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The Girl in the Photograph

Written by Kate Riordan

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The Girl in the Photograph

KATE RIORDAN



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For my four parents, for their love and belief

Prologue: Alice

Midsummer, 1936

Fiercombe is a place of secrets. They fret among the uppermost branches of the beech trees and brood at the cold bottom of the stream that cleaves the valley in two. The past has seeped into the soil here, like spilt blood. If you listen closely enough you can almost hear what's gone before, particularly on the stillest days. Sometimes the very air seems to hum with anticipation. At other times it's as though a collective breath has been drawn in and held. It waits, or so it seems to me.

The word 'combe' means valley in some of England's south-westerly counties but the roots of 'fier' are more obscure. At first I thought it was a reference to a past inferno, or perhaps a hint of one to come. It seemed just the sort of place that would dramatically burn to the ground one night; I could imagine too easily the glow of it from the escarpment high above, smoke staining the air, the spit and pop of ancient, husk-dry timbers as the flames licked faster. But I was quite wrong: in Old English it means 'wooded hill', aptly describing the dense and disorderly ranks of hanging beech that leer and loom as you descend steeply towards the old manor house.

Things you would never accept in everyday life – strange happenings, presences and atmospheres, inexplicable lurches of time – are commonplace at Fiercombe. They have become commonplace to me. I have never grown accustomed to the darkness of night here, though. The blackness is total, like a suffocating blanket that steals over you the instant the light is turned out. When open eyes have nothing to focus on, no bar of light under the door, no chink of moonshine through heavy curtains, they strain to catch sight of something, anything. During those early nights here, my eyes would flick from where I knew the windows were to the door and back, until exhaustion turned the walls to a liquid that rose up me in oily waves.

Like a blind person, my other senses grew quickly acute for the lack of visual distraction. Even in the dead of night, when the house finally slept, I was convinced I could hear it breathe, somewhere at the very edges of my hearing, beneath the whisperings and scratchings I thought I could discern. Even in the day, when nothing looked out of the ordinary, I would still find my skin prickling with the vibrations of the place, something instinctive and animal in me knowing that things had been knocked out of balance, that something had gone awry.

I have been here a little over three years now, since the late spring of 1933. When I arrived from London I was not quite six months' pregnant by a man I wasn't married to. A man married to someone else. If it hadn't been for him and my own foolishness, and the subsequent horror and shame of my parents, then I would never have come to Fiercombe at all. What a strange thought that is now, after all that has happened.

When I think back to the time before I came here, it feels like someone else's life, read in a book. It's difficult for me to recapture how I truly felt about things then; how I went about my normal routine of working, the evening meal with my parents, going to the lido or the pictures with my friend Dora, and daydreaming about the man I thought I was in love with. I see now that I wasn't very grown-up.

I came just as spring was softening and deepening into languid summer. It was a beautiful summer – more beautiful than any I've known before or since – though I was still glad to put it behind me when autumn finally arrived. Too glad, perhaps. There were rifts in the valley that remained unhealed as the leaves began to turn but I was too busy forging my own new beginning to acknowledge them. The signs and clues were there; I simply chose not to heed them. I have let three years of contented life in the present chase away the unresolved past, just as the morning sun does the nightmare. Today's confession has changed all that and I can no longer turn away. They deserve better. They always did.

Alice

Four years earlier

In the summer of 1932 I had never heard of a place called Fiercombe. I was still living an ordinary sort of life then. A life that someone else, looking in, would probably have thought rather dull. That was certainly how I viewed it, though I was reluctant to admit that at the time, even to myself. After all, admitting it also meant facing the likelihood that nothing more interesting awaited me on the horizon.

It wasn't until after I left school that I began to feel a creeping sort of restlessness. I had got a full scholarship to the local grammar and I had liked it there – not just for the solace of its rituals and order but for its pervading sense of purposeful preparation. Preparation for what was to come after: the tantalizing, unknowable future. What shape that would take I had no idea. Much of its allure lay in its very amorphousness, the vague sense of expectation that edges closest on those perfect summer evenings of which England never seems to have enough. Evenings gilded with twilight, the perfumed air brimming with promise. Yet the mornings after those evenings always seemed to go on in the normal way – the world shrunk to a familiar room again, consoling but uninspiring, the walls near enough to touch.

Quite suddenly, or so it felt, school was long behind

me and I was a woman of twenty-two. Still nothing of any note had happened to me. I remained at home with my parents, I had a job that I could have done perfectly adequately in my sleep, and there was no sense that whatever I had blithely expected to lift me clear of the mundane was any nearer. If anything, it seemed to have retreated.

My mother was no less frustrated by my lack of progress – though for rather different reasons. I was a good-looking girl, she told me somewhat grudgingly, so why did I never mention any gentlemen friends? Why was I not engaged, or even courting? After the milestone of my twenty-second birthday had passed, she aired those anxieties with ever-increasing frequency, her expression at once baleful and triumphant.

