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Opening Extract from...

Black Valley

Written by Charlotte Williams

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CHARLOTTE WILLIAMS

BLACK VALLEY

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For John

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PROLOGUE

Llandaff Green is a quiet place. There's a statue of a man in the middle of it, a cleric of some kind, frock-coated and gaitered, with a walking stick in one hand and a pile of papers in the other. He looks as if he's stopped on his way to work to check that all is as it should be in the diocese: in front of him, the crumbling remains of the old castle; to the left, the cathedral spire, poking up out of the hollow below, the crows flying around it; to the right, the road that leads down to the high street, into the bustle of town. He's a Victorian, this gentleman, and he looks out for the type of people he understands and recognizes: the dean, the canon, the chaplain, scurrying down the steps for matins or evensong; the organist arriving to rehearse the choir; the armies of elderly women who make tea, and bring flowers, and tidy and polish, and keep an eye on the visitors; and on Sundays, of course, the parade of portly burghers who arrive to celebrate the Eucharist, and their own good fortune, in this little corner of the city.

Then, of course, there are the heathen folk who have no cathedral business, making for the graveyard and the playing fields and the river that lie beyond it: the fishermen, the dog walkers, the teenage lovers. He keeps an eye on them, too, just

in case there should be trouble. But in truth, very little of note has ever happened up here on the green, apart from that dreadful night during the war when a bomb blasted off the steeple and sent tombstones from the graveyard flying through the village. Order was quickly restored, of course, and since then the even tenor of life has gone quietly on, and in the view of the Venerable James Rice Buckley (1849–1924), it is likely, and highly desirable, that it should continue to do so in the future.

There are occasional newcomers, though, from time to time. They seem out of place, as if they have no business here, strangers from a foreign, modern world. Here's one of them now, driving in from the high street in his shiny silver car, slamming on the brakes, and parking slap in front of the green.

He gets out, this man, barely glancing up, and bangs the car door shut. He's got the hood up on his coat, and he's wearing a scarf over his mouth. He clicks some kind of contrivance. The car lights up and gives a shudder. He walks away quickly, a little too quickly, as if he doesn't want anyone to see him. Furtive. But there's no one here to see him, anyway. The green is deserted.

The Venerable watches him as he goes. He's walking towards the artist's house. She's a bit of a mystery, that one. Grew up there with her family. Nice man, the father, decent fellow. Dead now, and the rest of them moved away. Lives there all by herself, she does; never goes near the cathedral, even though it's just on the opposite side of the road. Lovely house, white, arched, elegant. Where the prebendary used to live. The rowan tree in the front garden is still there.

Lovers, probably. He's seen the artist many a time, crossing the road to go down to the high street. Small, pretty, fair-haired. Doesn't make the most of herself. Always shabbily dressed, in black, or brown, or grey. They don't look well matched, Young Lochinvar and the artist. She's too timid; he's got too much of a swagger. But you can never tell, can you?

Night begins to fall. To pass the time, the Venerable begins to recite the liturgy:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, judge of all men; we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed . . .

The spire of the cathedral glimmers in the twilight. The saints and the gargoyles commune, high up on their stairway to heaven.

. . . We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable . . .

Hang on, here's the man again, coming out of the front door. He's carrying something, something flat and square, wrapped up in his scarf. He walks down the front path, past the rowan tree, and out into the street. He approaches the car, presses his gadget, and it shudders again, its lights flashing. He stops by the Venerable's feet, opens the car door, gets in, and deposits the intolerable burden, if that's what it is, on the floor under the front seat. Then he starts the engine, backs off, and drives away, with a squeal of tyres.

The crows fall silent. There's a rustling of trees in the graveyard. The tombstones huddle together, remembering their wartime night of horror. The gargoyles, high up above them on the flying buttresses, begin to chant. Their voices rise in unison. Malevolent. Blasphemous. The Venerable can do nothing to stop them. He can only listen and watch and wait.

Perhaps someone saw what happened. Someone next door, round the corner, in the high street. Perhaps someone will come.

But no one crosses the green.

MURDER IN LLANDAFF

Police were called to a house on Llandaff Green last night after a local woman, Ursula Powell, was found dead on the premises. Mrs Powell, whose family own a well-known Cardiff art gallery, is believed to have been killed during the course of an armed robbery at the house. The body was discovered by Mrs Powell's daughter, Elinor Powell, who had returned home from a shopping trip in the early evening. Police have launched a murder enquiry, and are currently appealing for witnesses who may have been in the area to come forward. PC Alun Evans commented: 'We believe Mrs Powell may have disturbed the thief, who acted in panic.'

