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Opening Extract from...

A Place for Us: Part 4

Written by Harriet Evans

Published by Headline Review

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First published in Great Britain in 2015
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 2126 1 (Paperback)

Typeset in Garamond MT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London nw1 3bh

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

The End and the Beginning

I think that just now we are not wanted there. I think it will be best for us to go quickly and quietly away.

E. Nesbit, *The Railway Children*

Florence

It was strange, coming out of the Royal Courts of Justice. It was so near to the Courtauld, in the one bit of London she knew really well. The sun had broken through the purple-grey rain clouds of the morning and, as Florence made her way through the great hall of the Victorian Gothic building, buffeted by swarming men and women in black, she found she had to squint as she emerged on to the pavement. A huge din greeted her, a mass of yet more people calling out, shouting. She felt completely bewildered. She still wasn't even sure she'd heard the judge right.

Outside, crowds and TV cameras thronged the pavement and she stopped still, in shock. Protesters were waving placards. Florence peered at one of the signs: did they all hate her that much? 'FRACK OFF', one of them read. She remembered brushing her teeth this morning at Jim's, frowning at herself in the mirror while listening to the *Today* programme: yes, of course. Some judgement was expected today at the Court of Appeal on a fracking company's right to drill in Sussex.

One of the signs of paranoia is the belief people are out to get you. Not today. Florence gave a shaky laugh, walking with relief into the furious crowd, almost touched at the strength of their belief, the passion on their faces. She had been like that once and it wasn't real, she knew it now. It was fake, a comfort, something for her to cling on to alone at night, like the cloth bunny she'd had when she was small . . . and now she'd taken it away, exposed herself, everything about her own sad, strange life . . . and she didn't know what on earth she'd do.

Florence shook her head, trying to stay calm, and looking wildly around her for an escape.

'This is not a matter of "passing off" or of academic judgement for the court to decide upon . . . This is a matter of deception and of income fraudulently

obtained on the basis of character assumption. You led the general public to believe you were an art historian who not only wrote and presented his own television documentary series, but also produced a tie-in book to accompany this series, for which you received a not inconsiderable advance of £50,000 from Roberts Miller Press. You have heard from the managing director of that company. Ms Hopkin says she believed, as did the public, that you were the author of this book, which was so well researched and written as to attract not merely favourable reviews in the academic world but to have been a word-of-mouth success, thanks to an endorsement from a television book club, and so on. And as a result of that belief you received a further £100,000 for a new book, not to mention substantial royalty payments on your first book. Professor Connolly, this case brought against you by Professor Winter is one of credibility. She is possibly the foremost expert in her subject in the world and your cynical attempt to exploit that, your arrogance and your sheer deceit is frankly breathtaking. I find her credible, and you to be liable for the costs of this case. The plaintiff's complaint is upheld.'

She wasn't crazy, she hadn't misheard, had she? She had won. She had done it, this weird, unlike-her thing. Hadn't she?

Florence had stood in the narrow wooden pew after the judgement, not sure what to do next. Her barrister, a florid young man called Dominic, had patted her on the shoulder and disappeared. She'd seen Jim earlier, but he was teaching that afternoon and hadn't been able to come. Lucy wouldn't be there, of course, or Bill, or Ma; she'd deliberately pushed them all away.

Before all this happened she'd always thought she was close to her brother. She and Bill weren't usually in daily contact, but they'd talk occasionally, amusing, low-key chats when he'd tell her about the village and what she was missing, ask about her job, that sort of thing. Bill was dry, and funny and kind. He was *very* kind. He was calm, too, always putting things in perspective. He *had* been calm, rather. Now, he seemed to be pitted against her, on Ma's side. But against her too, somehow . . . And there was no one she could talk to about the night Pa died . . . And that was . . . well, that was fine, because she was on her own now. So best get used to it.

Yes, get used to it. So much to get used to. Florence blinked and

closed her eyes, longing for a moment of quietness in the bright, loud street. When she opened her eyes, she saw a rather strange man with a notebook standing nearby. In an effort to ignore him she fiddled with her new grey suit jacket, which she'd bought the day before the trial began. 'You have to wear something vaguely business-like, Flo,' Jim had said, laughing at her discomfort. 'You can't show up in tie-dye skirts with mirrors on, or that dress with the pockets. Even I think so.' This was indeed strong stuff coming from Jim, who was usually in creased cheesecloth from March to September, so Florence had gone to a charity shop on Upper Street and come home with this. She'd been very pleased with it.

Today, though, Florence wasn't quite sure whether she'd bought a man's or woman's suit jacket. It had been on the women's rail but it looked really awful, like she was a tycoon in some programme like *Dallas*.