Triumphant, I suppose, because she had never really wanted me to go to the grammar school, believing that girls with too many brains were fatally unattractive to prospective husbands. Though the shortage of men after the Great War had been the crisis of an older generation, there lingered a sense of urgency for unmarried girls, at least in my mother's mind. She also professed not to see the point of school beyond the legal leaving age of fourteen. Anything after that was for boys, and girls with plain faces, she said. After all, no woman could keep her job after her wedding anyway.

For the time being, my own job – one I knew I was fortunate to have when so many had no work – contributed to the household budget, an aspect of it that even my mother couldn't criticize. Each morning I took a bus south to Finsbury Park, where I caught the Piccadilly line to Russell Square. Just off the square was the office where

I was the junior of two typists to a Mr Marshall, a minor publisher of weighty academic books. I had a smart suit I had saved to buy rather than make, and two handbags between which I transferred the gold-plated compact my aunt had bought me one Christmas.

On my first day I had felt rather sophisticated as I walked to the bus stop, the pinch of my new court shoes a grown-up and therefore pleasurable kind of discomfort. A few years on from that hopeful morning and I still occasionally felt a vestige of that early pride – it was just that sometimes, particularly during the afternoons, which were so quiet I could hear the ponderous tick of the clock mounted on the wall, I couldn't help wondering when my life – my real life – would begin.

I had never had any sort of serious attachment to a man. Perhaps the closest I'd come was a boy at school, whom I'd let kiss me a few times. At the grammar, some of the lessons were mixed and David had been in my French class. He'd thought he was in love with me during the last summer we spent there and, during those drowsy afternoons, when the high windows were opened and the smell of cut grass made us long for the bell, he would stare at me across the room. His gaze made my skin tingle warmly, and left me conscious of how I sat, how my hair was arranged, and what facial expression I wore. But the truth of it was not love, or probably even lust. What I liked was the way he felt about me, and I'm sure he was more in love with the sudden intensity of his feelings than he was with the girl in the next row.

Now many of my friends – David Gardiner too, in all probability – were married or engaged, or at the very least

courting, yet I had failed to meet anyone. Dora, who was forever trying to persuade me out to meet a friend of whichever man she was currently interested in, teased me gently for being so fussy. My mother, being my mother, was rather more direct.

'You'll be left on the shelf if you don't get a move on,' she said one Saturday, when I had been made to accompany her shopping on our local high street in a north London suburb. 'I've said it before and no doubt I'll say it again, but if you spent less time reading and more time out and about in the fresh air or going to dances, you'd give yourself a better chance.'

I remember we were in the chemist's shop, which was hushed except for my mother's voice and the bell that trilled whenever the door opened. The air smelt of floral talc and carbolic soap, and faintly bitter from the medicines and tonics that were measured and weighed out of sight.

We had an argument then – about lipstick of all the ridiculous things: she wanted me to buy a brighter shade than I could imagine myself wearing. That led to other topics of discord and by the time we were walking home, past the new cafe that had just opened opposite Woolworths, we had returned to the subject of my job and her conviction that I would never meet anyone if I remained in it.

'Why don't you try for work in there?' she said, nodding towards a girl behind the cafe's plate glass, pert in her smart uniform with its starched white collar.

Shifting the bags I was carrying to my other hand, I couldn't rouse myself to reply.

'I know you're a typist in an office in town, and that's all very fancy,' my mother continued, 'but May Butler's daughter Lillian met her husband when she was waitressing and look at her now, with a house in Finchley and a little one on the way.'

Lillian had left school at fourteen and eventually got a job as a Nippy in a Lyons Corner House on the Strand. According to my mother, Lillian had been admired half a dozen times a day by her male customers, solitary men in suits who'd come in for a plate of chops or some tea and toast. Eventually, apparently without much ado, she had married one of them.

'I don't want to be a waitress,' I said wearily.

'You shouldn't turn your nose up at it – you don't earn much more than the ones in the nice places do.'

'Yes, but I –'

'Oh, I know you think you're meant for better things but it hasn't happened yet, has it? And it won't while you're stuck up there with old Mr Marshall.'

What she could not possibly have known was that only a week after that desultory wander around the shops I would at last meet a man I actually desired, someone who would bring the world to life for me, at least for a time. In fact, the circumstances that would throw us together were already in train: an appointment made, a crucial hour already approaching. For it was in Mr Marshall's office – the obscure, dusty office my mother believed had already sealed my spinsterhood – that everything was about to change for me.

As if to further dramatize this episode, to darken the line that marked before and after, he arrived towards

the end of a particularly silent, stultifying day. I remember that he was a little out of breath after climbing the stairs to our small office. A late summer shower was flooding the pavements outside and he brought with him the smell of damp wool and cologne as he came noisily through the door. Mr Marshall heard it crash back on its hinges and came rushing out of his tiny room to greet the new arrival, whom he had obviously been expecting. They made a curious pair: Mr Marshall, an inch shorter than me and probably half a stone lighter, only came up to his visitor's chest.

