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The Silent Land

Written by David Dunham

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The Silent Land

David Dunham



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For Melissa and Judith

One

31 December, 1903, Cambridgeshire, England

Rebecca Lawrence reached a count of sixty in her head and slid her finger into the back pages of her mother's diary. Mistaking the diary for a book granted her innocence the first time she'd opened it. She had no argument for innocence now. She checked her mother remained asleep and began to read.

November 29

I deceived my brother today. He'll receive the same lie that Emily did. Whatever pity they would have given me can be shared among others this Christmas. I have enough of my own. There are mornings I wake and for a moment I am free, and then the unhappy truths of life rise up and the time that had seemed endless is taken from me. I'll not allow this disease to reduce me to misery in Rebecca's presence, although I wish I had the courage to bring this trial to an end myself; to end her suffering which I fear is greater than mine. It seems, however, I have been stripped of courage also.

Rebecca turned the page. It was blank. She heard the front door close and her father ask Elsie to bring up a pot of tea. Rebecca put the diary back on the bed and sat still, waiting. Her mother opened her eyes.

'You haven't moved,' she said, smiling weakly.

Rebecca leaned forward. 'I didn't want to leave you. Not until Papa returned.'

'You'll need to leave me this evening, remember?'

'I'd prefer to be here with you.'

'No, you're attending the dance, just as we agreed. Poor Tilly will be lost without you and Mrs Pugh would have already prepared your room.'

Rebecca watched her mother wince as she pushed herself up on to the pillows and felt a rush of guilt for troubling her. She glanced at the bed, suddenly doubting she had returned the diary to its correct place.

There were footsteps on the stairs. Rebecca's mother put her diary under the quilt. She looked Rebecca in the eye and said, 'Everyone is allowed a secret. This is mine, and now it's also yours. Your father need not know about it. Agreed?'

The footsteps came closer. Rebecca's father stepped into the room and smiled.

'You'd be wise to rest a while, Rebecca,' he said, putting down his medicine bag. 'You've a long night of dancing ahead of you.'

'She's considering changing her mind,' said her mother.

'Then she will have to re-consider, won't she?'

Rebecca looked away from her parents and stared at the firelight, searching her mind for an excuse. She wondered if snow had begun to fall. The walk into the village would be too dangerous in snow.

'Come and sit by me for a moment.'

Rebecca did as her mother requested, perching herself on the edge of the bed. Her father sat down next to her.

'You'll disappoint George if you stay at home,' he said, taking Rebecca's hand.

'George?'

'Turner. I understand he's keen to dance with you.'

Rebecca thought of George Turner's fat hands touching her waist and turned to her mother for help. Nothing in her expression gave Rebecca any hope of being excused.

'Your father and I want you to be with your friends tonight,' she said. 'We want you to forget how I am, even for a few hours. Can you try? Please, for me.'

Rebecca nodded reluctantly.

'Perhaps we'll go for a ride in the morning.'

'You really think you're strong enough?'

'Just so long as you promise to forget about me tonight, then I promise I'll attempt riding tomorrow.'

Rebecca kissed her mother on the forehead and stood up. She wanted to draw out the truth about how her aunt and uncle had been deceived. But as she opened her mouth to speak, her mother's eyes began to close.

'Be kind to George, Rebecca,' she said. 'Don't give him false hope, though. That wouldn't be fair.'

Rebecca was escorted to the dance by her father. It was his duty as parish doctor, he said, to make an appearance.

'I'll stay an hour and leave discreetly,' he said. 'I expect most folk will have drunk too much ale to notice.'

The paralysing cold had been shut out of the village hall. The fireplaces were ablaze, and though there were no chairs, there were hay bales against the walls. It seemed to Rebecca that with the exception of her mother, she was in the company of every man and woman in Welney. The piano fallboard was raised and an accordion, drum, and fiddle set in place, but the musicians were yet to begin playing. They were gathered by a cart where Tilly's mother was ladling drink into mugs. She caught Rebecca's eye and winked.

'He's here.'

Rebecca turned. Tilly smiled at her, eager and sweet.

'Who's here?'

'Tom Guest,' said Tilly. 'He arrived home today. George said he plans to stay.'

'You've spoken to George Turner?'

Tilly nodded. 'Tom and he are friends. That means you *have* to dance with George. You will, won't you? Please say you will or Tom will never dance with me.'

