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Opening extract from

A Song for Ella Grey

Written by

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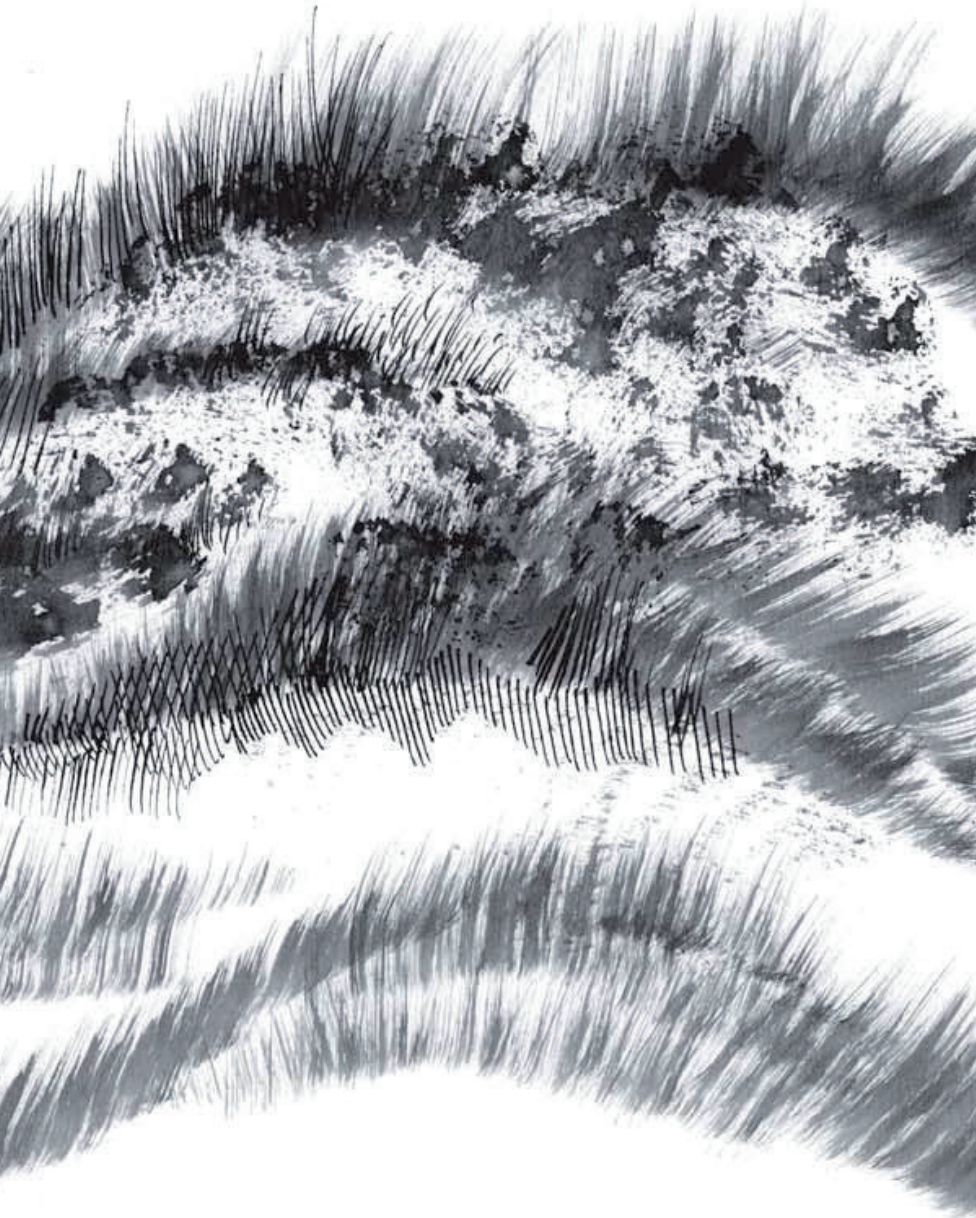
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PART *one*

I'm the one who's left behind. I'm the one to tell the tale. I knew them both, knew how they lived and how they died. It didn't happen long ago. I'm young, like them. Like *them*? Can that be possible? Can you be both young and dead? I don't have time to think of that. I need to cast the story out and live my life. I'll tell it fast and true to get it gone, right now, while darkness deepens over the icy North and the bitter stars shine down. I'll finish it by morning. I'll bring my friend into the world for one last night then let her go forever. Follow me, one word then another, one sentence then another, one death then another. Don't hesitate. Keep moving forward with me through the night. It won't take long. Don't look back.