Western Mail, Monday 14 October 2013

1

Jessica Mayhew was lying on the couch in her consulting room. She wasn't thinking about her next patient, who was due to come in at any moment. She wasn't examining her own internal conflicts. She wasn't clearing her mind, gazing up at the play of shadows on the ceiling, readying herself for what the day would bring: a steady procession of lost souls, some in states of emergency, others in the throes of anguish, yet others – the ones she found most exhausting, to be honest – simply playing for time, trotting through their sessions like sheep through a field, their passage marked only by a narrow path leading nowhere. No, Dr Jessica Mayhew, forty-three, psychotherapist, (ex-)wife of one, mother of two, was not thinking about any of this. She was not thinking at all. She was, in fact, fast asleep.

There was a knock at the door. Jessica woke with a start. For a moment, she wasn't quite sure what was happening.

She came to, and jumped up off the couch.

New client. Assessment. Name begins with an E. Jess glanced at her desk and saw, with relief, that she'd already set out her client's file. She grabbed it and walked towards the door, straightening her skirt and smoothing her hair as she went. She was wearing a forties-style tweed skirt and a cashmere cardigan, her

hair up in a loose bun. There was a sour taste in her mouth, as if she'd just woken up in the morning after a night's sleep, yet she could only have drifted off for a few minutes. She'd have to be more careful in future. No more kipping on the couch, even for a second. There was too much going on in her life at the moment. She'd accumulated too much of a sleep deficit.

She hesitated a moment, then opened the door.

The woman who walked in was small. She had pale, luminous blonde hair like a child's, and an almost translucent quality to her complexion. Her frame was slight, her limbs delicate. She was striking, yet there was a timidity in the way she carried herself, as if her marbled beauty was a cross she had to bear, rather than a gift to be treasured.

'Hello.' Jess put out her hand and gave her a welcoming smile. 'I'm Jessica. Jessica Mayhew.'

The woman nodded, but she didn't shake hands, or smile back. There was a wary look in her eyes.

Jessica gestured at the hat stand, and the woman went over and took off her coat. It was a faded navy blue with a muted tartan lining. Rather worn, but stylish in its way.

When she'd finished, Jessica motioned her over to two armchairs by the fireplace that faced each other. Between them was a low coffee table with a box of tissues on it.

'Please. Do take a seat.'

The woman glanced questioningly over at the couch by the window.

'You're welcome to use the couch if you wish, when you come into therapy.' Jessica paused. 'But for an assessment, and in general, actually, I prefer to talk face to face.'

There was a short silence. Jess took in the woman's appearance. Underneath the mac, she was dressed rather scruffily, in a T-shirt, a thin grey sweater, black jeans and ancient plimsolls, worn with

no socks. The muted tones of her clothing only served to accentuate the brightness of her eyes, which were wide, almond-shaped, and a clear, piercing blue. Her cheekbones were high, giving her features a Slavic look. From a distance, her small stature and diffident demeanour might have made her look girlish, but close up, it was obvious that she was well into her thirties. There were lines etched into her temples, running across her forehead, and beginning to drag at the corners of her mouth. She had the type of fair skin that age seems to mark more brutally than those with sallow complexions; or perhaps, Jess reflected, she simply seemed careworn, as if she hadn't slept well, not just the night before, but for a succession of nights in the recent past.

'Actually, I think I'll have to go on the couch. I need to be by the window, you see. I feel safer like that.'

Jess glanced at her notes. There wasn't much information there as yet. The woman's name was Elinor Powell. She'd been referred by her doctor for chronic claustrophobia following a traumatic family bereavement. Jess had tried to phone the doctor to get more details, but he'd always been busy when she'd rung. So that was all she knew so far.

Elinor crossed the room, opened the sash window a crack, and lay down on the couch. She gave a sigh of relief and settled herself.

Jess sat down on an armchair behind the couch. She was slightly put out by her new client. Already, despite her unassuming air, she'd got her own way: she was lying on the couch. As Freud had noted all those years ago, 'the neuroses', as he called them, are not just psychological aberrations; they always have a purpose, making demands that the bearer can't voice directly.

There was a silence. Jess didn't break it. She was curious to see which side of this woman's personality – the timid, or the forthright – would present itself first.