Rebecca glanced towards the cart, pretending to ignore what Tilly had said. 'I should say hello to your mother.'

Tilly sighed. 'If you must. But we can't stand about too long. Tom and George are over there.' Rebecca resisted looking away and kept walking. Mrs Pugh opened her arms and embraced her.

'Is your mother here?' said Mrs Pugh. 'I'm desperate for her to try my mulled wine.'

'Mama's resting. She's been a little more tired than usual today.'

Mrs Pugh touched Rebecca's arm. 'I'll keep you a serving to take home. Your mother will soon have colour in her cheeks.'

'Tom glanced at me, Mama,' said Tilly. 'Ever so coy he was. Should I approach him?'

Mrs Pugh frowned. She filled two mugs and passed them to Rebecca and Tilly. 'If a man lacks the courage to approach a young lady then his character is flawed. When you wish to attract a man's attention, pay him no attention whatsoever. Strangely, they seem to thrive on this.'

'But what if Tom's attention is taken by someone else?'

'Tilly, dear, every other lady here is either years away from coming of age, or is married. Unless Tom Guest intends to anger a husband or father, there are only two ladies he can attempt to charm tonight. Rebecca, or you.'

'Then it must be me as George is in love with Rebecca.'

Rebecca raised her eyebrows. 'In love?'

'Of sorts. At least, he's talked of finding a wife. He wants to take her to America.'

'Why would he want to leave the village for America?'

'Excitement, fortune. I'd leave if Tom invited me.'

Mrs Pugh scoffed. 'You most certainly would not. Your home is here in the Fens, just as Rebecca's is.'

Tilly pulled a face. 'Don't say that to George, Rebecca, it might upset him. He might leave early and take Tom with him.'

The young men of the parish approached Rebecca one by one after her father departed. Whenever she was asked about her mother's health she excused herself from the conversation or pretended she could hear nothing above the music. Midnight approached and she had danced with every man, save for George. She caught sight of him running his finger round the inside of his collar as his friends found partners to share the turn of the year with. However uncomfortable she felt at giving false hope, she could not bear to allow George's discomfort to continue. She wove her way through the crowd and tapped his shoulder.

'We seem to be the only ones not dancing,' she said.

George's eyes widened. 'Yes, it seems that way.'

Rebecca said nothing. She braced herself for George's request for a dance.

'How is your mother?'

'I adore this one,' said Rebecca quickly. 'Shall we?'

No sooner had George led Rebecca once round the dancing circle, the music stopped. The fiddle player stared at his pocket watch and began to count down from ten. The count reached five and George's hands remained on Rebecca's hips.

'Four.'

Rebecca glanced down. George's boots, muddied and wide, moved closer to hers.

'Three, two, one!'

Rebecca looked up. George's lips parted.

'Happy New Year!' shouted everyone together.

Rebecca stared at George, waiting for him to find the courage to kiss her. He stared back, saying nothing. As the silence dragged, Rebecca went up on her tiptoes and kissing him on the cheek, said, 'Happy New Year, George.'

George's face lit up. 'And you, Miss Lawrence. Happy New Year.'

Rebecca woke to the familiar feeling of time pressing against her. She pulled back the quilt and got dressed. A note had been pushed under the door. It was from Mrs Pugh.

There's a tin of biscuits on the hall table. I made them extra thick for your father. Don't wait for us to appear.

Rebecca crept downstairs, picking up the tin before she left The Three Tuns by the back door. As she came round the front, a window above opened.

'Fancy your first kiss being with George,' said Tilly smiling. 'You *will* have to sail to America with him now.'

Rebecca frowned. 'That was not a kiss, not a real one, and I'm most definitely not sailing to America with George Turner, or anyone else for that matter.'

Tilly laughed. 'If you insist… Mrs Turner.'

'I am *not* marrying George Turner, Tilly Pugh.'

Tilly laughed again. 'I'm merely teasing. Anyhow, no man will take you away from Welney while I'm living here.'

'Even if you marry Tom?'

'Even *when* I'm married to Tom. He'll propose by the year's end, I'm convinced of it.'

'I think you're still feeling the effects of the wine.'

'Perhaps, or it could be love. You will be my bridesmaid, won't you?'

'Only if you stop talking about George.'

'Agreed.'

