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Opening Extract from...

A Life Discarded

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Published by Fourth Estate

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PART ONE

Mystery

1 2001: The Skip

One breezy afternoon, my friend Richard Grove was mooching around Cambridge with his shirt hanging out, when he came across this skip



Only partially filled, it was resting in an old yew hedge, on a stub of dead-end road. Richard squeezed between the scuffed yellow metal and the hedge and wandered through what had once been an old orchard. Tree stumps, sliced off at ankle height, glistened smoothly in the sun. Pear and apple branches were piled up beside a wood-chewer, waiting to be turned into chips. Beyond this cleared woodland, spreading like a pool of bleach among the grass and flowers, was a building site. A large Arts and Crafts house was being modified. The roof had gone. Underneath, two stories of red brick walls were cordoned off by corrugated metal fencing. It seemed the property was being exposed to the wind for a good rinse-out. A lot of ancient professors live in this part of Cambridge, dozing on their laurels, shuffling about in worn-out cars. They give the place a musty feel; it needs the occasional airing.

Although Richard had lived nearby for most of his life, this

house was so well hidden behind hedges and trees that he hadn't known it existed. By pressing his eye against a gap between the metal fencing posts, he could see the remains of a porch. The wooden column holding up the roof had been snapped, like a knee.

Richard returned to the skip, peered in and became suddenly agitated. Something inside had caught his attention. He stood on tiptoe in an attempt to put his arms over the top and reach down, but his arms weren't long enough. With his shoulders still hunched over the metal, he slid along the skip until he reached the low end and, after looking around unsuccessfully for something to stand on, tried to tip himself over the edge and slide in – but he wouldn't tip. Professor Richard Grove is an energetic man, a world expert on the ecology of islands, and always eager to get himself dirty; but he's a little plump. Defeated by the skip, he ran off. Half an hour later he reappeared with Dr Dido Davies who is thinner.

Dido clambered in easily (by the tipping method) and slid down the metal slope until her feet rested on a large box. A plastic bath panel split and gave way. Dido dropped half an inch. Something collapsed with a metallic sigh. Dido fell to her hands. Dido – a historian, an award-winning biographer, author of two sex manuals under the pseudonym 'Rachel Swift' and the only person in the world who knows where the bones of Sir Thomas More are buried – could see exactly what had made Richard so excited.

Clustered inside a broken shower basin, wedged into the gaps around a wrenched-off door, flapping in the breeze on top of the broken bricks and slates, were armfuls of books. They had been scattered across the rubble exultantly and anyhow. 'They couldn't have been there more than an hour or two, they looked so fresh,' remembered Dido years later. 'It felt as though

the person who had thrown them might be still in the garden, but Richard and I looked – nobody was there. I thought, has someone thrown them away because they've gone loony? Has someone come along after the owner has died and tossed the books out in a fit of rage?'

The discovery reminded her of a story about the Cambridge literary critic Frank Kermode. 'Kermode was moving house, and he had this incredibly important library, all first editions, all signed to him by the authors, all boxed up. But somehow he accidentally gave the boxes to the dustbin men instead of the removal men, and this very personal collection was carted off. He never saw the books again. It was the same with these books in the skip: a feeling of wronged privacy. It was so obvious that they shouldn't be destroyed. You wanted to pick them up. It was nothing to do with keeping them. Just to save them, because whoever had thrown them in the skip had run off only a few minutes ago. These books were alive.'

A few of the thinner volumes had royal emblems embossed on the front:



Others were cheap



exercise pads in stale grey-blue. Many were plain, good-quality hardbacks in

old-fashioned, accountancy-office red, stamped with gold letters: 'Heffers, Cambridge'. Others were thin and black, with illustrated boards that might have been based on neurological patterns, and therefore belonged in a medical lab. There were jotters of the sort 1950s policemen brought out of their breast pockets, and small, plump ledgers that I last remember seeing in my school uniform shop in the 1970s. Some of the books had been partially destroyed by water that had long since dried out. The corners of the paper stuck in blocks; stains of rotting metal seeped into the pages from the staples. A box, big enough to contain a head, had landed further into the skip and split with the impact. Inside were more volumes, with covers ranging from post-war sugar card to glistening, oily hardbacks that looked as though they'd been bought that morning. The box had jaunty green print on the sides: 'Ribena! 5d off!'

A chalky notebook that Dido picked up broke like chocolate. Inside, the rotted pages were filled with handwriting, right up to the edges, as though the words had been poured in as a fluid.

It was a diary.

All the 148 books in the skip were diaries.