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Opening Extract from...

White Feathers

Written by Susan Lanigan

Published by Brandon

From White Feathers by Susan Lanigan, published by Brandon, an imprint of the O'Brien Press, 2014.

Extracted text: Chapter 1, pp 7-21

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First published 2014
by The O'Brien Press Ltd
12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar, Dublin 6, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 4923333 · Fax: +353 1 4922777
Email: books@obrien.ie · Website: www.obrien.ie

EAN: 539-150073-406-5

Text © Susan Lanigan 2014; editing, typesetting, layout and design

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

20 19 18 17 16 15 14

Typeset by the Little Red Pen, Dublin

Printed and bound by SPRINT-Print
The paper used in this book is produced using pulp from managed forests.

1

Until the ticket collector arrived, the two women occupying the second compartment of the fifth carriage on the two o'clock train from London Bridge to Brighton had not said a word to each other. Mrs Michael Stewart, the older of the two by several decades and dressed in black, the excrescence of crêpe and tulle partly hiding the cracks on her black gloves, had no book or newspaper or pastime to amuse her but stared straight ahead with the grim face of the chaperone on duty. Nothing stirred her, nothing interested her. Her widow's weeds were not recently acquired, yet she had lost interest in life long before she had qualified for their use.

By contrast, the younger of the two, Miss Eva Downey, sat close by the window, so close that her breath nearly grimed the glass. She squirmed on the soft upholstery of the seats and tweaked at the velveteen curtains. Sometimes she sat back and clasped the small medallion she wore around her neck. On other occasions she consulted her *Bradshaw's Railway Guide*, her other books being in the valise stowed above their heads.

Of this behaviour, Mrs Stewart indicated her disapproval though a series of tics and sniffs, all of which Eva ignored. She was seventeen years of age, with hair the colour of straw that had not seen sun, wide-apart grey-blue eyes and a carriage that was a good half stone too heavy for the stricter kind of corset. And up until the moment the line turned towards the coast and showed the wide expanse of sea glowing in the severe autumn sun, she had never seen the English coastline, nor had she ever been on a train, apart from the Tube.

Her stepmother Catherine had admonished her, ''Twas gettin' on the Tube that night brought it on yourself in the first place. I'm glad Mrs Michael's keepin' an eye on ye.' Eva, feeling the familiar residual ache in her arm and remembering all too well what she had 'brought upon herself,' had made no reply, merely turning away in disgust.

Mrs Stewart was a friend of Catherine's. Or, at least, they had known each other, back in Ireland. In London, Catherine Downey paid few calls; even after eleven years of marriage, her status was too uncertain for her to risk it. So of all the women in London she could have called on for the disagreeable task of escorting Eva to her destination, only Mrs Stewart was at her disposal. That lady had agreed to accompany Eva from the top step of the Downeys' three-storey terrace in 35 Wellclose Square, Stepney, to the station at Eastbourne, where Eva would be handed over, like a package of goods, to Miss Caroline Hedges, Headmistress of The Links School for Young Ladies.

Mrs Stewart was not a pleasant companion: Eva could not shake the odour of mothballs, combined with something malformed and rotting deep within the gut. But, regardless, Eva felt only joy. She

flourished her ticket at the collector, who stamped it with a smile. It was a single. She wasn't going back any time soon, thank God.

'Eastbourne, eh?' he enquired. 'Well, it's nice to see a lady as happy as you are. What business brings you there?'

Mrs Stewart immediately cut in. 'You're not to answer him.' To the conductor she declared, 'This girl's family is respectable. She doesn't talk to strange men.'

'He is the ticket collector,' Eva said, her voice like a bucket of iced water. 'It is his job to ask people where they are going.'

'And it's my job to make sure you behave yourself,' Mrs Stewart responded with rather more viciousness than seemed merited.

The conductor, obviously perturbed, backed away. He was nearly out the door when Eva called after him. 'Sir, wait, please. I shan't leave your question unanswered. There is a school near Eastbourne, called The Links. I am going to attend it for a year.' She broke into a broad smile.

'The Links! Isn't that the fine school for young ladies? I've heard it's very fancy indeed. You must be quite the lady yourself, to be going there, miss.' His forehead creased with the beginnings of doubt. She did not look quite right. While she was acceptably dressed, in a simple ivory cotton skirt and cream blouse, she was hatless, her hair hanging limply by her sides in a thick, rather shapeless cut. She was no Lady Lavery, that was for sure. But the conductor had heard tell that the school cost north of seventy pounds a year. One had to be seriously moneyed to put that amount aside.