'Good, and call this afternoon. Mama will want to talk to you about last night. I'll leave the part about Tom for you to tell.'

'And I'll leave the part about George for you.'

Rebecca scowled. Tilly poked her tongue out at her, waved and closed the window.

The momentary relief of Tilly's good humour gave way and reality hit Rebecca hard. It seemed that while others were waking with hope at what the new year could bring, she could not see beyond her mother's illness. For the present she knew she had to prepare for an interrogation about her evening. Questions from her mother about Tilly and George were inevitable. She resolved to be as truthful as she could be, but reveal nothing of the kiss. It was, after all, not a real kiss.

She left the riverbank and turned down the path that led to River Cottage. At the garden gate she glanced up and wondered if Elsie had been given the morning off as there was no smoke rising from the chimney. She stepped into the hall expecting to find her father carrying a coal bucket. The house was only a little warmer than outside. Rebecca paused at the foot of the staircase, anticipating a sound. Even the grandfather clock was silent.

'Hello?' She waited for a reply. None came and she climbed the stairs. As she reached the landing, she heard the rocking chair by her parents' bed being pushed back. Her father had fallen asleep in it again, she thought. He opened the door halfway.

Rebecca cleared her throat. 'Good morning, Papa. I'm sorry I woke you.'

'Wait in your room, please.'

'Is Mama still asleep?'

'Please.'

'Are you unwell?'

'I'll be with you shortly.'

Rebecca stepped across the landing. The door began to close. 'Papa, what's the matter?'

'Give me a few minutes.'

Rebecca put her foot in the doorway. 'Papa, tell me.'

The door began to open again. Even in the dim light Rebecca could see that her father's eyes were red and swollen.

'Wait in your room.'

Rebecca's lip began to quiver. 'I want to see Mama.'

'Please.'

'Mama?'

'Rebecca, stop this.'

'Mama?'

'Rebecca, please! She's dead… your mother's dead.'

Rebecca dropped the tin. She pushed past her father, falling to her knees at the bedside. Her father's arms came round her. She turned and put her head against his chest, tightening her grip even as her own chest ached with the strain of weeping.

'She's at peace now, Rebecca. Her suffering is over.'

The coffin was placed in the morning-room. The clocks remained stopped, and the curtains stayed closed. The vicar came and said a prayer over Rebecca's mother, thanking God for taking her to heaven while she slept. He passed Tilly and Mrs Pugh on his return to the riverbank. Tilly struggled to talk as she hugged Rebecca, managing only to say she understood her grief. News of the death spread through the parish. Many of the church congregation called. They looked into the coffin, offered their condolences and went on their way. Rebecca sat with her mother throughout the procession of sympathy. On the third day of mourning her father encouraged her to leave the house. She rode for hours across the Fens, all the while fighting the thought of her mother being lowered into a hole

and covered with earth. Snow began to fall. Rebecca felt mocked by its lateness. Had it fallen when she'd wanted it to she would have been at her mother's bedside as she faded, not in the hall, dancing and drinking. She turned for home. As she passed the church she saw two men with shovels enter the graveyard. They stopped and looked back to the far gate. Striding towards them was Rebecca's father. He shouted to them and pointed to a corner of the graveyard. Rebecca wondered if he had chosen the burial spot, or was acting upon instruction.

'…I hope you can take comfort in that.'

Rebecca looked down. 'Comfort in what?'

'In your mother's strength,' said Mrs Pugh. 'She was tremendously courageous. Just as you are.'

I wish I had the courage to bring this trial to an end myself.

The sound of shovels hitting the frozen ground carried across the graveyard. Rebecca stared at her father, certain her memory was playing a trick on her. It occurred to her the house was empty. She could search for the diary without being disturbed. Her father's attention shifted to a woman in black standing at the gate. Even from a distance Rebecca recognised her from a photograph.

He'll receive the same lie that Emily did.

'Do you know her?' asked Mrs Pugh.

'I know who she is, but I wouldn't say I know her.'

'Should I introduce myself?'

'No, not now. Leave them be for a while.'

'If you wish.'

'I should go. Mama's on her own.'

Rebecca stepped under the porch and hesitated. The diary was her mother's secret. To search for it would be a betrayal of trust.

I'll not allow this disease to reduce me to misery in Rebecca's presence.

Rebecca glanced behind her. There was no-one in sight. She breathed in, checked the riverbank again, and went inside.