'It's getting out of hand,' Elinor began, staring up at the tree outside the window. 'I really can't go on like this. It started with tunnels and lifts, but then it was cars. Then buses and trains. It's got to the point now where I don't like being shut inside a building. I have to open all the windows, wherever I go. And I've taken to camping outside at night, in a yurt on the back lawn. I can't sleep otherwise.'

'That must be rather cold.'

'It is. But there's nothing I can do. If I'm indoors, anywhere, I feel trapped. And it seems to be getting worse.'

Jess hesitated, unsure of the situation. This was an assessment session, in which she normally felt free to intervene and give her opinion, but since her client was lying on the couch, it felt like a psychoanalytic one. She decided to go ahead all the same.

'Well, that's the problem with claustrophobia.' Jess took care to name the disorder clearly. 'It can be cumulative, you see. Avoiding things you're afraid of can increase your fear in the long term.'

Elinor didn't reply. Instead, she sat up. 'Do you mind if I open the window a bit more?'

Without waiting for a response, she reached up and opened the window as far as it would go. Then she lay back down on the couch again.

This is going to be a rough ride, thought Jess. Her new client had a disconcerting way of doing the opposite of what she'd just advised. All the same, she found herself intrigued.

'Could you tell me a little about how this started?' Jess shivered as a draught of cold air hit her. It was spring, but it still felt like winter. How anyone could sleep outside in this weather she couldn't imagine.

Elinor thought for a moment, gazing up at the branches on the tree. She seemed quite comfortable in the icy blast. Then she took a deep breath, and spoke.

'Four months ago, my mother was found dead in my house. Someone broke in and stole a valuable painting.' Her tone was abrupt, as if she was summoning a toughness she didn't possess. 'I was the person who found her. She'd been beaten about the head.'

Jessica was shocked, but she tried not to show it. There were housebreakers in Cardiff, like anywhere else, but it wasn't the sort of place where, in the normal run of things, people got murdered in the course of a robbery. She cast her mind back. She had a faint recollection of reading about the crime in the paper, or hearing of it on the news, but at the time she hadn't paid it much attention. Now she wished she had.

'The police don't know who did it. They've got no leads, and no witnesses have come forward.' Elinor turned her face to the wall. 'I'm sorry, I still find this difficult to talk about.'

'Of course.' Jessica did her best to reassure her. 'Please, don't feel you need to go into details at this stage.'

This was a tricky situation, Jess knew. According to the latest thinking on post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD as it's known in the trade, beginning any kind of counselling too soon after the event in question can be counterproductive, because the mind responds by 'splitting': that is, using the unconscious part to work through the horror, while the conscious part gets on with the business of living. Asking a client to recall the experience can disturb this delicate process. In terms of the current guidelines, Jessica was on safe ground, because according to Elinor, the event had occurred four months ago. But over the course of twenty years in practice, Jess had seen the guidelines change so often that these days she tended to rely on the unscientific factor of hunch. And her hunch told her that if her new client didn't want to talk about her mother's violent death with someone she didn't yet know or trust, she shouldn't be pushed into doing so.

'I felt pretty bad just after it happened,' Elinor went on, turning her head back. 'I had nightmares, flashbacks.' She paused. 'But I'm sleeping better now, and the flashbacks have gone. It's just the claustrophobia that's bothering me.'

Jess thought about taking her through a checklist of other PTSD symptoms – hypervigilance, difficulty concentrating, irritability – but decided against it. She didn't want to interrupt Elinor's flow.

'I still get anxious when I talk about what happened. And I still can't concentrate. I haven't got back to work yet. I'm a painter, you see. A fine artist, not a house painter. That's what I do for a living.' She paused again. 'Well, when I can make a living.' Her brow furrowed. 'Anyway, that's what I do.'

Jess was struck by the combination of directness and insecurity in her manner. She seemed quite sure of her status as a painter, a fine artist as she called it, yet not altogether convinced that anyone else would believe what she said.

'Elinor – d'you mind if I call you Elinor?'

'That's fine.'

'Well, it's very early days, isn't it?' Jess chose her words with care. 'Your . . . loss . . . was only a few months ago. It's hardly surprising that you should find it difficult to get back to work right away.'

'Yes, but I don't think it's that.' A sudden look of panic came into Elinor's eyes. 'It's a punishment, you see. I'm guilty, and this is my punishment.'

She came to a halt.

Silence fell. Jess knew Elinor would continue, so she didn't break it. And sure enough, after a while, Elinor resumed her story.

'It was my fault. I shouldn't have kept the painting in the studio. Everyone told me that.'

She passed a hand over her brow, and when she took it away, Jess saw that there were tears in her eyes.

