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The Aftermath

Written by Rhidian Brook

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The Aftermath

RHIDIAN BROOK



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Sheila and Kim Brook

'You will be called the repairer of broken walls.'

Isaiah 58:12

'It doesn't seem to make any sense – one family in a place this size.'

Brideshead Revisited, Evelyn Waugh

September 1946

I

'The Beast is here. I've seen him. Berti's seen him. Dietmar's seen him. With his black fur like a fancy lady's coat. And those teeth like piano keys. We have to kill him. If we don't, who will? The Tommies? The Yankees? The Russkies? The French? None of them will, because they're too busy looking for other things. They want this and they want that. They're like dogs fighting over a bone that's got no meat on it. We have to do it ourselves. Get the Beast before he gets us. Then everything will be better.'

The boy Ozi readjusted his headgear as he led the others through the pulverized landscape of the Tommy-bombed city. He wore the English hard-helmet he'd stolen from the back of a truck near the Alster. Although it was not as stylish as the American or even the Russian helmets he had in his collection, it fitted him the best and helped him swear in English when he wore it, just like the Tommy sergeant he'd seen shouting at the prisoners at Hamburg's Dammtor station: 'Oi! Put your fucking hands up. Fucking up, I said! Where I can see them! Dumb bloody fucking Huns.' Just for a moment those men had failed to raise their hands; not because they didn't understand, but because they were too weak from lack of food. Dumb-Bloody-Fucking-Huns! Below the neck, Ozi's clothes were a hybrid fashion of make-do invention where rags and riches jumbled together: the dressing gown of a dandy; the cardigan of an old maid; the collarless shirt of a grandfather; the rolled-up trousers of a storm trooper tied with the belt of a clerk's necktie;

and the shoes, shredded at the toe, of a long-gone station-master.

The ferals – the whites of their eyes wide with fear and accentuated by dirty faces – followed their leader through the shattered scree. Weaving around the moraines of brick-rock, they came to a clearing where the conical rocket of a church spire lay on its side. Ozi raised a hand to halt the others and reached inside his dressing gown for his Luger. He sniffed the air:

'He's in here. I can smell him. Can you smell him?'

The ferals sniffed like twitchy rabbits. Ozi pressed up against the lopped-off spire and inched towards its open end, gun out, guiding him like a divining rod. He paused and tapped the cone with it, indicating that the Beast was probably within. And then: a flash of black as something bolted from inside out into the open. The ferals cowered but Ozi stepped out, took a wide stance, closed one eye, aimed and fired.

'Die, Beast!'

The shot was muffled in the low, muggy atmosphere, and a tinkling, metallic ricochet threw back the message that he'd missed his target.

'Did you hit him?'

Ozi lowered the gun and pushed it into his belt.

'We'll get him another day,' he said. 'Let's look for some food.'

'We've found a house for you, sir.'

Captain Wilkins stubbed out his cigarette and placed his yellowed finger on the map of Hamburg that was pinned to the wall behind his desk. He traced a line west from the pin-head marking their temporary headquarters, away from the bombed-out districts of Hammerbrook and St Georg, over

St Pauli and Altona, towards the old fishing suburb of Blankenese, where the Elbe veered up and debouched into the North Sea. The map – pulled from a pre-war German guidebook – failed to show that these conurbations were now a phantom city comprised only of ash and rubble.

'It's a bloody great palace by the river. Here.' Wilkins's finger circled the crook at the end of the Elbchaussee, the road running parallel to the great river. 'I think it'll be to your taste, sir.'

The word belonged to another world: a world of surplus and civil comfort. In the last few months, Lewis's tastes had narrowed to a simple checklist of immediate and basic needs: 2,500 calories a day, tobacco, warmth. 'A bloody great palace by the river' suddenly seemed to him like the demand of a frivolous king.

'Sir?'

Lewis had 'gone off' again; off into that unruly parliament inside his head, a place where, more and more, he found himself in hot debate with colleagues.

'Isn't there someone living in it already?'

Wilkins wasn't sure how to respond. His CO was a man of excellent repute with an impeccable war record, but he seemed to have these quirks, a way of seeing things differently. The young captain resorted to reciting what he had read in the manual: 'These people have little moral compass, sir. They are a danger to us and to themselves. They need to know who is in charge. They need leadership. A firm but fair hand.'