Eva shook her head, laughing. 'Oh no, not I. I'm hoi polloi, I'm afraid. No, I was very kindly bequeathed a legacy by Lady Elizabeth Jenkins for this specific purpose. I met her at a—' But there, Eva bit her lip and stopped.

'Yes, that's right,' Mrs Stewart snapped. 'Don't be telling him of your disgraceful behaviour, or he won't be so nice to you any more. You should have stayed home and married Mr Cronin, like you were told to.'

'I'm sorry, miss,' the conductor said, nodding at Eva. 'I seem to have embarrassed your mother.'

Silence fell for a few heartbeats, a few clackety-clacks as the wheels passed over the gaps in the rails. When Eva eventually replied, it was with a quiet viciousness that was clearly audible against the rush of wind and the noise of the train on the tracks. 'She's not my mother, nor is the woman who sent her. My mother died when I was five years old, and there's not a woman alive fit to take her place.' And with that the smile left her face like the sun retreating behind a heavy grey cloud.

She opened her *Railway Guide* and remained every bit as still and cold for the rest of the journey as the miserable, fossilised creature sitting opposite her. A month ago, Eva would never have dreamed she would be making this journey. That day, she had been called down to the parlour and introduced to a stranger, a solicitor called Mr Phelps, who had called especially to see her. The parlour fronted

onto the square, which was in a rather shabby part of town, so the curtains were often drawn to conceal the modesty of the neighbourhood.

Papa had been present, of course, as had the rest of the family, when the gentleman with the overlong trousers and florid delivery informed them that Lady Elizabeth Jenkins had bequeathed Miss Eva Downey the sum of seventy-five pounds for the express purpose of finishing her education. There had been a pause, which Mr Phelps, who looked too grand for the room, had allowed to lengthen long beyond the point of embarrassment before saying, pointedly, 'Any questions?'

Eva's sister, Imelda, had embraced her while Catherine stood there with a face like a gate. Since the discovery of her actions on Census Night, Eva's relationship with her father's wife had deteriorated from mutual distrust to open warfare. Catherine's reaction had been par for the course. But Eva's stepsister, Grace's, had not, and Eva could not forget it. At the time, Grace merely greeted the news with a shrug and a blood-red smirk that animated her pale, lovely, suspicious face. But a few weeks later, in August, Grace finally found Eva alone and confronted her.

Eva had been reading *Woman's Weekly* on the chaise longue in the parlour at the back when she felt two hands on her shoulders. She had jumped. 'Grace! What do you want?'

'Stand up.'

Eva was too surprised, at first, to disobey.

'Now. I am going to stand behind you. Like this. And I want you to fall backwards so I can catch you. I need you to trust me. Just for this moment.' No doubt Grace saw Eva's shoulders stiffen, because she quickly added, 'You're leaving now, and we haven't really had much of a talk, have we? About what will happen when you go?'

'No.' Eva clenched her fist to her chest.

'The world is not a friendly place for people like us. We have to be careful not to let the mask slip. When we're excited, our Irish accents can come out. We're judged for that.'

Still Eva kept taut, lifting her chin slightly.

'You needn't shut me out, Eva. Just this once, let yourself be helped.'

There was something mesmerising about her voice. Eva let herself lean backwards.

'Further. Trust me.'

Eva leaned back further – and fell, hitting the ground with a thump on the tailbone. She exclaimed with pain, looked up over her shoulder and saw Grace glaring down, as if Eva had caused her offence.

'Let that be your first lesson. Never trust anybody.'

Eva gaped at her. Grace returned her astonished glare with an elegant little moue. 'All right, so I tricked you. Don't be childish about it; those society girls aren't going to be any nicer. At least you now know what to expect.'

Slowly Eva rose from the floor. Her lower back was screaming. She was about to tell Grace exactly what she thought of her, but Grace held up a hand.

‘The trouble with you, Eva, is that you’ve always been too reckless. And you know what comes of that.’ Without waiting for a reply, she exited the room with the same tight elegance with which she had entered it.

The memory of Grace’s last salvo faded into the imperious hoot of the train as it pulled into Eastbourne station. Eva wasted no time in gathering her things and left the compartment without saying goodbye to her chaperone or even looking around to see where she might go. Mrs Michael Stewart could fall under the wheels of the train and be crushed to death for all she cared.

‘Eva Downey?’

She turned to find herself face to face with an attractive, red-headed woman somewhere in her early forties. She smelt of violets. ‘Caroline Hedges. I trust you had an easy journey?’ Without waiting for an answer, she held out her hand, and Eva took it; the grip on her fingers was soft but firm. The porter came from behind with their bags. Miss Hedges made a gesture to him indicating ‘outside’ and said to Eva, ‘Follow me.’

