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Opening Extract from...

The Primrose Path

Written by Rebecca Griffiths

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the primrose path

Rebecca Griffiths

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For my husband, Steven.
Without you, there would be nothing.

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Primrose Path: the pursuit of pleasure, especially when bringing disastrous consequences.

The Oxford English Dictionary

Fifty Years Before

An August moon pokes a white tongue of light through a gap in her bedroom curtains. Fear, hard as a pebble, fills her dry little mouth as she hears the clunk of a gate swinging wide on to Cwm Glas' yard. Her father and brothers, back from The Bear in Bryngwyn after last orders. Beth pulls the covers tight around her, fastens the top buttons of her nightdress and waits. Waits for their revelry to mutate into its usual blackness.

At any moment, heavy boots on the stairs, and Emyr will come. He is the first in line these days, not her father any more; he stopped when she started to bleed. She thinks of the barn and wishes she was there. Safe in there. Climbing the wood-worm-riddled ladder with Dai who pedals over the fields to see her. The two of them squeezing down between mildewed bales of hay and sacks of feed to lie with her bruises, listening to the breath of Tiny, her little dog, as he watches for trouble through the timber slats in the floor.

Her body stiffens and slackens with each crash and thud from below. Fingers, raw from household chores, respond to the rise of aggressive shouting by pressing their nails into the flesh of her palms, leaving behind the little half-moons that she won't turn the light on to see. Sometimes she stares at her

hands and is shocked just how like her dead mother's they are. Chapped and red and larger than they should be for her size, because she has always been told she is small, it is another thing they beat her for. As if being small for her age is somehow her fault. Like the turn in her eye is her fault.

The door to her bedroom is thrown wide. A drunken Emyr, silent and swaying, engulfs the threshold. His bulk silhouetted by the bald bulb on the landing. Terrifying, the vacant look she knows will be on his pig-pink face, and the orange down carpeting his over-developed forearms. Conscious of his weight balancing at the bottom of her bed, Beth pulls her bare feet under her and hears the sucking of heels as boots are pulled off, the rustling of clothes and unzipping of his fly as he pushes free of trousers that stink from years of dealing in sheep shit and afterbirth. She won't fight, any more than she will cry, as he rips away the flimsy bedcovers and yanks up her nightdress to expose her underdeveloped fourteen-year-old body. The days of crying and fighting are gone. Learning to detach herself from the shame of it long ago, she takes her mind elsewhere.

Emyr doesn't take long this time, and she prays, alone again in the dark, for Rhys, Wynn and Idris to be as quick. And turning her head to the side to wait for them, pushing her hot little face into the musty-smelling pillow for the comfort that isn't there, she blinks on to the dark, feeling how strangely dry her eyes are.

1

Present Day

She will try it out. This place that has taken her the best part of a day to travel to. See how things lie in the spring. It is the only way to tackle her past, the root of her trouble. At least this is the idea. And on this, her first night, she has her back curved low over the side of the bath trying not to splash the indelible Nice'n Easy dark-brown hair colourant on the pristine white-tiled surround. Feeling a great deal safer now she is going by a different name, she hopes dyeing her hair will keep her safer still. The collar of the top she should have taken off before she started feels wet and cold against her skin, but still she keeps at it: rinsing and rinsing; the shower hose held high above her head as soft Welsh water, which doesn't seem to want to clear, cascades through what was, until twenty-five minutes ago, beautiful golden hair. She watches it swirl away down the plug hole, hoping it will take her past life with it.

To stop her mind loitering on things she would rather forget, she chants her new name over and over, wanting to familiarise herself with its sound: 'Rachel Wright … Rachel Wright.' Envisaging the hoops and swirls of the signature she has been practising. Her voice quivers with the pressure she puts it under and it would be embarrassing if anyone could hear, but

who's listening? There is no one for miles, so what does it matter? All that matters is not thinking. Not about that. Her natural colouring has worked as a device to define her, scheming away behind the scenes, trouble's harbinger. Even her mother, someone supposed to be on her side, said that if you had the good fortune to be born blonde and honeyed-skinned with deep-blue eyes as she had been, then you deserved all you got. If you stood out from the crowd and made people look at you without trying, then it served you right and you couldn't complain when it made bad things happen.

She stops chanting the name. It isn't working. The vivid pictures she keeps of her past are too strong and, attached to a lengthy ribbon, they threaten to tug her back to the place from which she is trying to disentangle herself. Downstairs, something rattles. She turns the taps off to listen. A cow maybe, rubbing against the gate, except the nearest cows are at least two fields away at Cwm Glas farm. The wind then, she decides. The wind bumping up against the thick velvety blackness outside. A blackness she never knew in London. When it dropped down over her recently converted barn it was the biggest shock of all. For there are no street lights here. There is nothing here.

