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Written by Janet Ellis

Published by Two Roads

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www.tworoadsbooks.com
First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Two Roads

An imprint of John Murray Press
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781473625112
Trade Paperback ISBN 9781473625129
Ebook ISBN 9781473625136
Audio Digital Download ISBN 9781473625143

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ
www.hodder.co.uk

Part One

'I am a little world, made cunningly.'

John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*



Chapter 1

London, 1763 – Summer

When my mother lay down to birth that last baby, she was so tired of everything that I thought I could have sold her shoes; surely she'd not get up and need them anymore.

I go to her now only because I should. My glass is full to the brim with sorrow and there is no room for another drop, whether sweet or sour. This is my nineteenth summer, but I have known only thirteen happy years to this date. And that is only if I include my early childhood in the reckoning, back when, in all honesty, I owned no accountable state of mind. Without that, it is a very poor tally.

Her room is heavy with a milky fug, close and thick; the curtains are drawn so that they fold over each other and there is only one lamp lit. It is not the time for visitors or street sellers; carriages go quickly past without stopping. These tall buildings stand opposite their identical counterparts in neat rows, matching window for window and door for door. Castle Street is a dull, brick corridor for any traffic to pass along without distraction. Even if there were people walking outside, they would not cast more than a glance at this unprepossessing house or wonder what is within.

I do not take much notice of the scrap in the cot – it seems a waste of fine linen and lace to me – but I put my hand on my mother's forehead and marvel at the cheery pink of my skin next to her cloudy grey face.

Do not think me harsh that I do not coo at this new-born infant, but I had done much loving with that boy my brother, and he had coughed his last just before his third birthday two years ago, so a lot of good all that loving did *him*. So many affections and songs and jolly games I'd put into him yet they could not keep his breath in his body. I am done with being light towards babies, and had thought my mother the same. After she saw him dead, she got dry and thin, like those cases of the honesty plant – do you know them? – that become crisp as paper, with all the seeds rattling inside.

But she was got again with child, before six months were gone. 'Perhaps another brother is coming!' she said, not meeting my eye. Her stomach had scarcely swelled before that baby had shrivelled and died there.

Only the doctor's coming and going marked her subsequent confinements. Their optimistic beginnings and bitter endings were not mentioned. The possibility of a sibling was no longer discussed. I never saw her sew a single stitch on a tiny garment or prepare the crib.

Once, though, she took my hand and held it to the round, curved front of her dress. A baby's movement pushed the cloth against my palm.

'The quickening!' she said. I pulled away – surely it would not live very much longer and I thought I might feel the very moment of its death if I kept my fingers there.

That baby had died as soon as it breathed air. Perhaps I had felt a fish swimming instead.

But this infant rattled around inside till she was spat out, with her nose in the air to sniff out love. I am cried too empty to hold her or do more than merely glance in the crib. I turned off my tears tight like a tap after my brother's small body was buried, and she will have to put her snout elsewhere for her games and rhymes.

My mother only stares at the ceiling, but she trails one hand over the rail of the child's bed. If I was to think of the mite, it would be to pity it: so new in the world and with only a cold sister turned away and a bony, limp hand dangled above it for company and comfort. Scarcely a week before, despite her full belly, my mother had held me to her and whispered some small sweet words close to my ear. I am woman enough now to carry my own infant, but I am still my mother's child, too. Let's see who is the better fighter for her favours. I'd been tested with such sadness as would try a martyr, and I'd stood straight. This new piglet won't get much room at the trough.

'Annie . . .' There is too much breath in my mother's voice, and yet not enough of it. She dozes, her lids half-closed. She will not remember this moment, I think.

When I was small, my nurse would hold my dark hair from my face and look at me carefully. 'You are not like your mother at all,' she'd say, 'but you are your father's child.' I do not have the flaxen hair of my mother, nor her bright beauty. It is faded now, like a rose, but not with the full-blown heaviness of the flower, but of a bud which was picked too soon and never bloomed.

My mother used to stand with her warm back pressed to

mine, to see where I reached against her. By the time I had grown above her head, she was seldom upright. 'Your eyes are the same colour as my sister's were,' she had told me once. My aunt had died when I was too young to be sad, but I hoped that my brown eyes did not upset my mother. They sat wide apart in my round face and looked at her with love, as her sister's once did. I had wanted to ask if I resembled her or anyone else in the family in other ways, but the moment passed. It was left to me to peruse my appearance and decide that my features were acceptable if not startling, and to note the narrowing span of my waist as I got taller.