I'll start in the middle of it when the wheels were already turning, when the end was still to come. It was

a late spring early morning, two weeks into the new term, and we were in bed, the two of us together, as we were so often then. It's how our sleepovers had developed. We started out as five year olds cuddled up with teddy-bears and fleecy jimjams. Now here we were at seventeen, still spending nights together. They'd been stopped by her parents for a while. They'd said she was too old for this. They'd said she was going astray, not working hard enough at school. But she'd knuckled down as they'd told her to. She'd wrapped them around her finger as only she could. And here we were again, sleeping tucked against each other in my safe warm bed, breathing together, dreaming together. Ella and Claire. Claire and Ella, just as it had always been. So lovely. So young and bright and free and . . . And our futures lay beyond us, waiting. And . . . Ha!

Light filtered through the thin yellow curtains. My dangling wind chime sounded in the draught and the shabby dreamcatcher swayed. A river bell rang on the turning tide and a foghorn groaned far out at sea.

I thought Ella was still asleep. I had my cheek against her back and listened to the steady rhythmic beating of her heart, to the hum of life deep down in her.

'Claire,' she softly said. 'Are you awake?'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'No.' She didn't move. 'It's love, Claire. I *know* it's love.'

My heart quickened.

'What d'you mean, love?'

I heard the smile on her breath, her sigh of joy.

'I've been awake all night,' she said, 'just thinking of him.'

'*Him*?' I demanded. 'Who do you mean, *him?*'

I removed myself from her. I rolled onto my back.

I knew her answer, of course.

'Orpheus!' she whispered. 'Orpheus! Who else could it be?'

She giggled. She turned to me and she was shining.

'Claire! I am in love with him.'

'But you haven't even *met* him. He hardly even knows you bliddy *exist*.'

She went on giggling.

'And you've only spoken to him on the bliddy . . .'

She pressed her finger to my lips.

'None of that matters. I keep on hearing his song. It's like I've been waiting to find him, and for him to find me. It's like I've known him forever. And he's known me.'

'Oh Ella.'

'It's destined. I love him and he'll love me. There'll be no other way.'

Then my mother's voice, calling us down.

'Coming!' called Ella.

She held my face, gazed into my eyes.

'Thank you,' she said.

'For *what*?'

'For bringing us together.'

'*What?*'

'If you hadn't called me that day and told me to listen, and if he hadn't sung to me . . .' She kissed me on the lips. 'None of this would have happened, would it?'

Mum called again.

'Claire! Ella!'

I pulled my clothes on.

'*No*,' I said.

She just kept on smiling.

She kissed me again.

'You'll see,' she said. 'You'll understand. It won't be long now.'

'What won't be long?'

'Until he comes for me. I *know* he'll come for me.'

She kissed me again.

Thud, went my heart. *Thud*.

★ ★ ★

We walked to school along the riverbank, past where the shipyards used to be. We crossed the bridge over the burn where we once sailed paper boats and bathed our dolls. The high arches of the Newcastle bridges shimmered in the distance. We passed some men fishing. Part of the pathway had collapsed into itself, probably into one of the multiple cavities left by ancient mining works.

I took her hand and guided her across.

I took her face in my hands and held it gently.

'You're such a total innocent,' I told her. 'You've never even had a proper lad before, and now . . .'

She giggled, the way she did.

'It's how it happens, isn't it? One day everything's just ordinary. And then kapow, out of the blue, you fall . . .'

'It can't be love,' I said. 'It's madness.'

'Then let me be mad!!'

She kissed me in delight and stepped away and we hurried on. Others were around us now, all making their way to Holy Trinity. We called out greetings to our friends.

She hesitated before the gates and spoke softly, conspiratorially.

'I know you're jealous,' she said.

She came in close again, lowered her eyes and

whispered soft and low.

'I know you love me, Claire.'

'Of course I do. Proper love, not this . . .'

'I'll still be here for you,' she said. 'I'll still be your . . .'

'Oh, Ella stop it. Stop it now.'

I tried to hold her, but she broke away, didn't look back.

In English that morning, Krakatoa's droning on and on and on and on. *Paradise* damn *Lost* again. I'm watching Ella staring from the window. Always such a dreamer. Sometimes it's like she's hardly there at all. Sometimes it's like she's half-dead and I'm the one doing her living for her.