She undid the button again, and began to look along the street for the bus that'd take her home to Jim's house, when a voice called: 'Happy now, then?'

Her heart leaping, Florence turned round. 'Oh. Peter,' she said. 'I thought you were – never mind. Yes, I am. Thank you.' The *Thank you* sounded more jubilant than she intended.

Peter Connolly stood a few metres away on the edge of the crowd. His jowls were grey-black, as they always were by mid-afternoon, dark with stubble. He really was very hairy. Hair in his ears, in his nose – it was actually not at all pleasant, when you thought about it.

He nodded a farewell greeting to his lawyer and came towards her, slowly, and when he reached her he said, 'Well, you've proved your point, I suppose. You really are a bitter, dried-up old coot, aren't you.'

'It's over now, Peter. Come on.'

He was spitting, he was so angry. 'Living in your sad little apartment with your sad little mementoes, waiting like a spider in her web to trap me.' He shoved his hands in his pockets, made a gormless face and loped round in a circle in exaggerated imitation of her, as the anti-fracking protestors looked on, curiously, and one or two of them, recognising him, nudged each other.

'Peter.' Talitha Leafe appeared, and put one pale hand on the crumpled arm of his blue linen suit, the kind he always wore on television. Florence knew that one: he'd had it on the day she'd seen him eating in Da Camillo with a couple of students and she'd 'pretended' to walk past and popped in to say hi and they'd had to ask her to stay, of course . . .

'No,' she whispered to herself. 'Not any more.'

'God,' he said, his large face looming over her. 'I – I – you have no idea how much I *wish* I'd never laid a finger on you.'

Talitha said quietly, her lips curling in cold rage: 'Peter, for God's sake shut up! The press are everywhere.'

'[~]"*Is* everywhere",' Florence muttered under her breath. She was amused to see the slightly untidy-looking chap with a notebook ambling up to them.

He stood in front of the awkward group and said, mildly, 'Hello, I'm from the *Guardian*. Any comment on the court's ruling today?'

'Um, well . . .' Florence could feel perspiration forming under the jacket, between her shoulder blades. She had no idea what the right thing to say was. 'I'm delighted.'

Peter shook his head and said under his breath, 'You'll regret this, you know that, don't you? I mean, it's the end for you, one way or another. You've burned your boats. George isn't going to want—'

Someone called his name and his expression changed, the whole cast of his face. He turned round and said in his most mellifluous voice: 'I say, hello! Kit! Hello there, Jen!'

'Hello, Peter,' said the first woman, in a neutral voice. Florence suddenly recognised her: she was the producer of his TV series.

'Yes! Thank you for coming. Wondered if you'd be here, if you'd come – thanks for your support, Kit—'

Kit said, 'We had to come. We were subpoenaed, Peter.'

Peter spoke loudly. 'I need to come in for some dubbing, I know, for the last section outside Santa Croce.' Florence thought for the first time how like the snobbish English vicar in *A Room with a View* he was, how that had been part of his charm for them – and her too. And it was an affectation, of course. The real Peter was simply a mediocre person.

As the two women walked away, nodding farewell politely, the older one stopped suddenly, and whispered something to the younger one, then ran back towards Florence, avoiding Peter's gaze.

'Here,' she said. She thrust a small card into Florence's hand. It dug into her palm and Florence looked down at it in surprise. 'Take my card. We'd love to talk to you about a project we have in mind – now's not the right time, I know. But you'd be fantastic. I'm Kit. I'm the commissioning editor. Give me a call because – well, yeah. You really were terrific in there. I was really proud . . . anyway.' She avoided Peter's incredulous, shell-shocked expression and dashed off down the road to where Jen was waiting.

Peter and Talitha stalked off in the opposite direction without another word, Talitha's heels clicking angrily like tap shoes on the pavement. Florence was left holding the card in the middle of the street, feeling dizzier than ever. The noise from the fracking protestors grew louder. She didn't want to be on TV, did she? What would happen with Peter's next TV series? With his new book deal, his villa near Siena, the flat in Bloomsbury, his lecturing role on the *Queen Mary*? She had ruined it all for him, and for what?

'So,' said the *Guardian* journalist. She'd forgotten he was still there. 'What's next for you? I mean, do you think this kind of case is reflective of the current state of academia, of television commissioning policy?'

'Oh,' Florence said. 'I don't know. I just had to do it. I had to tell the truth. Everything out in the open.' She could feel her throat constricting.

'Right.' He scribbled furiously on a tiny pad. 'Of course. Right . . .' He scanned his pad with his pen. 'And is this correct, you're David Winter's daughter, right?'

