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Hester's Story

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I will not cry, Hester thought. But the phone call had ended only moments ago and she still felt anguished, stiff with pain. She'd been drawn back, too, to thinking about the distant past, which only made things worse. She told herself: I will answer this young woman's questions about the Wychwood Festival, my childhood and my past life as a ballet dancer and I will not on any account cry. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed in and out slowly, collecting herself in the way she'd learned to do before any performance. Find something – anything – in front of you, she told herself, and fix your gaze on it and you'll keep steady however many times you spin around. The old trick might work for interviews as well as it once did for pirouettes.

'This is the Wychwood Festival's tenth year,' she said. 'Quite an important anniversary, really, and we've got a fascinating ballet premiering here in a few weeks . . . on the sixth of January. It's called *Sarabande* and the music is by my old friend, Edmund Norland. It's being put on by the Carradine Company. There's a competition every year to see who's going to choreograph the ballet and Hugo Carradine is a worthy winner. I'm sure it will be an enormous success.'

'There's a rumour,' said the interviewer, whose name Hester had forgotten (Jenny? Julia? Jean? Something beginning with J. Never mind) 'that Silver McConnell's going to be in it. Is that right? I thought she was going to dance in Paris or Berlin . . .'

Hester suddenly remembered her name as she was flicking through her notebook. *Jemima*. 'I believe she's going to Paris, but it's a Festival tradition to have only ten performances up here at the Arcadia Theatre, so she can fit this in before she leaves. The company arrives on December 27th. It *is* quite an intensive rehearsal period, but everyone seems to enjoy the challenge.'

She forced her lips into a smile. Oh, please, please, she thought, let her stop. Let her close her notebook and leave. Please let there be no more questions.

'I should think that rather cuts into your Christmas celebrations, doesn't it?'

'We don't celebrate Christmas at Wychwood,' said Hester, and realised her mistake even as the words were leaving her mouth. If she didn't move on immediately, Jemima would ask why not, and then . . . Hester couldn't talk about it. Not now and not ever. She found that she was speaking rather more quickly than she normally did, to block any further discussion of Christmas or anything to do with the festivities surrounding it.

'Has George shown you round the Arcadia?' she asked. 'You've met Ruby and George Stott, haven't you? They're such an important part of the Wychwood family. Ruby used to be my dresser, you know, while I was still dancing. I don't know how the Festival would function without them.'

'May I ask you something else, Miss Fielding?' Jemima smiled at Hester, gathering her bag on to her lap as she spoke. Thank God, Hester thought, she's going. She's getting her bag ready. Not long now and then I can be alone again to think. I need to think.

'Yes, of course. Please do.'

'I was wondering . . . I hope you'll forgive me asking, only it's something every one of my readers will be longing to know. Can you say something about why you've never married?'

Hester saw red. It wasn't, she realised with alarm, a figure of speech but something that was literally true. The whole room swam in front of her eyes, as though it had suddenly been flooded with scarlet light.

'Go,' she said, barely able to get the words out at first and then letting them fly from her mouth with an anger she did nothing to disguise. 'Go at once, please. I have never, not through the whole of my career, answered a question like that and I don't propose to start now. This interview is over.'

By the end of this outburst, Hester found she was standing up and pointing at the door. She had a sense of Jemima hurriedly stuffing her

notebook into her handbag and backing out of the room, bent nearly double under the blast of Hester's fury.

As soon as she'd gone, Hester sank into the chair and covered her face with her hands. Oh God, here they come. The tears. If I start crying now, she thought, how will I ever be able to stop?

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Edmund had phoned her only minutes before her interview with Jemima was supposed to begin.

'Wychwood House,' she had said, picking up the phone as soon as it began to ring. Why was it that people always rang you at a time when you couldn't possibly talk? Hester never gave her name out, just in case the caller turned out to be some sort of a nuisance.

'Hester?'

'Edmund! How lovely to hear from you! What a surprise . . .'

In the second between hearing Edmund's voice and speaking herself, before she had time to adjust what she was saying, Hester knew that bad news was coming. Edmund never phoned. He hated the idea of speaking without being able to see the person at the other end. Telephones were, in his opinion, for emergencies only. She imagined a warning vibration on the line, and the moment between dreading and actually knowing spun itself out, stretched and lengthened for second after second, as though the whole world were slowing to near-stillness. But the words came at last, and as soon as she heard them, Hester wished she'd never answered the phone, never admitted that, yes, she was there and ready to hear whatever was coming.

'Hester, darling, I'm sorry,' said Edmund. 'I'm in Vienna. I've just spoken to Virginia. She phoned me from New York. I knew I had to tell you at once. It's Adam.'

'Something's happened to him?' Part of her wanted to say *what business is that of mine? Adam Lennister has been nothing to me for over thirty years . . . why should I care what's happened to him?* but Edmund, as he always seemed to do, guessed what was in her mind.

'I know you haven't been in touch and so forth, but still. I do feel you must know. You might have seen it in the papers tomorrow anyway, and I couldn't bear the thought of you happening on it, just

like that. He's dead, Hester. Adam died yesterday from a heart attack. He didn't suffer any pain, apparently. He was working. In the library of the New York house, because they're always over there for Thanksgiving and Christmas, aren't they? I'm *so* sorry, darling Hester. So sorry . . .'

'Yes,' said Hester. What else could she say? She felt as though all the words she used to know had flown out of her head. Edmund sounded on the verge of tears himself. It reminded Hester of how upset he'd been on the one occasion when they'd really quarrelled. She found that she was clutching the receiver so hard that her wrist and her fingers hurt. Breathing had suddenly become almost impossible, a matter for the utmost concentration. I must say something to Edmund, she thought. He was Adam's best friend.

'Edmund, I don't know what to say. I'm so, I'm so . . .' she managed to stammer, after an effort to move her mouth into the right shape. 'You must be very sad. Would you like to come up here?'

'I'd have adored that, Hester, but I've got to stay here for a couple of days . . . they're doing one of my symphonies and I can't miss it . . . and then of course there's the funeral. I have to go to that. But I'll come straight to Wychwood afterwards. Is that all right? I could get there on the second of January. How does that sound?'

'Oh, Edmund, do come as soon as you possibly can. I can't talk now, because I've got some wretched journalist coming to interview me about this year's Festival.' She laughed, but with no mirth in the sound. 'It's the last thing I feel like doing now.'

'I'll be there soon, Hester. Will you be all right? I'll be thinking of you.'

'I'll be fine. The show must go on, right? I'll see you soon. Goodbye.'

Is this me, uttering such clichés, Hester wondered. *The show must go on.* I don't care, she thought. This cliché is particularly comforting and also true. She believed it. What would become of her if the show *didn't* go on was too dreadful to think about.