Sometimes you just want to kick her arse and shake her up and snap,

'Wake up!'

'Claire?' comes Krakatoa's voice.

He's right by my desk.

'Yes, sir?'

'What do *you* think?'

'About what, sir?'

He rolls his eyes, but he can't go on, because suddenly Ella's out of her seat and stuffing her things into her bag.

'Ella?' he says.

She doesn't even look at him. She grins at me. She makes a fist of joy.

'*See*?' she whispers. 'Didn't I tell you, Claire?'

And she laughs and she's out the door and gone.

Then we see him, out in the shimmering at the edge of the yard. Just standing there, with the coat and the hair and the lyre strapped to his back, gazing towards us with that Orpheus look. And now there's Ella, hurrying over the concrete to him.

Krakatoa yanks the window open.

'Ella!' he calls. 'Ella Grey!'

She doesn't turn. There's a moment when she and Orpheus just stare at each other, seeing each other for the very first time. Then they take each other's hand and off they go.

Krakatoa gives one more yell, then shoves the window shut again.

'Doesn't say boo to a goose and then up she comes with this?' he says. 'Who'll ever understand you kids?'

'It was true, then,' whispers Angeline at my side.

'Aye,' I whisper back.

'She said he'd come, and so he did.'

'He did.'

'She's the dark one. Who'd have thought it?'

We stare at the space they've left behind.

'Her and *him*,' says Angeline. 'Her and *him*.'

There's lots of others at the window.

'Who is he?' says Bianca.

'He's sex on a bliddy stick!' laughs Crystal Carr.

None of the boys says anything.

'Back to your seats,' says Krakatoa. 'If she wants to throw away her chances then so be it. She's her own person.'

'Is she?' I grunt.

'Who *is* he?' says Bianca. 'Who?'

'So let's go on,' says Krakatoa. 'Evil, be thou my good. What exactly does Milton mean by this?'

'Who?' says Crystal.

'He's called Orpheus,' I say. 'Bliddy Orpheus.'




PART two

One

Maybe he was always with us. Maybe he was there when we were thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, when we were forming our beautiful friendship group. We used to meet up on the grassy slope beside The Cluny, that old whisky warehouse converted into artists' workshops. It's down by the Ouseburn, the stream that comes out from under the city then flows through its gates down into the Tyne. There's a café, a bar, a little theatre, a room where bands play. Close by is Seven Stories, the children's book place. When we were little, we used to go there with our parents and teachers to listen to writers and artists. We'd make masks and put on costumes and act out stories of our own. We'd speak through our masks and say, I'm not me. I've gone. I've turned into Dracula, or Cinderella, Hansel, Gretel, Guinevere. And then we'd tell our tales and write them down. And as I

write this down, I think that he was with us even then, speaking through us, making us sing, making us dance.

We always said there was magic in the air down by the Ouseburn. We'd sip wine, listen to the river, stare up at the stars, share our dreams of being artists, musicians, poets, wanderers, anything different, anything new. We scoffed at the kids who weren't like us, the ones who already talked about careers, or bliddy mortgages and pensions. Kids wanting to be old before they were young. Kids wanting to be dead before they'd lived. They were digging their own graves, building the walls of their own damn jails. Us, we hung on to our youth. We were footloose, fancy free. We said we'd never grow boring and old. We plundered charity shops for vintage clothes. We bought battered Levis and gorgeous faded velvet stuff from Attica in High Bridge. We wore coloured boots, hemp scarves from Gaia. We read Baudelaire and Byron. We read our poems to each other. We wrote songs and posted them on YouTube. We formed bands. We talked of the amazing journeys we'd take together once school was done. Sometimes we paired off, made couples that lasted for a little while, but the group was us. We hung together. We could say anything to each other. We loved each other.

There was one Saturday dusk when Orpheus was

surely in the air. Early spring, but already the temperature had started to rise. Above the city, the sky was pink and gold. The grass we sat on still held some heat from that day's sun. From the quayside, further in towards the city, came the laughter and screams of early drunks. Somebody had brought a bottle of Tesco Valpolicella and we were passing it round, mouth to mouth, tasting each other as we tasted the wine.

We all gasped at the dark silhouette of a single swan that swooped towards us from the metro bridge high above. It swerved just a few feet over our heads, and rushed towards the river. We cursed with joy. We applauded, laughed, smiled, sighed our way into the stillness afterwards.