Lewis nodded and waved the captain on, saving his words. The cold and the calories had taught him to ration these.

'The house belongs to a family called Lubert. Loo-bear-t. Hard "T". The wife died in the bombings. Her family were bigwigs in the food trade. Connections with Blohm and Voss.

They also owned a series of flour mills. Herr Lubert was an architect. He's not been cleared yet but we think he's a probable white or, at worst, an acceptable shade of grey; no obvious direct Nazi connections.'

'Bread.'

'Sir?'

Lewis had not eaten all day and had taken the short leap from 'flour mill' to bread without thinking; the bread he pictured in his head was suddenly more present, more real, than the captain standing at the map on the other side of the desk.

'Go on – the family.' Lewis made an effort to look as if he was listening, nodding and setting his jaw at an inquisitive tilt.

Wilkins continued: 'Lubert's wife died in '43. In the firestorm. One child – a daughter. Frieda, fifteen years old. They have some staff – a maid, a cook and a gardener. The gardener is a first-rate handyman – ex-Wehrmacht. The family have some relatives they can move in with. We can billet the staff, or you can take them on. They're clean enough.'

The process by which the soul-sifters of the Control Commission's Intelligence Branch assessed cleanliness was the *Fragebogen*, or questionnaire: 133 questions to determine the degree of a German citizen's collaboration with the regime. From this, they were categorized into three colour-coded groups – black, grey and white, with intermediate shades for clarity – and dispatched accordingly.

'They're expecting the requisition. It's just a matter of you viewing the place then turfing them out. I don't think you'll be disappointed, sir.'

'You think they will be disappointed, Captain?'

'They?'

'The Luberts? When I turf them out.'

'They're not allowed the luxury of disappointment, sir. They're Germans.'

'Of course. How silly of me.' Lewis left it there. Any more such questions and this efficient young officer with his shiny Sam Browne and perfect puttees would have him reported to Psychiatric.

He stepped from the overheated British Military Detachment Headquarters into the premature cold of a late-September day. He blew vapour and pulled on the kid gloves that Captain McLeod, the American cavalry officer, had given him in the town hall at Bremen the day the Allies had announced the division lines of the new Germany. 'Looks like you get the bum deal,' he had said, reading the directive. 'The French get the wine, we get the view and you guys get the ruins.'

Lewis had lived among the ruins for so long now he had stopped noticing them. His uniform was fitting garb for a governor in this new, quadripartite Germany – a kind of internationalized mufti which, in the midst of post-war disorientation and re-regulation, passed without comment.

The American gloves were prized but it was his Russian-front sheepskin coat that gave him the most pleasure, its provenance traceable back via the American to a Luftwaffe lieutenant who had, in turn, taken it from a captured Red Army colonel. He'd be wearing it soon enough if this weather kept up.

It was a relief to get away from Wilkins. The young officer was one of the new brigade of civil servants that made up the Control Commission, Germany, a bloated force of clipboard men who saw themselves as the architects of the reconstruction. Few of these people had seen action – or even a German – and this allowed them to pronounce and

theorize their way to decisions with confidence. Wilkins would make major before long.

Lewis took a silver-plated cigarette case from his coat and opened it, catching the light from the sun on its clear, buffed surface. He polished it regularly. The case was the only material treasure he had with him, a parting gift from Rachael given to him at the gates of the last proper house he'd lived in – in Amersham, three years ago. 'Think of me when you smoke' was her instruction, and this he had tried to do, fifty, sixty times a day for three years; a little ritual to keep the flame of love alive. He lit a cigarette and thought about that flame. With distance and time it had been easy to make it seem hotter than it was. The remembrance of their love-making and of his wife's olive-smooth, curvy flesh had sustained him through the cold and lonely months (her flesh seemingly growing smoother and curvier as the war went by). But he had grown so comfortable with this imagined, ersatz version of his wife that the imminent prospect of actually touching and smelling her unsettled him.

A sleek black Mercedes 540K with a British pennant on the bonnet pulled up in front of the steps of the headquarters. The Union Jack at the wing mirror was the only thing that looked out of place. Despite its associations, Lewis liked this vehicle, its lines and the silky purr of its engine. It was appointed like an ocean-going liner, and the ultra-careful driving style of his driver – Herr Schroeder – added to the impression of it being like a ship. No amount of British insignia could de-Germanize this car, though. British military personnel were built for the bumbling, bulbous Austin 16, not these brute-beautiful, world-conquering machines.