She shuts her eyes and reaches blindly for the little bottle of conditioner. Clumsy in its complimentary plastic sheath, her hand catches a corner of the box and the contents slip down inside the bath. Forced to look, she reads the word Clairol in letters spaced out along the top of the packet.

Claire.

The benign face of her ex-husband's new wife, the stepmother of her now thirteen-year-old daughter, floats into view.

Splashing it away, she untwists the lid of the bottle that tempted her into being 'a shade braver' as she scanned the shelves at the Boots outlet in Paddington station. She squeezes

some conditioner on to her palms, massages it through and waits, eager for the glassy shine the six-quid's worth promised.

Finished at last, she strips off the polythene gloves and kneads the flesh of her lower back. This wasn't the best thing to do. Not after all the lugging and lifting she had done once RiteMove had gone. She picks at the image of the brace of big-bellied fifty-somethings, sees again their synchronised sweating and matching baby-blue Aertex shirts as they shifted from foot to foot in her kitchen. Complaining about leaving the removal van unattended in a virtually traffic-free lane, they had left her with most of the heavy stuff to shift on her own. 'It's all right,' she'd said, refusing to engage with their disgruntled expressions. She flapped them away. 'Off you go. I can manage.'

Nothing new there. Managing is something she has always done, there being few people in her thirty-six years, aside from her father, that she could rely on. But it is such a mediocre word, *managing* – as if in the achievement of it you are only half doing a job. She had mulled this over while assembling the bed. A bed she had been assured by the person taking her booking and credit card payment over the phone was going to be put together for her on delivery. She should try clawing some of her precious inheritance back; it isn't as if she has it to waste. But she won't, this move to Wales is supposed to be a fresh start, one free from negativity and, smiling, she consoles herself with how she at least made them carry the double mattress up the stairs.

2

Idris Tudor could have sworn the girl had long blonde hair when he first saw her. But watching her now, on her walk up the steep sheep track on the opposite hill, he sees it is dark and cut shorter.

He shifts his bulk from his position behind an upstairs window and lets his breath steam the already smeary glass. Careful, he doesn't want his binoculars touching the curtains, not because they are fly-encrusted things no one has bothered to change since his da was alive, but because he fears any movement, even from this distance, could alert the girl to him. But he needn't worry, for Idris to be seen is near-on impossible. The girl is too far away for a start, and no one but Evans the Post thinks to come along this stretch of tapering lane. It doesn't lead anywhere.

He picks at a boil on the side of his neck but can't get a purchase. Inspecting his chewed-down fingernails he decides they aren't equipped for the job. Shame, he thinks, his gaze refocusing on her nice round arse as she makes her climb in tight-fitting jeans. He preferred her blonde. Blondes are more his thing. A good-looking bit of stuff though, nevertheless. Dead classy for around here, and he wonders, not for the first time, where she's come from and why she's living on her own. Whatever her reasons, she's certainly an improvement on the types he meets on overnight trips to Somerset with his haulage business.

Idris has never had any luck with women. He didn't once have a girlfriend at school, not that he attended school for long; hating the discipline of the classroom, the hierarchy that was the playground, he steered well clear of girls. He had hoped things would improve when he got older, that was why he and his brother Wynn signed up with that dating agency in Llandafen. But to his crashing disappointment, it was still only the ugly old trouts he got to mingle with there. It's about time he had something better.

Repositioning his binoculars on the girl who is pacing it out over the hill, the strawberry mark on the side of his face growing hot with excitement, he shivers with delight. Safe enough within his hidey-hole to drink her in at leisure. *Brrrr*. He shakes himself, vigorous as a big wet dog, setting his jowls wagging. Even in her wellingtons and anorak this one looks the business. And he wonders, not for the first time over the past couple of days, what he can do to get close to her.

3

The doorbell goes at the exact same time Jennifer D'Villez lifts the telephone to her ear.

'Oh, *Lynette* – hello.' Slightly breathy, she presses the palm of her other hand to her forehead in a gesture suggestive of a headache. 'Sorry, d'you mind waiting? I've got someone at the door.' She sets the receiver down with a neat little click on the lacquered mahogany telephone-table seat once belonging to her mother.

It is Mr Antonelli. The gardener. His pink-ringed eyes giving Jennifer the once over before looking past her and into number seventy-seven's exquisitely furnished hall.

'I told Mister D'Villez I come by this week – tidy before frost.' His Neapolitan accent is strong, despite living twenty years in the London Borough of Haringey with views of Canary Wharf.

'Go ahead,' she offers, not filling him in on what has happened to Mr D'Villez in the meantime. 'You know where everything is, I'm sure.' And dropping a bunch of keys into his fat little hand, she hopes one of them will unlock her late husband's shed. 'I'll bring you out a cup of tea.'

'Very nice, missus.'

He shuffles off round the side of the house and she waits for the customary squeak of the bolt on the gate before going back inside to her telephone.