The sash is closed tight. There seems hardly enough air in the room for the three of us to share. If my father could brick up all the windows he would – not to put money in his pocket, but because he has no use for light within or the sounds without his house. The curtains and wall coverings are all of a piece: a sprigged, floral pattern that my mother chose many years before. It has darkened with age and neglect, a barren field where once was a cheerful garden.

Her bedroom aches with my mother's weariness. If she is weary now, it is as much with what's in her heart as with the struggle of birth. I'd sat in the room below while she laboured, watching my father's face, while above us there were sounds that made me blush. He didn't flinch at my mother's grunts and low groans, neither did he smile at the small cry that followed. He only met my eye when the nurse, Grace (though why is she called that when she has none?) a silly red-faced girl not much older than I, tapped at the door and opened it wide as her fingers were still knocking.

'You have a daughter, Sir,' she said, important with news.

'I have two daughters then,' my father said, looking at me all the while. She laughed as though this was wit of the highest order, but I'll tell you why he didn't smile. Two daughters living and one son dead! What use is that to him? Why does this pig-faced idiot clap her pudgy hands together to applaud his achievement? He must rise from his chair and climb the stairs to hold a wife he doesn't love and admire a baby he doesn't want. My father has never exchanged a single private thought with me, yet I know what I know as surely as if he'd written a treatise.

I almost wished the nurse were a friend to me, so that we could share some confidence about his failings, while he was adding up ours. But then I looked at her face and thought myself better alone. No one but a fool could look so happy in a miserable house, could they? The mice here probably throw themselves on the traps for a quicker end.

The baby stirs and cries, and my mother rouses herself a little and picks the infant up from the crib. They are all white cotton and ribbon together, my mother unlacing her nightgown to free her dug. I look away. I do not want to watch this intimacy and the thought of it makes me squeamish. Tiptoeing to the door, I turn to see my mother's head bent over her task. I do not bid her farewell, only stop the door's slam with my arm so I do not attract her attention. In truth, the tableau disturbs me. The sounds of nursing and the sight of my mother's bare skin make all my thoughts complicated. For a moment I cannot tell which of them I envy more, but this envy makes my blood run hot.

The nurse stands on the landing, her face set as usual in a smirk. 'Evelyn,' she says. 'That's pretty, isn't it?' I don't answer,

which she takes for ignorance. She is right. 'The baby's name,' she simpers. 'After her grandmother, your mother tells me.'

If I didn't think it would cause more trouble than it was worth, I'd box her ears for that. Cuff! for knowing the child's name before I did. Cuff! that I didn't think to ask what my sister was to be called. Cuff! for even mentioning my grandmother to me. I could cope with her tears, and watch the red weals rise on her face all right, indeed I would relish the sight, but if she prattled to my father or stormed out of the house I'd suffer for it worse than she her short smacking.

So I say nothing. From downstairs comes a hoarse 'Dinner!' and the nurse nods her head to me a little, remembering at last that she is in our employ, and pushes open my mother's door.

'Let me take her when you are done.' She sings the words almost, adding 'ohs' and 'ahs' and 'nows' as she goes about her business. Then there is rustling and murmuring, the mingled noises of these women and that child and I go away from what troubles me.

My father is already seated at the dining table, a large wodge of linen at his throat, a glass of wine in his hand. I suppose we cannot afford another maid, or my father will not pay more likely, so the cook serves on. Which is a shame for her, as she must listen to my father's nightly abuse of her offerings. She is supposed to take off her apron before bringing in plates and bowls, as if to mark her transition between stove and table, but oftentimes forgets and it amuses me to see her try and turn her apron behind her back with one hand, as she balances her load with the other. Tonight she has realised once more that she still wears the thing and attempts to roll all the fabric up and tuck

it in to the waist of her skirt while aiming to distribute the plates between us.

My father regards her with contempt. 'Just bring the food, Jane.' He doesn't rise to help her, or include me in what might be a shared amusement.

'Oh, Mr Jaccob,' Jane says, 'this baby arrived safely, thank the Lord. Does she resemble her mother?'