I was leaning back with my legs stretched. Ella was leaning back on me. It was she who heard it first.

'What the hell is *that*?' she suddenly said.

'Is *what*?'

'Is *that*?'

She sat up straight.

'*That*. Listen.'

What was it? We listened. We heard nothing, then we did.

'There is *something*,' said Sam Hinds.

'That kind of singing or something?' said Angeline.

'Aye,' said Ella. 'That.'

Aye, like singing. But also like a mixup of the river sounds, the drunks, the air on our faces, bits of birdsong and traffic, like all of those familiar things but with a new note in them that turned it all to some kind of weird song.

We listened hard.

'Naah,' said Michael. 'It's nowt.'

But it wasn't nowt. Otherwise why would we all get up like we did and start searching for its source? Why did we all say that yes, we could hear it? Or is that just how we were then, ready to find weirdness and beauty where they didn't really exist? Was it just the Valpolicella and the swan and us being together and being young and being daft?

Whatever it was, we got up. I swigged the last of the wine and chucked the bottle into a bin. We went down the grassy bank to the Ouseburn, that flowed through the deep shadow cast by The Cluny. Water, spinning and spiralling and gurgling as it flowed down to its meeting with the Tyne. The slick black glossy mud at the edge clicking as it dried. Footsteps of a couple as they crossed the narrow steel bridge over it. I held Ella's hand as we walked.

We followed the stream to where it emerged from

its tunnel beneath the city. It gushed through the metal bars of locked gates. We gazed at the bolts and massive padlocks, the rusted warning sign with the skull-and-crossbones on it, the arched tunnel beyond, the deepening darkness.

'God, how scary this used to be!' she said.

'Remember staring in, peeling our eyes to see who could see furthest?'

'Seeing all those fiends and monsters?'

'And all those rats that slithered out that time?'

'And running away yelling and screaming?'

We giggled.

'There's one!' I said.

'And another, Claire! Look! The one with horns! Oh no!'

We were joking but we trembled. I drew her to me and kissed her full on the lips. It was in just this place that I had done this first, those years ago when we still those infants scared by dark.

'Listen,' she said. 'It's like it's in the water, Claire. Can you hear?'

We listened to the way it flowed through the gates, between the banks.

'Aye!' I said.

We laughed.

'Tinkle tinkle,' I said.

'Gush gush gush!'

But then the sound we searched for seemed to come from everywhere. We walked away from the water. It came from a different direction at every corner, from a different place each time we paused.

'Where *is* it coming from?' I said.

Ella closed her eyes and turned her face to the sky.

'From inside us!' she said.

Carlo Brooks, who looked the oldest of us, went into The Cluny bar to get more wine. We swigged it and we walked on, not searching now, just wandering through the sound. Maria and Michael, who'd been teasing each other for weeks, slid into a doorway, held each other, and started to kiss passionately at last.

'Yes, go on,' called Catherine. 'Love each other now!'

A group of drunken lasses swaggered past us.

'It's the hipster crew!' they laughed.

We giggled when they'd gone.

'Hipsters!' we scoffed.

'That's us!' laughed Sam.

We kept on listening. Did it fade or did we just stop hearing it – or was it never really there at all? Who knows? Anyway, we realized it was gone. We came to the quayside. We walked by the bars and the

restaurants, through gangs of drinkers.

There was a busker under the Tyne Bridge, an old bloke with a lined filthy face playing a battered mandolin and singing something foreign in a croaky voice.

'Mebbe it was just him all the time,' said Sam.

We stood and listened for a moment.

'He must have been lovely at one time,' said Ella.

The bloke gestured down to the old mandolin case on the ground at his feet.

We found a few coins, threw them in.

He smiled at us and held his mandolin towards the sky.

'The Gods will reward ye,' he said, and he played again with new verve.

'Wow!' said Carlo. 'How good would you get if we threw some tenners in?'

The bloke laughed.

'Give me your everything,' he said. 'And you will see.'

I walked homeward with silent Ella.

'Maybe it was nothing,' she said. 'Maybe it *was* just something coming out of us.'

I left her at her gate. She hardly moved. She stepped back, stared at me like it wasn't me she was staring at.

'It's mad,' she said.

'What is?'

'Being us, being young! It's amazing! Isn't it, Claire? *Isn't* it? Say yes! Say *yes*!'

'Yes,' I whispered.

And she giggled, shrugged, turned, was gone.