Lewis walked down the steps and gave his driver a half-salute.

Schroeder, a reedy, unshaven man wearing a black cap and

cape, leapt from the driver's seat and walked briskly round to the rear passenger door. He bowed once in Lewis's direction and, with a flourish of his cape, opened the door.

'The front seat is fine, Herr Schroeder.'

Schroeder seemed agitated at Lewis's self-demotion. '*Nein*, Herr Kommandant.'

'Really. *Sehr gut*,' Lewis repeated.

'*Bitte*, Herr Oberst.'

Schroeder clunked the rear door shut and held up a hand, still not wanting Lewis to lift a finger.

Lewis stepped back, playing the game, but the German's deference depressed him: these were the motions of a defeated man clinging to patronage. Inside, Lewis handed Schroeder the scrap of paper on which Wilkins had scribbled the address of the house that was probably going to be his home for the foreseeable future. The driver squinted at it and nodded his approval of the destination.

Schroeder was forced to steer a weaving course between the bomb craters that pocked the cobbled road and the rivulets of people walking in dazed, languid fashion, going nowhere in particular, carrying the remnant objects of their old lives in parcels, sacks, crates and cartons, and a heavy, almost visible, disquiet. They were like a people thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers.

The ghost of a tremendous noise hung over the scene. Something out of this world had undone this place and left an impossible jigsaw from which to reconstruct the old picture. There was no putting it back together again and there would be no going back to the old picture. This was *Stunde Null*. The Zero Hour. These people were starting from scratch and scratching a living from nothing. Two women pushed and pulled a horse cart stacked with furniture between them, while a man carrying a briefcase walked along as

though in search of the office where he once worked without even a glance at the fantastic destruction that lay all around him, as if this apocalyptic architecture were the natural state of things.

A smashed city stretched as far as the eye could see, the rubble reaching as high as the first floor of any building still standing. Hard to believe that this was once a place where people read newspapers, made cakes and thought about which pictures to hang on the walls of their front parlours. The facade of a church stood on one side of the road, with only sky for stained glass and the wind for a congregation. On the other side, apartment blocks – intact except for the fronts, which had been completely blown off, revealing the rooms and furniture within – stood like giant doll's houses. In one of these rooms, oblivious to the elements and exposure to watching eyes, a woman stood lovingly brushing a young girl's hair in front of a dressing table.

Further along the road, women and children stood around piles of rubble, scavenging for sustenance or looking to save fragments of their past. Black crosses marked the places where bodies lay waiting to be buried. And, everywhere, the strange pipe-chimneys of a subterranean city protruded from the ground, pouring black smoke into the sky.

'Rabbits?' Lewis asked, seeing creatures appear from unseen holes in the ground.

'*Trümmerkinder!*' Schroeder said, with a sudden anger. And Lewis saw that the bobbing creatures were 'children of the rubble' and that the car was drawing them out of their holes.

'*Ungeziefer!*' Schroeder spat with an unnecessary vehemence as three of the children – it was hard to tell if they were girls or boys – ran straight in front of the car. He gave them a warning toot but the approaching black bulk of the

Mercedes did not deter them. They stood their ground and forced the car to a stop.

'*Weg! Schnell!*' Schroeder screamed, the veins in his neck pulsing with a thick rage. He tooted the horn again but one of the children – a boy in a dressing gown and English helmet – marched fearlessly to Lewis's side of the car, jumped on the running board and started tapping on his window.

'Vat you got, Tommy? Fucking sandvich? Choccie?'

'*Steig aus! Sofort!*' Schroeder's spittle sprayed Lewis's face as he leant across the colonel and raised a fist at the child. Meanwhile, the other two children had climbed on to the bonnet of the car and were trying to pull off the triangular chrome Mercedes emblem.

Schroeder turned back and leapt from the car. He lunged at the children as they tried to scamper across the bonnet to safety and managed to catch the tail of a nightshirt. Schroeder yanked the waif towards him; he held the child by the neck with one hand and began to thrash him with his other.

'Schroeder!' It was the first time Lewis had raised his voice in months, and it cracked with the surprise of it.