'Does this resemble meat?' My father grunts his words, pushing at the meal in front of him with his knife. 'What grey beast died for this, eh, Jane? And how long it must have suffered, for no amount of good living would lead to this quantity of gristle in death. And you have added to its misery with poor gravy and sad potatoes.'

Jane bobs, and tucks and pulls at her wretched apron, and altogether makes such a complete show of being a miserable woman that I don't like to look at her. Bright spots of shame paint livid colour on her cheeks, and her voice trembles.

'I swear I cooked it as usual, Mr Jaccob, but I'll tell the butcher's boy of your displeasure.'

'You are a gang together, a pair of idiots: one who can't sell good meat, the other who can't prepare it.' He continues in this vein for a long time, all the while shovelling in and chewing at the accursed stuff. The linen at his throat turns brown with gravy, he sometimes grabs at the folds of material and swipes them over his chin and cheeks. I wonder, if Jane were to leave the room, might he subside like a pricked bladder and grow quiet? But she stays and stands and falters and apologises and tries to change the subject. The one probably needs the other, I think: this nightly ritual, their ridiculous conversation.

I stare at the floor. The painted petals and leaves have worn

thin under my feet to reveal a dull, dark green beneath. In the church the stone stairs bow under the footsteps of the pious, as they all take the same path to prayer. I am very far from good thoughts and proper observance as I sit here, scuffing the floor cloth into a smear, day after day. The heavy furniture seems to close in. I think it must creep towards the middle of the room when I'm not looking, like the child's game.

Do not imagine that I have lived only in this endless winter. The sky above my head was not always the colour of an old man's snot. There was a time of such bright light you would have to shield your eyes and, until you were accustomed to the glare, you would be only able to make out shapes. But then you'd surely look twice to make sure you were seeing what you thought you saw. That man bending to swing a little boy onto his shoulders then imitating a whole farmyard to make him laugh? That was my father. That woman singing as she went about her day or making a dolly walk and talk and say nonsense to entertain a child? Not her twin, but my mother . . .

* * *

My mother was so often confined to her bed when I was a child that I barely remembered her being well. The cause of her indisposition was never mentioned to me, although I heard whispered clues and decided the reason for myself. *'Poor woman, another one died.' 'Will she ever carry to term?' 'Burn that little shawl, she won't want to see it again.'*

The changing for the better happened slowly. My mother's swelling stomach was mildly interesting and I stood in front of my glass with a cushion under my petticoat to see how it suited me. But I did not imagine it would mean a new person in the

world. When he arrived, the baby was swaddled not only with blankets and quilts, but with his own mucky binding. The crusted rime at his ears, the posseting puke that dried rancid and hard, his caterwauling insistence on attention and comfort all reminded me more of young animals than people. I asked when he would talk or play and was met with patronising answers. 'All in good time, Anne,' or, 'Nature will decide.'

There was an energy in the house, though, which was all the more surprising as its little instigator did nothing. He only fed and slept and followed each large face with his new eyes as they bent over his cot to greet him. But I saw my father stand aside to let Jane pass instead of colliding with and then rebuking her. I watched him touch my mother's arm lightly and deliberately as he asked after her day. I noticed her glance at him when in company and how warmly he returned her look. I was not jealous of the effect the infant had, but only curious as to how this little body, that could only lie flat on his back, could cause it.

'Give him this toy,' my mother held out a little dog made of soft cloth. I turned it round to inspect it. I knew it to be a thing I had played with. It had two cross-stitch eyes and a small bell hung from its ribbon collar. I shook it to hear the familiar little jangle. My mother watched me, pensive. 'My Anne. You are fourteen, you're nearly a grown woman. It seems only moments since this was your toy and you crawled to fetch it.' My mother went to take it back, but I turned to the cot and waggled it about over the baby. My brother did not look at this offering, but instead fixed his lidless stare on me. And smiled. As if his mouth instructed his whole body, he poured his good feeling from the length of him. His toes pointed in joy and he curled and waved his fists with happiness. I could not help but smile

back, which only increased his response. Like idiots, we gazed at each other and prolonged this wordless exchange.

'He smiles at you!' I did not need my mother's confirmation. I put my fingers to my brother's little hand and he gripped as hard as his untested muscles allowed, which was strong enough to squeeze my heart, too.

