evie'd never even been certain whether Mrs Winter had understood that Robert had died those eight years ago. Impossible to tell whether the information had pierced the old lady's expressionless eyes.

Evie touched her arm. 'The picture's not very clear, is it? You can't make out the details?' She gave the arm a gentle shake. 'Where did you think you saw him?'

Mrs W's eyes focused on the square box. The carriage had reached the Abbey now.

'First the Duke of Edinburgh and then the Queen alight from the royal carriage,' Richard Dimpleby said on the television.

The old woman's lips opened. 'There,' she said again, her eyes focusing somewhere in the direction of the television. Something about the flags and crowds must have made Mrs Winter remember a previous Coronation. Perhaps Robert had enjoyed watching the news film at the cinema and that was why she was thinking about him now.

'You're right, mother, she's there now,' Matthew said.

‘Going in a young wife and mother and she’ll come out a queen. Doesn’t she look young? Barely older than our Evie.’

‘There,’ the old woman said again.

‘I’m just going to check on that heifer.’ Evie stood, her eyes on the window behind the television. The room felt stifling, despite the unseasonable chill outside. Remembering Robert was making her feel dizzy.

‘She’ll be fine, love. Leave her till later. You’ll want to watch the ceremony.’

‘I don’t mind.’ She left the room, praying he wouldn’t make a fuss, but he didn’t, Matthew never did unless something triggered one of his bad turns; then he’d grow uneasy if she left his sight. She forced herself to walk unhurriedly through the house to the kitchen, where she swapped her court shoes for a pair of boots in which to negotiate the muddy farmyard. The heifer looked up as she approached the shed, eyes no longer dull, nose damp and twitching. Good. She could go back inside now, into the companionable fug of the parlour. But she didn’t. She found herself walking out of the yard. She needed space – her feet found their own way across the field and through the gate. The faint outline of a sheep track led up to the Ridgeway. Years ago she and Charlie had stood up here looking down as smoke curled from the roof of the barn.

Evie’s feet pulled her into a run uphill, towards the ribbon of clear sky forming over the grey skies. She passed Martha Stourton’s cottage and was careful to take quiet steps, in the shadows, until she was outside the view of anyone looking out of a window. Her lungs protested as she dashed forward but she kept going. It started to rain and almost immediately

her frock became a cold flapping sheet around her legs. Evie headed slowly back down the hill towards the farm, her head bowed down, her mind dipping backwards into the past. She found herself standing by the back door again and rubbed the raindrops off her face.

From the drawing room came the sound of Richard Dimbleby's voice, still narrating the Coronation from Westminster Abbey. A blast of trumpets snarled out. She could slip off this bloodied dress and leave it to soak. Lucky she'd planned to wear the New Look-style frock she'd made to the party on the green.

It could be as though it had never happened.