'I live alone, you see. I'm single. My mother was just visiting. She had a key; she used to let herself in whenever she wanted.' She paused. 'She always told me the painting should be kept somewhere safe. This would never have happened if I'd listened to her.' Her voice was trembling. 'I feel terribly guilty about her death. I blame myself entirely.'

Jess decided against telling her that feelings of guilt are common among survivors of a tragedy. It was a truism, and besides, she couldn't assume that this woman had no reason to feel guilty about her mother. As yet she knew nothing of their relationship. So instead, she changed the subject.

'You say you find it hard to talk about your mother's death' – Jessica took care not to emphasize the word 'death', but she felt it should be used – 'and I fully respect that. But I'm just wondering if you're ready to come into therapy yet. As I said, it's very early days.'

'Well, I've got to do something. I can't carry on like this, can I?' Elinor's voice rose in anguish. 'I can't travel. I open windows wherever I go.' She furrowed her brow. 'D'you think you can help me?'

There was a pause.

'I don't know.' Jessica was honest in her reply. 'It's up to you, really. You see, the way I work, we'd have to discuss your mother's death. The circumstances surrounding it, your relationship with her, and so on. We would be looking for explanations for your claustrophobia there. But if you're not ready to delve deeper into that, there are other ways of helping you with your problem. Cognitive behavioural therapy, for example. CBT, as it's known. There's a method a colleague of mine uses that's been specially formulated to help people who've been exposed to traumatic events. I can refer you, if you like.'

'No thanks.' Elinor waved a dismissive hand. 'I've heard of CBT. I don't fancy it.'

'Oh?'

'Identifying your negative thoughts. Adjusting them. Making checklists. Writing out worksheets. It sounds tedious.'

Jess was amused. Although she respected her colleague, and knew many clients who had been helped greatly by CBT, she had to admit she felt rather the same. If one was honest, the type of therapy one practised, or chose to follow, was usually more a question of taste than a rational decision, whether or not one cared to admit it.

'But that approach can be very effective,' Jess said, in an effort to be fair. 'It's extremely practical. You'll develop ways of managing your fear, coping with everyday tasks, using various techniques—'

'I don't want that.' There was a note of irritation in Elinor's voice. 'I don't want to make checklists and be given homework to do. That's not the type of person I am.'

Jessica repressed a smile. She was beginning to warm to her new client. There was something endearingly direct about her.

'I suppose, being an artist, I'm more drawn to a Jungian view of the world,' Elinor went on. 'You know, dreams, archetypes, mythologies. That kind of thing. What about you?'

'Oh.' Jess thought for a moment. She didn't want to sound too theoretical, but there was no way round it. 'I'm what's called an existential psychotherapist.'

Elinor frowned, whether in concentration or irritation it was hard to say.

'It's actually quite simple,' Jess continued. 'We're rooted in Freudian theory, but we emphasize choice and freedom, rather than the idea that we're the victims of our past.'

'But I thought psychotherapy was all about the past. Delving into your childhood and so on.'

'It is, to some degree. Of course, the circumstances of our birth, and our upbringing, are vital to our understanding of

ourselves. And, to a greater or lesser degree, we're limited by those circumstances. But every person has a set of choices as to how to respond to those limits.' She paused. She didn't want to come over as didactic. 'And if we're to live full, engaged lives, we have to acknowledge our freedom to make those choices, and act on them.'

Elinor looked puzzled. 'So how would this apply to my situation?'

'I don't really know what your situation is. Not yet, anyway.' Jess hesitated. 'But it's possible that your claustrophobia may be what we call a "call of conscience". It may be trying to tell you that there's something you need to address in your life.' She paused. 'You see, normally we tell a story about our lives, like the one you've just told me. But sometimes our bodies and our minds tell *us* a story, and we need to stop and listen.'

There was a long silence. Elinor looked pensive. Her eyes began to rove around the room. She seemed to be assessing it: the sash windows, the pale green velvet curtains either side of the bay, the antique wooden desk in the corner, the white-on-white Ben Nicholson-style relief on the wall. As the silence deepened, the consulting room seemed to take on a life of its own: peaceful, patient, expectant. The two of them, client and analyst, became aware of the low hum of traffic from the street, the faint rustle of the wind in the tree outside, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Secrets had been revealed here, maps redrawn, the compass realigned, new paths plotted. Jess was familiar with that history, that potency; she sensed it every time she walked into the room. For her new client, it was the first time.

'All right, then.' Elinor's voice finally broke the silence. 'When can I start?'