After that I could not wait, on waking each day, to go to him. I propped pillows behind his back before he could sit alone, to show him more of the world. I made sounds in his ear until he could copy them. I held his arms as he sat on my lap and clapped them together to hear him laugh as his pudgy palms met. I was moved to tears by the beauty of the place where his neck joined his back. I marvelled at the unworldly softness of his skin. I curled the immature tresses of his downy hair till they stood from his head like a halo. 'Where is Anne?' I played peekaboo with him, hiding my face behind a scarf. 'Am!' he said confidently when I reappeared. I crouched in front of him to encourage his steps and applauded even when he toppled. I will not catalogue all his achievements but you can be sure they followed the path of any such infant. He learnt steadily and rejected or accepted what he needed to build him. He was probably no cleverer and no more beautiful than others. I have seen wrists as plump and heard sounds as sweetly gurgling since. But he filled me as completely and lightly as feathers in a quilt.

If my mother seldom vouchsafed a confidence or asked me my thoughts, I forgave her for this boy was more than reparation.

I could not imagine the world would ever change and indeed, on the day that it did, the sun rose as always, in mocking imitation of a better morning.

My father stood outside the nursery like a guard and put his hand across to prevent me passing. 'The doctor comes,' he said, keeping his eyes to the floor.

Panic laid cold hands on my skin as if I stood there naked. I had hardly enough wind in me to speak. 'What is wrong?' I whispered.

'A fever. Your mother found him ailing,' he said, still looking away.

'Did he not cry out?' I said. If my brother had spoken 'Am!' in his quietest voice, I would have heard him and scampered to his side.

'He was very brave and waited till she came,' my father said. I thought this elision of illness and courage very stupid. When he was well, I would teach him to fear every sniffle.

'Let me past,' I pushed at my father's barring arm.

'There may be a contagion,' he hissed, but he let me win the contest.

The room within was muted with fear. My mother sat by his bed and Jane was pressing a flannel in a basin. I could hardly focus on him when I looked to see. His eyes were closed but when I called his name, he opened them to reveal a glassy stare.

'He sees angels already,' said Jane. I struck her hard on the arm. She winced, but did not make a sound. My fingers were still sore with the blow when I put them to his forehead. It was ridiculously hot.

'Where is the doctor?' I said, not taking my hand away though I hated what I felt.

'He comes, he is sent for,' my mother said, her voice high with anxiety.

The doctor's arrival caused the curtains to flutter and the

candle flame to shake, but I stayed immobile as a statue. He bent over him and rubbed at his chest and put a tincture under his tongue, but my brother slipped further from my desperate arms.

'He sleeps,' the doctor pronounced, though there was no discernible change in him. 'You should rest, too,' he turned to my mother. She shut her eyes at once, as though he hypnotised her with this instruction.

Jane led her from the room. 'Tell us if . . .' she left her sentence unfinished, but the words she didn't say reverberated as if she had shouted them.

The doctor began to unscrew yet another vial of liquid. 'Leave!' I said to him. He did not question the command. His very obedience demonstrated what little more he could do. When we were alone, I began to speak to my brother but my voice trembled and I stopped. I did not want him to hear me falter and then feel afraid. His breathing was so shallow I could not see any movement in the bedding. I put a fingertip to his nose. If I pinched his nostrils even lightly together, he would fade like a shadow exposed to light. His suffering would cease. His eyes snapped open and he read my intent. I snatched my hand away. I began to make promises to the empty air if he could live. Before I could even say *Amen*, his last breath failed to reach his tiny heart.

I would not leave his side. Though my mother begged and my father admonished, while the doctor left me medicine and Jane brought food that I did not touch, I stayed. It was not until the vicar arrived, kissing his jewellery and making signs that I got to my feet. He blessed the small body, muttering of heaven and pure souls. He wrapped him in a linen shroud that would

cling more diligently than his clothes ever did, for he wriggled and kicked in life. My mother and father knelt with clasped hands and closed eyes to pray to their God, but I only watched a man tend a corpse.

The day after he was buried, although I lay with a pillow to my head to muffle my thoughts of him in the earth, I could not help but hear my mother and father raise their voices to each other.

'There is still love.' My mother was pleading. She sounded like a little girl. 'There will be other children.'

'I wanted my son,' my father said. I hugged the pillow tighter but his words leaked in.

'And we still have Anne. We still have each other,' the child-woman said. 'You still have me.'

He roared his answer. I would never be deaf to it. 'You are not enough!' And again, '*You are not enough*.'