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Opening Extract from...

Kehua!

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Scarlet blows the gaff

Your writer, in telling you this tale of murder, adultery, incest, ghosts, redemption and remorse, takes you first to a comfortable house in Highgate, North London, where outside the kitchen window, dancing in the breeze, the daffodils are in glorious bloom: a host of yellow male stamens in vigorous competition, eager to puff their special pollen out into the world. No two daffodils are exactly alike, nor are any two humans. We attribute free will to humans, but not to daffodils – with whom we share 35 per cent of our DNA – though perhaps rashly, when we consider the way some human families behave. It may be that DNA and chance is all there is. We can only hope that this morning the strong wind blows the brightest and best of daffodil genes abroad, so all the gardens around are blessed by yellow loveliness.

Inside the kitchen, Scarlet, a young journalist of twenty-nine, is in conversation with her grandmother Beverley. Scarlet is indifferent to the marvels of nature – how the tender, sheltered female pistil, all receptivity, is rooted to the spot, while the boisterous male stamen above yearns for something better and brighter than plain stay-at-home she. To Scarlet a flower is just a flower, not a life lesson.

Daffodils occasionally self-fertilise, but not often. Inbreeding is unpopular in nature, in the plant and animal kingdoms alike.

‘I wasn’t going to tell you now, Gran,’ says Scarlet, as casually as

she can make it seem, 'but I've decided to run away from home.'

To which Beverley, aged seventy-seven, closes her eyes briefly like some wise old owl and replies: 'That's not surprising. There's quite a breeze today. How those daffodils do bob about! Are you going to tell Louis before you go?'

Louis is Scarlet's husband; everybody thinks he is anyway, though they never actually went through with the ceremony. The couple have been together for six years and have no children, so they are entwined merely out of custom and habit, like ivy tendrils curling up a tree, but not yet grown into one another. The severance will cause little distress, or none that Scarlet can see. She is anxious to be off to her new life, with a hop, a skip and a jump, as soon as she has packed her grandmother's freezer with all the delicacies that a relative newly out of hospital is likely to favour. She reckons she can just get it done, and meet Jackson her lover in Costa's Coffee House in Dean Street, Soho, by twelve-thirty. He will wait patiently if she is late but she would rather not be. A tune is running through her head which bodes no good. It is a doomy song in which Gene Pitney gets taken to a café and then can never go home any more. Twenty-four hours from her arms and he met and fell in love with someone else. It's the kind of thing that happens, Scarlet knows. It's at the very last minute that the prize is wrenched from you. She will not be late.

'No,' says Scarlet to her grandmother. Beverley has had a knee replacement, and is temporarily holed up on the sofa in her large and well-equipped kitchen. 'I haven't told him. I hate scenes. Let him come back to an empty house.'

Already Scarlet regrets telling Beverley she is leaving. She can see she's in for a sermon. As if *Twenty-Four Hours from Tulsa* were not enough, now the hop and the skip will turn into a lengthy drama

with the hounds of doubt and anxiety snapping at her heels.

‘The house isn’t exactly empty,’ says Beverley. ‘Isn’t Lola staying?’ Lola is a wayward nymphet, and Scarlet’s sixteen-year-old niece. ‘I daresay she will look after him. But do be careful, all the same. Leaving home can cause all kinds of unexpected problems. But I don’t suppose Louis is the kind to go after you with the kitchen knife. And you haven’t got any children he can put in the back of the car and suffocate with exhaust fumes. So I expect you’re okay. But you can never quite be sure what manner of man you have, until you try and get away.’

Try to envisage the scene. The dancing daffodils: the smart kitchen: Scarlet, a long-legged skinny girl of the new no-nonsense world, with the bright, focused looks you might associate with a TV presenter, attractive and quick in her movements: a girl for the modern age, a little frightening to all but alpha males, in conversation with the raddled old lady, who, though obliged in her infirmity to rely on the kindness of family, is not beyond stirring up a little trouble.

‘I know it is tempting,’ says Beverley now, equably, from the sofa at the end of the long kitchen, ‘just to run, and on many occasions I have had to, and thus saved my life, both metaphorically and literally. But a woman does have to be cautious. Are you running to someone, Scarlet, or just running in general?’