Schroeder didn't seem to hear and continued to beat the child with a vicious force.

'*Halt!*' Lewis got out of the car to intervene, the other children backing away for fear they'd get the same. This time, the driver heard, and he stopped, a curious expression of shame and self-righteousness on his face. He let the child go and came back to the car, muttering and panting from his exertions.

Lewis called to the children: '*Hierbleiben!*'

The eldest boy stepped back towards the car, and his pals followed him tentatively towards the Englishman. Other ferals were now coming over to pick up scraps, children camouflaged by filth. Close up, they gave off the oedemic

stench of the starving. All of them put out hands in supplication to this kindly English god passing in his black chariot. Lewis fetched his haversack from the car. It contained a bar of chocolate and an orange. He offered the chocolate to the eldest boy.

'*Verteil!*' he instructed. He then gave the orange to the smallest child, a girl maybe five or six years old – her life a war-span – and repeated the order to share. But the girl immediately bit into the orange as if it were an apple and started to chew, skin, pith and all. Lewis tried to indicate that the fruit needed peeling, but the girl shielded the gift, afraid she was going to have to give it back.

More children were pressing in now, hands out, including a boy with one leg who leant on a golf club for support.

'Choccie, Tommy! Choccie, Tommy!' they called.

Lewis had no more food to give, but he did have something more valuable. He took out his cigarette case and tapped out ten Player's. He handed the cigarettes to the eldest boy, whose already distended eyes bulged at the sight and feel of the gold in his hands. Lewis knew that his transaction was illegal – he had both fraternized with Germans and indulged the black market – but he didn't care: those ten Player's would buy food from a farmer somewhere. The laws and regulations that the new order had imposed had been concocted in a mood of fear and revenge by men sitting at desks, and for now – and until an unknown time in the future – he was the law in this particular bit of the land.

Stefan Lubert stood before his remnant staff – the hobbled gardener, Richard, the breathless maid, Heike, and the obdurate house cook of thirty years, Greta – and gave them a final set of instructions. Heike was already crying.

'Be respectful, and serve him as you would serve me. And

Heike? – all of you – if he offers you work, you must feel free to accept. I will not be offended. I will be glad to have you here, keeping an eye on things.'

He leant forward and wiped a tear from Heike's round cheek.

'Come. No more tears. Be grateful that we don't have the Russians. The English may be uncultured, but they are not cruel.'

'Do you want me to serve refreshments, Herr Lubert?' Heike managed to ask.

'Of course. We must be civil.'

'We have no biscuits,' Greta pointed out. 'Only the cake.'

'Fine. Make tea and not coffee. Although we don't have coffee. So this is just as well. And serve him in the library. It's too bright in here.' Lubert had hoped the officer would come on a dull, grey day, but the early-autumn sun was sending its best light through the art deco stained glass that decorated the high window opposite the minstrels' gallery and on to the floor of the hall, making it all the more inviting. 'Now, where is Frieda?'

'She is in her room, sir,' Heike said.

Lubert steeled himself. The war had been over for more than a year, but his daughter had still not surrendered. He needed to suppress this little putsch now. Wearily, he climbed the staircase. At Frieda's bedroom door, he knocked and called her name. He waited for an answer he knew wouldn't come then entered. She was lying on her bed, her legs raised a few inches off the mattress. A book – a signed copy of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* which his wife, Claudia, had given him for his thirtieth birthday – was balanced across her feet. Frieda did not respond to her father's presence but continued to concentrate her efforts on keeping her weighted legs in the air. They were beginning to tremble with the strain.

How long had she been in this position – one, two, five minutes? She started to breathe furiously through her nose, trying to disguise the effort, refusing to show weakness. Her strength was impressive, but it was joyless, another of those Mädel routines she had religiously kept up since the war.

All strength, no joy.

Frieda's face began to flush and a tiara of sweat formed at her forehead. When her legs began to sway from side to side, she did not let them drop; instead she lowered them in a controlled way, as of her own will.

'You should try the Shakespeare – or perhaps the atlas,' Lubert said. 'That would test your strength better.' Although his jokes tended to ricochet back with redoubled velocity, lightness was still his preferred weapon against her fierce and humourless moods.

'The books are not important,' she said.

'The English officer is coming.'