They made their way through the sunlit pavilion and out onto the street. The station entrance curved around a junction and at the far side a little clock tower chimed a quarter to five. Not far away, perhaps a mile off, Eva could sense the presence of the sea and could smell it in the air. Her anticipation only gathered apace when Miss Hedges stopped beside a small red motor car and indicated to the porter to put Eva’s sparse luggage into the back. She got into the driver’s seat and fetched a red checked scarf from her glove compartment, beckoning Eva into the passenger seat as she fastened it around her chin. Then she dragged a motor hat down on top of the scarf and cranked up the motor while Eva sat watching her, enthralled at the sight of a woman in a car.

‘Oh that’s nothing,’ Miss Hedges laughed, when Eva commented on her driving. ‘We can do anything we want! I do encourage my pupils to bear that in mind. There is more than one way of finishing one’s education these days. Did you know we teach mathematics? We are one of the only finishing schools in the country to do that.’

Eva made a sound that was meant to convey polite admiration.

‘Well, I’m glad you’re sensible anyway. No retinue. I thought when I saw that woman step off the train with you—’

‘Mrs Stewart?’ Eva could not suppress a shudder. ‘She’s my stepmother’s friend.’

‘So many of my girls think I’m going to put up their maids! It frightens me sometimes, to see them so ill equipped for life.’

Eva wanted to laugh. A maid? Her?

‘It’s hard,’ Miss Hedges continued, shouting over the wind, ‘to reconcile this sort of work with proper feminist principles. We do try to arrange alternatives for our less fortunate girls, who might not have the opportunity to marry.’

Oh, Eva thought, *she means me*.

‘A decent career … teaching perhaps. Never did me any harm. Anyway, you’ve had the good fortune of enjoying this little trip,’ Miss Hedges shouted, as the wind began to get up, ‘since none of the other girls come in on the train. They all have private transport, so they’ll be along later.’

Whereas I took the train because I’m poor.

As they left town, Miss Hedges accelerated along the country lanes. It was a bright evening after rain. Droplets on the windshield shone as the yellowing sun hit them, and trees whispered in the wind as they speeded past. Miss Hedges’ hair blew out of her hat and scarf, while her attempts to make conversation were largely defeated by the rushing air and the noise of the engine. Eva was too spellbound to speak much anyway. She allowed herself to feel the wind brushing past her cheek with an almost ecstatic pleasure.

They reached the school half an hour later. It was up a short, twisting driveway, a rather grand, white, two-storey house with a stern portico and a lawn out front that stretched for a good half an acre. Beyond that, a row of trees half concealed some sports pitches. On the far side, Eva could make out a whitewashed stone extension, of the same height as the original house but longer, with its own entrance. This, Miss Hedges explained, contained dormitories and servants’ quarters; on the other side were stables and outhouse buildings. These had been converted to classrooms; equitation was included on the curriculum but conducted off the premises.

‘I bought the whole thing for a song back in 1907. It was a tumbledown wreck at the time. Some sort of artists’ colony.’ She did not say where she got the money from, and Eva knew better than to ask; she was already aware of being in a different world. In the six years of its operation, The Links had boasted many distinguished former pupils. in spite of its modest size and unpretentious rooms. Eva, a parvenu second-generation Irish girl with barely a spare penny to her name, felt like a fish out of water, but she did not tell Miss Hedges that.

A man came out onto the gravel driveway: Miss Hedges instructed him to take the car around the back, while she indicated to Eva to follow her inside. The hall was narrow and dark, with a limestone-tiled floor painted green and white, a colour scheme continued in the striped wallpaper. Eva guessed this was her private quarters. Straight ahead, a small series of steps led down to the kitchen. On Eva’s left was a row of coats on hooks. She reached out to touch one, a grey fine-cotton gabardine, brushing it ever so lightly with her fingertips. It released a fine perfume into the air. Her own coat, heavy on her shoulders, felt malodorous and shapeless in comparison.

‘Miss Downey!’ Miss Hedges called out.

Eva guiltily dropped her hand and went into the kitchen. A supper of thickly sliced bread with cheese and dripping was waiting for her, along with a mug of tea. Opposite, a place was set for Miss Hedges, along with some cold meats with a small glass of white wine.

‘Elderflower,’ Miss Hedges said. ‘From our own orchard. Would you like to try some?’

‘Oh no, ma’am. I don’t drink,’ Eva answered, flustered.

‘Oh, I think a sip just this once should be fine,’ Miss Hedges smiled. ‘Here.’