‘To someone,’ admits Scarlet. ‘But it’s only temporary, a really nice guy with a whole range of emotions Louis simply doesn’t have. Louis is hardly the knifing sort. I wish he was. Jackson’s offered me a roof over my head. I’ll move out as soon as Louis sells the house and I can get somewhere of my own. Louis hit me last night, Gran, so there’s no way I can stay. You wouldn’t want me to.’

‘Hit you?’ enquires Beverley.

‘On my cheekbone,’ says Scarlet. ‘Just here. The bruise hasn’t come up yet.’

Beverley inspects her granddaughter for sign of injury but sees none.

‘Leaving in haste,’ says Beverley, ‘may sometimes be wise. The first time I did it I was three. I wore a blue and white checked dress and remember looking at my little white knees going one-two, one-two beneath the hem and wondering why my nice dress was bloodstained and why my legs were so short. My mother Kitchie, that’s your great-grandmother, had very good long legs, like yours and your mother’s. They bypassed me, more’s the pity.’

Scarlet grits her teeth. What have these toddler reminiscences to do with her? She has since childhood been incensed by her grandmother’s – and even her mother’s – ‘when I was a girl’ and ‘in those days’. Why can’t the old realise the irrelevance of the past? There can be no real comparison between then and now. People have surely moved on from the old days of ignorance, hate, violence and prejudice they are so fond of talking about. No, she should never have started the Louis hare running.

‘I can’t remember what my shoes were like,’ Beverley goes on, relentlessly, ‘it being such a long time ago – 1937, it must have been – but I think they were yellow. Or that might have just been the dust. We were in New Zealand then, in the South Island, on the Canterbury Plains. The dust on those dry country roads round Amberley was yellowy, a kind of dull ochre. You notice the colour of the earth more as a small child, I suppose, because you’re nearer to it.’

Beverley too wonders why she has set this particular hare running: now she has, she can see it will run and run. But then she takes a pleasure in rash action, and always has, and perhaps Scar-

let inherits it. There is something grand about burning one's boats. And Scarlet, bound by the tale of the family scandal, longs to get away to her lover, but like the wedding guest in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, holds still.

'I was quite athletic as a child,' Beverley says. 'I even used to get the school gymnastic prize. And I was a really good little runner, a sprinter, until my bosom began to grow, and I developed an hour-glass shape, and bounced while I ran. That was one of the early tragedies of my life. I expect it was that early experience of one-two, one-two down this dusty road to Kitchie's best friend Rita that made me so value running. I wasn't otherwise sportive in any way. I ran because Kitchie, that's my mother, your great-grandmother, was lying dead on the kitchen floor. I wasn't quite sure at the time what dead was, I was only three, but when I tried to open her eyelids she didn't slap my hand away as she usually did. There was a lot of blood around; I remember thinking it was like the time when I blocked the basin with my flannel and the water overflowed and I thought that was funny. But this wasn't funny and it wasn't even water, which is a nothing sort of substance, but a strange red rather sticky stuff coming from my mother's neck.'

'They say you can't remember things that happened when you were three,' says Scarlet. She would rather not be hearing this. It is making her very angry. What sort of inheritance does she have? What has her grandmother done? As happens with many when they are shocked, their first instinct is to blame the victim for the crime.

'I was rising four,' says Beverley. 'They say anything that suits them, and I am bad at dates. But help was required and I was sensible enough to know it, which was why my little legs were going as fast as I could make them. And the reason my mother was lying

dead on the floor, though I didn't know this until later, was because she'd told my father Walter, while he was cutting sandwiches, that she was running off with another man. So Walter cut her throat with the bread knife, leaving me, little Beverley, having my afternoon rest upstairs. Men do the oddest things when sex is involved. And fathers weren't very close to their children in those days. They supported them and that was that. If it happened today I expect he'd have come after me too. In times of desperation, the nearest and dearest get it in the neck.'

'You never told me,' says Scarlet. She could see the Alexandra Palace mast between the trees. She feels it was probably transmitting invisible rays of evil, jagged and ill-intentioned, cursing her designs for the future. 'What kind of genetic inheritance is this?'