'Lynette – you still there? Sorry about that, something Donald fixed up.' Jennifer sits. Comfy on the velvet upholstery, she crosses one leg over the other to silently appraise the flattering cut of her new Armani jeans.

'I'm ringing to see how you are?' Lynette Brown – a woman who tries her best to look like that Mariella Frostrup from the BBC, has taken to grinning through her words in the same way too.

Jennifer relaxes a little inside her merino roll-neck. She likes Lynette Brown and with her handicap of under-five, she is the perfect golfing buddy. 'Oh, you are sweet to think of me. I'm doing all right, you know … keeping busy.' Jennifer doesn't elaborate on how she's made a start on clearing out her late husband's things, waking as she did with ideas of how to claim back what has always been known as Donald's Room: a masculine space that, although part of her house, she has never felt comfortable in. 'As I said at Don's funeral, it was a blessing really – him suffering for all those years, poor thing.'

'You heard from Sarah yet?' Lynette asks.

'Not a dicky bird,' she tells the vaguely playful voice. 'To be honest, I didn't think she'd stay, not once probate came through.'

'How d'you feel about that? Donald leaving everything to Sarah, I mean.'

'Well, it was his money,' Jennifer replies stiffly, slightly taken aback by her friend's bluntness; she has never liked discussing money. 'We agreed years ago.' It sums up their closeness, the father and daughter bond I had no chance of penetrating, she thinks, but doesn't say. 'It's great,' she continues, infusing her voice with a brightness she doesn't feel. 'It's given her choices; she's an independent woman now.'

'So you've no idea where she's gone?'

'Not the foggiest,' Jennifer sighs. 'It's an absolute mystery to me.'

'Has she gone to friends, d'you think? Friends you and Donald didn't know about?'

'What friends? Cooped up with us like she's been for the last ten years. Since her split with Spencer and coming back here, it's been a job to get her to leave the house.' Jennifer coughs up a tight little laugh. 'No, sad as it is to say, any friends she had dropped by the wayside long ago.'

'Why don't you try finding her?' Lynette suggests.

'Where would I start?'

'Well, you remember Audrey – Audrey Reardon?'

'Audrey?' Jennifer's mind cartwheels.

'Yes, you know her – red hair, big jewellery, used to play bridge with us?'

'Vaguely, think I might have met her once.'

'Yes, well, she stopped coming, didn't she, when her husband left, and that's what I'm getting at. Big CEO he was, can't remember who for, but anyway, he ran off with his PA. Half his age – shocking business.' Jennifer hears the woman exhale. 'The shit planned it all. One day he was there, the next he'd vanished. Audrey said she came home from shopping and all his stuff had gone. Left her right up the swanny with bills, mortgage, kids' school fees – but this bloke she hired, this private investigator, don't ask me how, but he tracked them down. I could get his number for you?'

'Ooo, I don't know,' Jennifer, unsure. 'Sounds a bit over dramatic; like something off the telly.'

'Have a think about it, it's worth a try.'

'Maybe,' Jennifer remains unconvinced. 'I'll let you know; hopefully I won't have to go that far. There's someone closer to home I want to try first.'

'Oh – who's that then?' Lynette, greedy to know.

'Probably a long shot, I'll tell you if it comes to anything.'

'A shame she couldn't have told you what her plans were, saved you this worry,' the friend coos. 'You and she always seemed so close.'

Did we? Jennifer thinks. Did we really? Her coffee, now cold, has formed a skin not unlike her own: creased, thin, puckering at the edges, but she won't let the fears of her own mortality suck her down. Too much talk of death these past few years. Donald certainly strung his out for long enough. She is free now, free to play her eighteen rounds with the girls without needing to feel guilty about leaving him alone with Sarah. Although hadn't he always preferred to be with Sarah? Wasn't this the problem? Made to feel the cuckoo in the nest the moment she brought their longed for daughter home from the maternity hospital. His golden child. With her beautiful yellow hair, her willowy figure and arresting blue eyes. Jennifer would often look at her and wonder where it was she came from. She has nothing of her – a woman who has to try hard to look this good. If she hadn't given birth to her those thirty-six years ago, she would never believe she was hers.

Lynette is still talking when Jennifer re-joins her and, pulling herself back from wherever she's been, she looks down at her well-manicured hands.

'. . . so I said, I'd do the flowers this week, but if she's going to keep letting us down . . . '

A tapping on the window of the patio doors. Jennifer leans forward in her telephone seat to check it isn't that blackbird throwing itself at the glass again. It isn't. It is Mr Antonelli. Grinning at what he can see past his own reflection and making a T sign with his stubby mud-caked fingers.

Cheeky sod, she thinks, thanking Lynette for calling and ending their conversation with, 'I'll see you next week at the club.'

'*Promise*?' The word, delivered like a slow smile, is squeezed along the cable, down the handset.

'I promise.'

'Try not to worry; I'm sure Sarah'll be in touch when she's settled, and if not, let me know, I'll get the number of that chap for you.'