Florence found, to her horror, that she couldn't speak. Her eyes filled with tears, her fingers clutched at her handbag strap. She opened her mouth.

No, actually. No, I'm not.

'You must miss him,' the journalist went on. 'He was very well loved, wasn't he? It's not long since he died, is it?'

How could he ask her questions like this? She stared at him,

blankly, not sure what she was about to do, and then someone took her arm, gently.

'Come on, Flo.' She looked up, to find Jim standing in front of her, puffing hard, out of breath. 'Let's go and get a drink.'

'Oh, Jim.' She wanted to throw her arms around him and remembered just in time the journalist, still watching them.

Jim leaned against a wall, wheezing. 'I'm so unfit. I only just made it. They wouldn't let me miss the lecture. It's all anyone's talking about in the common room, I can tell you.' He turned to the journalist. 'Goodbye then,' he said, in his firm but awkwardly shy way, and took her arm. 'Shall we go back to the Courtauld?' he said, shepherding her across the street. 'There's a bit of a hero's welcome there for you, if you fancy it?'

'Oh, no, absolutely not, I'm sorry. I want some peace and quiet.'

'Right. Want me to leave you then?'

'No, please don't.' She clutched his hand so ferociously that he laughed.

'All right, of course. Come on, we'll go to the pub.'

In Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a tiny, warren-like pub off Fleet Street, Florence found a table deep in the vaulted cellars, while Jim went to the bar. She sat waiting for him, blinking hard, clutching her handbag on her lap and wishing everything wasn't so loud in her head, the clamour of too many voices all shouting to be heard.

Jim appeared, and handed her a stiff gin and tonic. 'Congratulations!' he said, clinking her glass. 'How do you feel?'

Florence gulped down her drink. 'Relieved, I suppose,' she said. 'Glad it's over.'

Jim watched her. 'Are you going to call your mother? Your family?'

'Oh. Maybe later.' She shook her head. 'They won't care. I haven't told them much about it. Anything, really.'

'Come on, Flo. They'll be over the moon. We all are.'

Florence couldn't tell him what she wanted to, what she'd told Lucy. She couldn't bear to say it again. *They're not my family. I don't belong to anyone.* She just shrugged.

Jim said softly, 'Flo, the way those lawyers tried to bring you down in there was horrible. You could sue Peter for defamation.'

Florence felt her eyes twitching, with tiredness, with mortification at the memory of what they'd said. She rubbed them. She couldn't really bear to think about the last four days of the trial, how Peter's barrister had, in his opening statement, exposed in five short minutes the sad, pathetic nature of her outer life. 'My suing days are over.' Florence downed the rest of her drink. She didn't feel triumphant. Just reckless, and quite mad. 'Maybe I shouldn't have done it. I wish everything hadn't come out like this.'

'Come on, Flo!' Jim looked appalled. 'You can't say that.'

'It's mortifying.' She looked almost with surprise at her empty glass. 'They made me look so – so pathetic. I haven't had that since . . .'

Since Daisy.

'Let me remind you, Flo,' Jim said, 'when you took this on, you were very clear to me. You wanted to prove your point. You wanted to show them they couldn't push you around.'

'Yes. Yes . . . I suppose so. I can't remember why now.' She brushed her forehead with her hand, bewildered. 'Peter – he and George, they were trying to get rid of me. And I'm better than both of them. I didn't know what else to do.'

'But you know you could have moved back here.'

'And do what?' She looked up uneasily, as the door swung open.

'Flo, you've just won a plagiarism case that says you wrote the biggest-selling book in recent memory on the Renaissance. Students come from all around the world to the Courtauld just to hear you lecture. You know, admissions to your course rose by nearly sixty per cent after you joined us?' She shook her head. 'You've written three other books. You're – you're about to be in demand. Get used to it. Stop thinking you're not part of the rest of society.'

'Sure. OK.' Florence picked at the worn trim of the stool. 'Sure. It's just . . .'

Jim said gently, 'Just what?'

She glanced up, and caught his kind grey eyes staring at her. She thought how well she knew him, how lucky she was that, in all this, she still had a friend, one friend.

The fact that she'd kept in a special bag a tissue Peter Connelly

had left at her apartment. The lists she'd kept of things they'd done, found in one of the manuscripts he still had. The stories, repeated over and over to colleagues, the notes she'd written him . . . The mug he used that she never washed. A piece of pink paper stuck to the fridge, a flyer advertising a joint lecture at the College: *Professor Connolly and Professor Winter*. Seeing their names printed together had continued to give her a thrill long after the paper grew faded and crinkled in the sun.