Today Scarlet is a little pink and feverish about the cheekbones; perhaps her blood pressure is raised? If it is, it is only to be expected: last night she wept, screamed and threw crockery. A high colour suits her, brightening her eyes and suggesting she is not as self-possessed as she seems, and might have any number of vulnerabilities, which indeed she has. After she has had a row with Louis, and these days they are more and more frequent, men look after her in the street, and wonder if she needs rescuing. Today is such a day, and Jackson is indeed at hand. She has no real need to worry about losing Jackson. He would be hard put to it to find another more desirable than she, celebrity though he may be.

After last night's row Louis went to sleep in one of the spare bedrooms of their (or at any rate his) dream home, Nopasaran. The bedrooms are described in the architectural press, where they often feature, as alcoves, being scooped like ice cream out of the concrete walls of a high central studio room. Guests are expected to reach the alcoves of this brutalist Bauhaus dwelling by climbing ladders, as

once the cave-dwellers of the Dordogne climbed for security. Changing the bedding is not easy, and the help tends to leave if asked to do it – there is other easier work around – so Scarlet finds the task is frequently left to her.

No one in this book, other than peripheral characters like ‘the help’ as the particular reader may have realised, is particularly short of money; that is all in the past for them. The need to avoid poverty, once both the reason and the excuse for improper actions, no longer dictates their behaviour. This is not the case for Jackson, who is in financial trouble and has his eye upon Scarlet’s good job and general competence, as well as upon her face and figure, but find me anyone whose motives are wholly pure? He for his part could complain Scarlet loved him for his headlines, which once were large though they will soon be small. None so desperate as a failing celebrity.

Murder will out. Poverty was not the cause of the crime which was to so affect Beverley’s future and that of her descendants, and concerning which she had stayed silent for so long; rather it was love. And Beverley’s version of an event which happened on the other side of the world in 1937 may not be as accurate as she believes. A different truth may still come back to solve the problems of the present. Novels can no longer sit on shelves and pretend to be reality; they are not, they are inventions, suspensions of reality, and must declare themselves as such. By hook or by crook, or even by the intervention of the supernatural, we will get to the root of it.

Where they live

Where we live influences us, though we may deny it. High ceilings and big spaces make us expansive; cramped rooms and low ceilings turn us inward. Those who once lived where we live now influence our moods. A house is the sum of its occupants, past and present. People who live in new houses are probably the sensible ones; they can start afresh. They may seem shallow to us, hermit crabs that we are, these strange empty people, dwellers in the here and now of new developments; but perhaps a kinder word is subtlety. How can our precursors in the bedroom where we sleep not send out their anxieties, their sexual worries to us? As you brush the stairs – should you condescend to do so – spare a thought for those who ran up and down them before you. Something echoing from the past, as she changes the sheets in Nopasaran's alcoves, tossing the soiled bedding down, dragging the fresh up, almost drowns out Scarlet's lust for Jackson.

Nopasaran, where Louis and Scarlet share their lives, was built in the 1930s when domestic help was easier to come by. It was designed to an advanced taste: hailed at the time as a machine for living in. Machines in those days had a better press than they do today. Louis loves the house; Scarlet hates it. Now she has resolved never to spend another day in it, let alone another night. She wants to go and live with her lover, who has atrocious taste and shagpile

carpets – but livelier sexual habits than Louis. A row with Jackson would surely have ended with sex, not a disdainful exit to different rooms, let alone scooped and moulded alcoves.

A lot of people assume that Louis is gay but he is not: indeed he is most assiduous, in a heterosexual fashion, towards his wife. Two or three times a week is not bad after six years of togetherness, but there is nothing urgent about it any more and Scarlet is conscious of a shared falling away of desire, which reminds her that soon it will be her thirtieth birthday, that though she studied Journalism she is working in what amounts to glorified PR, and that her ambitions are somehow being stifled by Louis, who will not take her job seriously while taking his own extremely so.

Louis has a wealthy mother, and it is through her family connections that Louis and Scarlet own Nopasaran, a house-name Louis loves and Scarlet hates. No one ever spells it right: it frequently comes out as Noparasan in articles, and for some reason this enrages her. It can hardly matter, she tells herself. Louis agrees. Perhaps she has the same over-sensitivity to language that he has to design; she earns her living through words, as he earns his through the way things look.