'Who was that?' I said to Miss Cunningham, after they had gone out to lunch, Mr Marshall not having thought to introduce us. Miss Cunningham was the senior typist and didn't like me very much, perhaps because she knew I didn't aspire to her job.

'Mr Elton? He's too old and too married for you to concern yourself with,' she replied crisply.

After I had made her a cup of tea she relented, unable to resist demonstrating that she knew more than I did.

'He's the new accountant, if you must know. The old one's retired and now we've got him. Bit too sure of himself, if you ask me.' She sniffed and went back to her work.

They didn't return from lunch for two hours, and when they did, Mr Marshall was uncharacteristically flushed, eyes glazed behind his spectacles. Miss Cunningham got up and pointedly opened a window, though I couldn't smell any alcohol on them; only the rain and the new accountant's cologne.

While she was at the window he crossed the room towards me and I saw that his eyes were the same shade

of deep brown as his hair. He didn't have a single feature that stood out as exceptional but they combined in such a way as to make him handsome.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said, his voice low and unhurried. 'I'm James Elton.' He shook my hand. His was warm and dry. 'I've met the lovely Miss Cunningham, of course, but you are?'

'Alice,' I said, more bluntly than I'd meant to because I was thinking about my hand being cold. I was forever cold in that office, regardless of the season. 'Alice Eveleigh.'

When I left work a couple of hours later he was waiting for me in the cafe that I had to pass to reach the Underground. I spotted him before he saw me: sitting up at the window on a stool that looked silly and feminine beneath him. If he hadn't glanced up from his paper at that moment, and raised his hand with a smile, I would certainly have walked on. It would never have occurred to me to tap on the window.

Of course, I didn't know then that he'd been waiting for me; he didn't tell me that until later. Instead, he smiled his easy smile and, when I hesitated, gestured for me to come in and join him. We had some tea and he tried to persuade me to order a slice of sponge cake. We talked about this and that: London, the weather, of course, and what I thought of my job in Mr Marshall's quiet office. I said, rather primly, that I was very grateful to have it and he grimaced, which made us both laugh.

That was the beginning. Shared pots of tea became habitual until one fog-bound autumn evening he appeared out of the shadows as I left the office for the day and

suggested that we had dinner together. It was too filthy a night for a paltry cup of tea, he said. Perhaps we might try this little restaurant he had discovered down a nearby back-street.

Afterwards, on the way to the Underground, he stopped and pulled me towards him. I would like to say I resisted but I simply couldn't. In truth, my face was already tilted up towards him before his lips touched mine. You find that once something like that has happened, it's very hard to go back to how it was before.

He was almost fifteen years older than me. When I was eight or nine, a schoolgirl with pale brown hair cut to the jaw, he was a newly minted accountant. Each morning he took the Metropolitan line into the City, his briefcase unscuffed, his newness such that he had not yet earned a regular seat on the carriage he always boarded.

His wife, when she came along, was a suitable, pretty girl called Marjorie. His domineering mother apparently approved; she and Marjorie's mother played bridge together, I think. He once mentioned in passing that Marjorie was an excellent tennis player, which I found both intimidating and fascinating.

When I met him he was thirty-six, already eleven unimaginable years into his unhappy union. He once said that you would imagine time spent like that would crawl by – the inverse of it flying when you are enjoying yourself. But in fact those years, packed tight with obligation – the tennis doubles and dinner parties and whist drives – had been compressed.

Once, when I think he must have been rather drunk, he confided that Marjorie didn't like the physical side of

marriage much. He was desperately unhappy, he told me, time and time again. They had made a terrible mistake when they got married; they had never really loved each other; the whole thing had been engineered by their mothers.

After that first kiss, I went around in a fug of guilt and excitement. I didn't confide in anyone, not even Dora. I knew that, despite all her casually knowledgeable talk of men, she had never gone beyond a certain point and would never dream of doing so with a married man. You simply didn't, and the boys we had grown up with knew it as well as we did.

When I wasn't with him I thought about him constantly, indulging myself in the delicious agony of it all and mooning about, like a girl in a sentimental song. Precisely like that, in fact: it was around that time that Dora bought a gramophone record of Noël Coward's new song, 'Mad About The Boy', and played it endlessly. Every day I felt queasy as I walked past the cafe on my way home from work – in case he was there, waiting, and in case he never was again.

He didn't appear for three weeks after the kiss and I felt eaten away by misery. When I finally saw him in the cafe one evening, head bent over his newspaper, it was as though the whole world – the sour breath of London's air, the hollow clip of women's heels and the rumble of the Piccadilly line's trains far below – ceased to be. I knew that nothing would have persuaded me to keep walking. I had been a nice, bookish sort of girl, and now I was someone different. I felt as though my life was out of my hands. It was like an attack of vertigo.

I only went to bed with him once, at a hotel. Of course,