She extended the glass, and Eva took a cautious sip – then recoiled, the sharp taste jangling on her tongue and down her neck like a twisting corkscrew.

Miss Hedges took the glass away from her and smiled. ‘Ah yes. Perhaps you are not quite ready to taste the sweetness of wine.’ She finished the glass off herself with surprising speed. ‘So, Eva Downey,’ she said, when it was drained and set firmly back on the table, ‘why here?’

The question caught Eva off guard. ‘It was … er … on a list Lady Elizabeth Jenkins gave me. She said you had a thorough understanding of the grounding needed for a modern woman. Lady Elizabeth was the one who—’

Miss Hedges cut her off. ‘Oh yes, I knew her, may she rest in peace.’ She smiled with limited affection. ‘Incorrigible old suffragette. You know her great-niece, Sybil Destouches, is here?’

‘I didn’t,’ Eva said, surprised, ‘but I’ve met her.’

The memory was all too sharp. Census Day, Sunday, 2 April 1911. The headiness of that afternoon – that glorious and endless summer, stretching from then to mid-October almost without a break. The young woman on Trafalgar Square in the navy corduroy skirt, waving her placard, ‘Convicts, Lunatics, Women! All Three Have No Votes!’ Her hoarse whisper of invitation in Eva’s ear, while Catherine was trying to pull them away: ‘History is happening here. Do you want to be part of it, or do you want to be a bystander all your life?’

Eva had persuaded Imelda, in spite of her rattling, lingering cough, to sneak out with her that evening on a clandestine journey to Richmond Park, eleven miles and several changes on the Tube away from their home, to take part in a mass suffragette protest to evade the Census. The woman from Trafalgar Square had made a speech. Illuminated by lanterns suspended from a tent roof, she looked gaunt in the cheek, as if she lived off nothing but her own burning fervour. As Eva cheered with the crowd, stamping her feet and raising her arms to applaud, she felt as if she were on the edge of something new and exciting, something that would lift her out of the life she had known.

And then there had been the chance meeting with Lady Elizabeth Jenkins, that most singular of aged suffragettes, as Miss Hedges had already noted. Although she hardly knew Eva Downey from a hole in the ground, she had put her claw-like hand on her shoulder and declared her in need of finishing, forthwith. ‘There is something missing in you, an absence. It bothers me,’ she had said. ‘I’ll see to it.’ And then she had grumbled about how she could not get anyone to contribute to her suffragist magazine, not even one little article about skipping the Census. She looked disapprovingly over at her great-niece … Yes, that was where Eva had met Sybil. But, given they both had been breaking the law, it was perhaps wiser not to mention it to Miss Hedges.

Once supper was over, the headmistress brought Eva on a tour around the buildings, pointing out the classrooms, common room, sewing and music rooms and concluding at Eva’s new dormitory. This

contained six beds: as the newest pupil, Eva would have to sleep in the bed closest to the door. Even though the girls had not yet arrived, all their beds had been ‘taken’.

Miss Hedges waited while Daisy, the maid, brought up Eva’s case, then she handed her a mimeographed timetable and bade her goodnight.

For a moment, all was quiet except for creaks in the walls and floorboards. Then, ‘Halloo!’ A voice rising up the stairs, then a sudden rush of footsteps, the door opening, the corridor light spilling in. The smell of cigarette smoke. The culprit leant against the door jamb: a tall, handsome girl of about Eva’s own age, wearing a long, patterned, drop-waist dress. No sooner had their eyes met than the girl fished another cigarette out of her purse and bent close with the lighter. The flame caught her profile, then died out. The indoor light could not entirely dull the shade of the girl’s hair, a far deeper and more magnificent red than Miss Hedges’. Eva recognised Sibyl the moment she saw that profile.

The smell of fresh smoke filled the room, pleasant for a few seconds before the inevitable staleness that followed. Sybil looked up, anxious. ‘You’re not going to tell on me, are you? I’ll jolly well have to open the window or I’ll get into ferocious trouble—’

Eva smiled. ‘You don’t remember me, then?’

Sybil took another drag and puffed out some smoke. ‘Oh, gosh, yes, I do remember. My great-aunt took a shine to you, didn’t she? Left you a bit in her will, I heard. Didn’t leave me a bean, but she was generous enough to me when she was alive, God bless her. Besides, I didn’t write naughty stories for her paper, and you did. Jolly good show.’

‘I liked it,’ Eva said shyly.

‘That’s sweet,’ Sybil said, sounding somewhat doubtful. ‘What’s your name anyway, Evelyn, was it? I have a memory like a sieve.’

‘Eva. Eva Downey.’