Louis knows how to acknowledge difficulty, to soothe and disarm. He is a thoroughly reasonable, thoughtful and considerate person. Nopasaran – which is Spanish for ‘they shall not pass’: the battle cry in the Spanish Civil War of the Communists at the siege of Madrid – was designed in 1936 by Wells Coates, the Canadian minimalist architect. Enthusiasts come from all over the world – for some reason disproportionately from Japan – to cluster outside and admire, to peer in as best they can through billowing gauze curtains at the rough flat concrete walls.

Scarlet feels particularly bitter about the gauze curtains, which

Louis prizes. He managed to acquire some original gauze drapes from the Cecil Beaton set for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the 1946 production on Broadway. Scarlet, unlike Louis, does not feel the pull of history. Nor indeed of the future. She sees in gauze curtains only the worst aspects of suburbia. Last night's row had started, as so often, with disagreements over Nopasaran. Scarlet argued that it was no place to bring up children – they needed a degree of comfort, and au pairs would never stay: Louis argued that it was entirely suitable for developing their children's aesthetic and political sensibilities, and talk of au pairs 'struck terror to his heart'. Surely she must bring them up herself? What was the point of having children if you handed them over to someone else to rear?

'You are going to say next,' said Scarlet, 'that my job is of no importance.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Louis, 'just that any literate girl from a mediocre university with a 2: 1 could do it and you are worth more than that.'

He meant it as a compliment but she did not see it like that. He had been to Oxford, she to Kingston.

She said that one thing was certain: until they lived in a proper house she would not be breeding. Two-year-olds weren't any good at scuttling up ladders to bed. They tended to fall.

'This is a proper house,' said Louis. 'We are privileged to live here. What you really mean is that you've decided against having children.'

'No I haven't. I just want them by a man who isn't a total nutter.'

'I resent that,' said Louis. 'Have you been drinking? Wells Coates brought up his own children in this house. My grandmother used to visit him here.'

'Any minute now you're going to reveal that this is your ancestral

home,' said Scarlet.

'No. I am just telling you that the only way I am ever going to leave this house is feet first.'

'Me, I'd leave it with a hop, a skip and a jump,' said Scarlet. 'And I may yet.'

Scarlet had been drinking caipirinhas, clubland's current favourite, snatching a quick drink with Jackson before getting home from work, and Louis had shared a bottle of champagne with a colleague before leaving Mayfair, where he works. Lola had been staying, though she was out late tonight, and that had disturbed their usual equilibrium, making them see each other as outsiders saw them, not necessarily to their advantage. Both were quicker to anger than usual. Starting a family was normally a subject they skirted around, but that evening they had both piled into it with energy. Louis maddened Scarlet further by raising his eyebrows and sighing as if to say, 'What have I done in marrying a woman so bereft of aesthetic understanding?' He should have refrained: it was this look from him that tipped her into defiance, making Jackson's tasteless shag pad and pile carpet seem not so bad after all, for all the module in Art History she had done at Kingston, alongside her Journalism degree.

But then Louis did not suspect Scarlet of having an affair; it would be too vulgar of her. That she would allow herself to become physically and, worse, emotionally involved with someone as flashy and uneducated as Jackson was not within his comprehension. That Scarlet could move from a lover's bed into the marriage bed within the space of an hour – as in the last couple of months she had, five times, on her way home from work – well, it shocks even your writer. Louis would be dumbfounded, undone. But Scarlet is good at hiding her tracks; it is part of the fun.

It occurred to her even now, mid-row, that without the deceit Jackson might not seem so attractive. She had loved Louis and lusted for him when hiding that relationship from her family. They would find him boring, etiolated like some rare, pallid, carefully nurtured hothouse plant. Scarlet, out of Beverley, being more the tough, all-purpose, all-garden, all-climate-growth, adaptable and robust kind. As it happened, when she did finally present Louis, they liked him and said he would be good for her (what could they mean?) and even seemed to be more on his side than hers.