Frieda sat up suddenly, without using her arms. She swung her legs athletically to the floor and wiped the sweat back over her braided hair. The ugly, defiant look she had adopted in these last few years pained him. She stared at her father.

'I would like you to greet him,' he said.

'Why?'

'Because –'

'Because you are going to give up Mother's house without a fight.'

'Freedie. Please don't talk that way. Please come. For Mutti's sake?'

'She wouldn't leave. She would never let this happen.'

'Come.'

'No. Beg.'

'I would like you to come now.'

'Beggar!'

Unable to stare his daughter down, Lubert turned and walked away, his heart pounding. At the bottom of the stairs he caught himself in the mirror. He looked gaunt and sallow and his nose had lost some definition, but he hoped this would help. He had dressed in his most moth-eaten suit. He knew he would be giving up his home – it was one of the finest on the Elbchaussee and more than any luxury-starved, middle-ranking officer from England would be able to resist – but it was important to make the right impression. He had heard stories about the Allied forces purloining all manner of treasures since the surrender, and the imperialist, philistine English were known abusers of people's cultures – he was particularly nervous about the paintings by Fernand Léger and woodcuts by Emil Nolde which hung in the main rooms – but he had the idea that if he could deport himself in the right way the English officer might think well of him and be less inclined to abuse his possessions. He poked the ashes of the previous evening's fire and rearranged them slightly to show that they had been burning furniture. Then he took off his jacket, loosened his tie and struck a pose somewhere between dignified and respectful: hands at his sides, one leg slightly askance. This felt too casual, too informal, too confident, too close to who he really was. He pulled the jacket back on, tightened his tie, smoothed back his hair and stood more erect, his hands clasped meekly in front of his trousers. That was better: the demeanour of a man who was ready to hand over his house without rancour.

Lewis and Schroeder did not speak for the rest of the journey. Lewis could see Schroeder's lips moving as he replayed the encounter with the ferals and recited silent expressions of disgust and irritation, but he elected to say nothing more about it. The car soon reached the outer limit of the city and

the edge of all that the British and Americans had bombed so comprehensively three years before. The road was now smooth, with plane trees lining the verges and whole houses lying behind high hedges and gates. This was the Elbchaussee, and these were the homes of the bankers and merchants that had made Hamburg rich and its port and working districts such a desirable target of Bomber Command. They were grander, more modern, more impressive than any residence Lewis had seen outside of London or any house he might have expected to live in.

The Villa Lubert was the last house on the road before it turned away from the River Elbe, and when he saw it for the first time Lewis wondered if Captain Wilkins had made a mistake. It lay at the end of a long drive lined by poplar trees: a great, white wedding-cake structure built in the grand style, with porticos and a large, semicircular, colonnaded balcony. The ground floor of the house was raised several feet from the earth and split by an imposing stone staircase climbing to a lower-level balcony. Pillars wreathed in wisteria supported an upper balcony from which the residents could watch the Elbe flow some one hundred yards away. Lewis was shocked by the bright elegance and size of this house. It was not quite a palace, but it was still a residence more suited to a general or a chancellor than a through-the-ranks colonel who had never owned his own home.

As the Mercedes turned into the circular drive, Lewis could see three figures – two women, and a man he presumed to be the gardener – forming a guard of honour. Another figure – a tall gentleman in a loose-fitting suit – came down the staircase to join them. Schroeder eased the car round the drive and stopped right in front of the welcoming committee. Lewis didn't wait for the driver to open his door; he let himself out straight away and made for the man he presumed

to be Lubert. Lewis was half into a salute when, at the last moment, he redirected his hand to shake that of his host.

'*Guten Abend*,' he said. 'Colonel Lewis Morgan.'

'Welcome, Herr Oberst. Please. We can speak English.'

Lubert clasped Lewis's hand with friendly strength. Even through the gloves, Lubert's hand felt warmer than his own. Lewis nodded to the women and the gardener. The maids bowed, and the youngest of them gave him a curious look, as though he were a member of a lost tribe. She seemed amused by him – by his accent or perhaps by his odd uniform – and Lewis smiled back at her.

'And this is Richard.'

The gardener clicked his heels and stuck out an arm.

Lewis took his bare, calloused hand and let that lever-arch arm yank his own up and down like a piston.

'Please – come in,' Lubert said.