Sybil sat down on her bed, wrinkling her nose in some confusion. ‘Downey … Downey … I’m sorry, who are your people?’

‘You wouldn’t know them. They came over from Ireland – that is to say, my father did, quite recently, and brought us with him.’ Eva could feel her cheeks grow warm. Had Grace been right? Was it starting already?

‘Ireland?’ Sybil said. ‘You have no trace of an accent at all.’ She could not quite manage to keep her tone free of praise.

‘I was not seven years old when we left Cork for good, so I would have very little of it left.’ *And I work hard at suppressing the remnants*, Eva did not add.

Sybil must have picked up the defensiveness in Eva’s answer, because she shrugged and pulled on her cigarette again. ‘I’m being cheeky, aren’t I?’ she said. ‘I only meant to be curious. I like different backgrounds, you know. I get so tired about people harping on about ancestors and titles and all that nonsense. I mean, look at me. My blood is bluer than a field of cornflowers. We’ve been around, since,

my goodness, Edward the First? Though, as far as I can remember, I think our entire lineage was only granted legitimacy because they offed the Duke of York and stuck his head on a pike. When was that, do you remember?'

Eva had no idea, but Sybil continued, 'And the worst part of it all is that everyone thinks we're French because I'm unlucky enough to be saddled with the last name "Destouches". It never occurs to them that my family go back far enough that *everyone* had French names. As it happens, I hate the French. They're so arrogant. Why, we were cycling around the Loire valley, and we stopped for a sandwich in the middle of the afternoon, and everything was shut. I could see the back of the kitchen, all the ingredients there, some bread, the most beautiful-looking goat's cheese. I said, "I'll make it myself, for Heaven's sake," but it was all, *Non, non, c'est fermé*. Oh, I do hate the French!' She stretched herself out the length of the bed, letting her booted feet dangle over the end, earth and dust from the soles falling on the linoleum, just as footsteps and voices began to echo from the bottom of the stairs. 'You mustn't mind me,' she added. 'I do go on so. Mama says it gives her quite a headache.'

Eva let Sybil rattle on as she sat down on her own bed and pushed her suitcase underneath it. A bell clamoured down the corridor as the other girls joined them. They expressed a cursory interest in Eva before returning to their conversations. A girl wearing a long, habit-like garment, which Eva recognised as the school uniform, walked up and down outside, the heavy bell in her hands. They would stand for prayer, then it would be lights out. That's what the timetable said anyway.

She undressed carefully. The process of removing dress, corset, petticoat, flannel undershirt, stockings, combinations and finally underwear was tricky enough when done in private, and ten times worse in public. It seemed to take forever, the fiddling, hooking, unhooking, secreting away the used linen. Finally, she donned a nightdress, which fell over her body like a billowing curtain. Usually Eva undressed in the dark, with only Imelda there, and she didn't have to worry about being seen, unlike now.

When they were in their nightdresses, the girls all stood by their beds, leaving the door open to listen to the bell-ringer read a verse from *The Book of Common Prayer.* Then the thin curtains were drawn, the light turned out, and they all got into bed. Eva rested her head on the thin pillow and looked at the faint light through the windows while the others settled into rhythmic breathing or light snores. It took her some time to follow them into sleep.

This is a new adventure, she thought, *and I must trust where it leads me*.

During the night she had the old dream, the version of the story she hadn't told Miss Hedges, the aftermath of that Census Day in 1911.

In her dream, the foul-tasting, mottled ink of Lady Elizabeth's *New Feminist* got on her fingers, and the headline, 'A JOLLY NIGHT OUT HIDING FROM THE CENSUS MAN – BY MISS E.M. DOWNEY' turned into rivulets of black blood running down the paper and obscuring everything. Close by, her mother Angela, long dead, hummed lula-bye-byes, until Eva tried to look at her, come to her arms – and then she fell

into nothingness, blackest inky dark. The void roared, first a growl low and indecipherable as a gale-force wind between buildings, then words: *Yehbitchyehbitchyehbitch! Bitseach!* Everything snapped into white, and in the midst of it was Grace, standing in a doorway, lips a precise, cranberry red, eyebrows arched with reproachful dismay. She was saying something. *Mama—*

Eva woke up in a thresh of sweat. Immediately the unfamiliar walls and windows of the dormitory crowded in on her, the sounds of the girls in slumber. She had to clap her hand to her mouth and bite her palm not to cry out. She brushed her eyes with the back of her hand. They were wet.

What had started that up again? It must have been Sybil, she concluded. Sybil, now lying on her back several feet away, sending light snores up to the ceiling. Meeting her must have raked over the coals.

She allowed more tears to flow silently until she fell back to sleep.