Louis is tall and thin and gentlemanly; he has a cavernous kind of face, good-looking in an intellectual, sensitive, gentle-eyed, slow-moving kind of way. Observers tended to murmur about ‘the attraction of opposites’. Beverley once remarked that theirs was the kind of instant unthinking sexual attraction that usually moves on to babies, as if nature was determined to get the pair together whatever society might have to say, but Scarlet, whose second three-year contraceptive implant is coming up for renewal, and who has already booked her appointment with the doctor to see to it, has so far thwarted nature.

‘So what you are telling me,’ said Scarlet, as the row moved up a notch, ‘is that I have to choose between this house and you.’ He was being wholly outrageous.

She heard the kind of chattering noises in her head she sometimes hears when she is about to lose her temper. It is somewhere between the clatter of cutlery in a kitchen drawer being rattled as a hand searches for something urgently needed that isn’t there, and the chatter of a clutch of baby crows rattling their throats in a nest. It sounds like a warning to run away, but probably has some boring cause to do with plumbing – there is a pump perched up in the roof next to something called a coffin tank.

The rattle, now more like a smoker's cough, seemed to be coming from up above her and she looked up, but there was only the thirty-foot *chamaedorea* palm tree, planted by the architect seventy years ago and still growing up towards the atrium skylight, and a source of yet another dissatisfaction. Its leaves were stirred gently by the fan that switches on automatically whenever the lights go on to save the plant from too much condensation and consequent mould – Wells Coates left nothing to chance – and would at least turn itself off after an hour was up. Perhaps it was to do with the fan rather than the plumbing? The lower leaves of the palm were discolouring and needed to be removed but how could Scarlet get up there to do it? Why couldn't she have a living room like anyone else, with a couple of armchairs and a sofa and a telly?

'No,' said Louis, bluntly. 'What I am telling you is that you have to choose between no children and me.'

This was strong stuff. Scarlet was usually the one who issued edicts. Again, unwise of Louis; the balance stops wavering, tilts towards Jackson.

'Well, sorry,' said Scarlet, 'if you won't move house to somewhere more sensible and not out in the sticks, that's about that, isn't it? I like my life as it is. It's far too early for me to start worrying about having children and why should I have them with a man who cares more about a pile of crumbling concrete than me. Sorry, but there are other fish in the sea.'

What she meant, of course, was that she loved Jackson more than she loved Louis, and just at the moment if she wanted anyone's children it would be Jackson's, and when Jackson kissed her goodbye outside the BarrioKool club in Shoreditch earlier that evening, saying, 'Move out from him, move in with me, let him take his gauze curtains and go back to his mum,' the feel and promise of

his arm across her back made her catch her breath. 'What have you got to lose? A house built seventy years ago by some tosser?'

So lightly had Jackson swept away decades of aesthetic aspiration, dedication and financial investment on Louis' part that a kind of shift took place in Scarlet's vision. If Nopasaran was not to be taken seriously, was Louis either? Louis could be seen by others not as an alpha male but as a pretentious wanker. At least Jackson had the respect of a lot of howling, enthusiastic, underdressed girls. The chattering from the tree dwindled into the kind of sparky noise which the cooker makes when you press the electric button to light the gas, but somehow suggested there was no time to be lost. *Run, run, run* was what she was hearing.

'If I was choosing between you as you are tonight and the house I'd certainly go for the house,' said Louis.

As you are tonight. He is hedging his bets; he is at his school-teachery worst. Why can't he just commit himself and say: 'I hate you'? Scarlet despised him the more. He was like his mother, po-faced and prudent, bloodless.

'Pity you couldn't have married your mother,' said Scarlet, 'instead of her opposite.'

Louis launched a furious blow into the air, which Scarlet managed to be in the way of, so that his knuckles scraped her cheekbones, thus giving herself the more reason to do what she wanted without qualm. Truth, tears, rage, insults, hysteria, then blended into distasteful memory; all that was clear to Scarlet now was that Louis took her favourite pillow with him to the lower spare alcove in the hope, he said, of silence and a good night's sleep. Scarlet of course lay sleepless, while her husband presumably slept soundly, after the fashion of men, for the rest of the night.

So that was the row. And in an upper spare room, or scoop, or

alcove, Scarlet's niece Lola, who had slipped in unnoticed after her night out, listened to and cherished every word and wondered how best she could use them to her advantage.