Lewis left Schroeder sitting in the driver's seat with his legs resting on the running board of the Mercedes, still sulking after being reprimanded, and followed Lubert up the steps into the house.

The house revealed its true self inside. Lewis did not much care for its style – the angular, futuristic furniture and the awkward, difficult artworks were too modern, too outré for his tastes – but the quality of the build and the skill of the design were to a standard superior to anything he had seen in an English home, including that of the Bayliss-Hilliers, who lived in the manor house at Amersham and whose home Rachael coveted and believed to be the acme of all residences. As Lubert walked him through the house, graciously explaining the function of various rooms and the history of the place, Lewis began to project ahead to the moment when Rachael would step into this house for the first time and he could see his wife taking in the light, clean lines of these

rooms and her eyes widening at the grandeur of it all – the marble window seats, the grand piano, the dumb waiter, the maids' bedrooms, the library, the smoking room, the fine art – and as he imagined this he had a sudden, unexpected hope that this house might in some way make up for the lean and distant years the war had laid between them.

'You have children?' Lubert asked as they climbed the stairs to the bedrooms.

'Yes. A son. Edmund.' He said the name as if reminding himself.

'Then perhaps Edmund would like this room?'

Lubert showed Lewis into a room that was full of children's – mainly girls' – toys. A rocking horse with bulging black eyes and a china doll perched side-saddle on its back stood at the far end. A doll's house as big as a kennel and built in imitation of a Georgian town house had been placed at the foot of a small four-poster bed. Several mid-sized dolls sat on its roof, their legs dangling over the tops of the bedrooms, a line of porcelain giants squatting on someone else's home.

'Your son will not mind the girls' things?' Lubert asked.

Lewis couldn't say for sure what Edmund would like or dislike – his son had been ten when Lewis had last seen him – but few children could object to such space and treasure.

'Of course not,' he said.

With every beautiful room and every intimate piece of information – 'This is where we liked to watch the boats'; 'This is where we liked to play cards' – Lewis felt more uncomfortable, as if Lubert were heaping hot coals on his head. He would have preferred some hostility, or at least a brittle, silent resistance – something, anything, that might harden him enough to make this task easier – but this civil,

almost quaint, tour was making the whole business worse. By the time they arrived in the master bedroom – the eighth bedroom on this floor, with its high and narrow French-style box bed and oil painting depicting the green spires of a medieval city hanging just above its headboard – he felt wretched.

'My favourite German city,' Lubert said, catching Lewis staring at the spires, trying to work it out. 'Lübeck. You should try to see it if you can.'

Lewis looked but didn't linger. He moved towards the French windows and looked out across the garden and the River Elbe beyond it.

'Claudia – my wife – liked to sit out here in the summer.' Lubert went to the windows and opened them out on to a balcony. 'The Elbe,' he declared, stepping out and sweeping his arm in a 180-degree arc from end to end of the vista. It was a proper, great European river, wider and slower than any in England, and here, at the bend, it was almost at its widest – perhaps half a mile across. This river and the cargo it carried had built this house and most of those along the northern bank.

'It flows into our Nordsee. Your North Sea?' Lubert asked.

'It's the same sea in the end,' Lewis said.

Lubert seemed to like this, and he repeated the phrase. 'The same sea. Yes.'

Others might have seen Lubert's performance as an attempt to make Lewis feel bad, or they would have detected in his upright poise all the haughtiness and arrogance of a race that had sought the world's destruction and now had to face the consequences, but Lewis did not see things that way. In Lubert, he saw a cultured, privileged man humbling himself and clinging to the last cliff of civility in order to limit the damage to a life already ruined. Lewis knew this whole

show was an attempt to win him over, to lessen the blow in some way, perhaps even persuade him to change his mind, but he could not condemn Lubert for trying, nor could he summon up the faux anger with which to play the aloof, decisive man of expedient.

'Your house is wonderful, Herr Lubert,' he said.

Lubert bowed in gratitude.

'It is more than I need – more than my family needs,' Lewis went on. 'And . . . certainly much more than we are used to.'

Lubert waited for Lewis to finish, his eyes brightening, sensing a surprise retreat.

Lewis looked out across the great river that flowed out to their 'shared sea' – the sea that was carrying his own estranged family towards him now. 'I'd like to propose a different arrangement,' he said.