Florence had always told everyone that she didn't care what they thought of her. She had told Daisy she didn't care about the notes left on the bed, the wasps' nest, the constant pinches and bruises her sister gave her that no one ever seemed to notice. Only once had she cracked and told Ma, creeping into the kitchen while Daisy was out with Wilbur, silent tears running down her grubby face. And Ma had kissed her, and said, 'Oh Flo. You have to learn to get on with other people, birdie, instead of telling tales. Like I say. Fight back.'

And Florence was left with her mouth open, her tongue dry, wanting to speak next but too frightened. *I think she might kill me if I fight back.*

It had always been easier and safer to retreat into her own mind. And who was there who could help her, who would listen? She had burned her boats with everyone, really, except Jim. As she smiled awkwardly into his kind face she knew she couldn't talk to Jim about it. She liked him too much. She could feel the doors sliding shut, feel herself pulling the trapdoor in, retreating back. The fact was she'd been living in her own world for so long she wasn't sure if she could ever live anywhere else again.

Jim interrupted her thoughts. 'What will you do now?'

Clearing her throat, Florence tried to sound businesslike. 'I think I might go back to Florence next week. Get on with some work. A new paper for the *I Tatti Studies* Harvard journal on the relationship between Lorenzo de Medici and Gozzoli and how the latter controlled Lorenzo's public image, you know, not only the frescoes but—' She saw Jim was staring at her with a slightly glazed expression and she stopped. 'Anyway, I need to work. Most of the summer, I suppose.'

'What about the TV people?'

'Oh, they were just being nice, don't you think?'

'They're not charity workers. You should call them.'

'Listen, Jim,' she said, wanting to change the subject. 'Thank you. Thank you for everything the last few months. I don't know what I'd have done without you. Gone mad, probably. Thanks for having me to stay, too. It's great Amna doesn't mind me, clogging up the house.'

He laughed. 'I don't think she'd be bothered one way or the other.'

'When's she back?' Jim had said something about Istanbul for a conference, but conferences didn't last a month. Florence had been so wrapped up in herself lately, it only occurred to her now that this was unusual.

'Oh. Well, she's back. Back a couple of weeks ago, in fact. It went well.' Jim nodded, then looked into his glass.

'Is she?' Florence didn't understand. 'Oh. Where is she then?' She wondered if, in her self-obsession, Amna had been eating breakfast with them every day, chatting about history or academic gossip in the evenings whilst making pasta in the kitchen and she simply hadn't noticed.

'Florence, we've split up.'

'Who?'

'Good grief, concentrate. Me! I mean, me and Amna.'

She shook her head, blindsided. 'I didn't know that.'

'You didn't ask.'

'You should have said.' She felt embarrassed. 'I wouldn't have stayed if —'

He laughed. 'What, like a Victorian maiden? You don't think it's appropriate for us to be in the house alone without Amna as a chaperone?'

'Don't laugh at me,' she muttered, flushing.

'I'm not, sorry.' His nice old face grew serious, and he said, 'I never saw her. She was away three weeks out of four. The house is too big for one person waiting for the other person to come home. And – well, no big surprise, but there's someone else.'

'Oh. Oh my goodness.' Florence impulsively put her hand on his,

which was wrapped round his glass. 'I had no idea, Jim. I'm so sorry. I feel I've been no friend to you, while it's been going on and you've been . . .' She could feel herself, wanting to cry again, and dug her hands into her thigh. *For God's sake, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Wait till you get home. You can indulge it then. You can do what you want with your life, then.*

And a seed took root in her thoughts then, a seed that sprouted and grew rapidly, and which she realised then was, really, the only solution to all of this. But she didn't say anything to Jim, who was watching her intently.

'I'm fine about it,' he said. 'It's been over for years, really, and now I can get on with life. Leave it behind me.' He cleared his throat. 'Do you understand what I mean?'

They stared at each other. 'Yes,' she said. 'Perhaps I do.'

'Everything's changed,' Jim said, and he shifted a little closer towards her, but Florence's knees knocked against the stool that was in between them and, impatiently, she flung it away so it rolled on the floor. As Jim picked it up and set it right again she watched him and knew, of course, that she wasn't in any state for this, not now, probably not ever.

Dear Jim. With a monumental effort she plastered a smile on her face and said, 'Let's change the subject. I want to know what you thought about Talitha Leafe. I heard from someone at the Academy that she asked David Starkey out before she went for Peter. She's apparently a well-known TV historian stalker. Have you come across her before?'

Jim was silent for a moment, and then gave one of his delighted chuckling laughs, and shifted his weight on the stool, and she was glad to have made him smile, to leave everything else behind, to be gossiping and talking about someone else, for once. When she got back to Florence, that's when she'd take the next step, the final one. Not today.