The House at Riverton

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Extract

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Ghosts Stir

Last November I had a nightmare.

It was 1924 and I was at Riverton again. All the doors hung wide open, silk billowing in the summer breeze. An orchestra perched high on the hill beneath the ancient maple, violins lilting lazily in the warmth. The air rang with pealing laughter and crystal, and the sky was the kind of blue we'd all thought the war had destroyed forever. One of the footmen, smart in black and white, poured champagne into the top of a tower of glass flutes and everyone clapped, delighting in the splendid wastage.

I saw myself, the way one does in dreams, moving amongst the guests. Moving slowly, much more slowly than one can in life, the others a blur of silk and sequins.

I was looking for someone.

Then the picture changed and I was near the summer house, only it wasn't the summer house at Riverton – it couldn't have been. This was not the shiny new building Teddy had designed, but an old structure with ivy climbing the walls, twisting itself through the windows, strangling the pillars.

Someone was calling me. A woman, a voice I recognized, coming from behind the building, on the lake's edge. I walked down the slope, my hands brushing against the tallest reeds. A figure crouched on the bank.

It was Hannah, in her wedding dress, mud splattered across the front, clinging to the appliquéd roses. She looked up at me, her face pale where it emerged from shadow. Her voice chilled my blood. 'You're too late.' She pointed at my hands, 'You're too late.'

I looked down at my hands, young hands, covered in dark river mud, and in them the stiff, cold body of a dead foxhound.

I know what brought it on, of course. It was the letter from the film-maker. I don't receive much mail these days: the occasional postcard from a dutiful, holidaying friend; a perfunctory letter from the bank where I keep a savings account; an invitation to the christening of a child whose parents I am shocked to realize are no longer children themselves.

Ursula's letter had arrived on a Tuesday morning late in November and Sylvia had brought it with her when she came to make my bed. She'd raised heavily sketched eyebrows and waved the envelope.

'Mail today. Something from the States by the look of the stamp. Your grandson, perhaps?' The left brow arched – a question mark – and her voice lowered to a husky whisper. 'Terrible business, that. Just terrible. And him such a nice young man.'

As Sylvia tut-tutted, I thanked her for the letter. I like Sylvia. She's one of the few people able to look beyond the lines on my face to see the twenty-year-old who lives inside. Nonetheless, I refuse to be drawn into conversation about Marcus.

I asked her to open the curtains and she pursed her lips a moment before moving on to another of her favourite subjects: the weather, the likelihood of snow for Christmas, the havoc it would wreak on the arthritic residents. I responded when required, but my mind was on the envelope in my lap, wondering at the scratchy penmanship, the foreign stamps, softened edges that spoke of lengthy travails.

'Here, why don't I read that for you,' Sylvia said, giving the pillows a final, hopeful plump, 'give your eyes a bit of a rest?'

'No. Thank you. Perhaps you could pass my glasses, though?'

When she'd left, promising to come back and help me dress after she'd finished her rounds, I prised the letter from its envelope, hands shaking the way they do, wondering whether he was finally coming home.

But it wasn't from Marcus at all. It was from a young woman making a film about the past. She wanted me to look at her sets, to remember things and places from long ago. As if I hadn't spent a lifetime pretending to forget.

I ignored that letter. I folded it carefully and quietly, slid it inside a book I'd long ago given up reading. And then I exhaled. It was not the first time I had been reminded of what happened at Riverton, to Robbie and the Hartford

sisters. Once I saw the tail end of a documentary on television, something Ruth was watching about war poets. When Robbie's face filled the screen, his name printed across the bottom in an unassuming font, my skin prickled. But nothing happened. Ruth didn't flinch, the narrator continued, and I went on drying the dinner plates.

Another time, reading the newspaper, my eye was drawn to a familiar name in a write-up in the television guide; a programme celebrating seventy years of British films. I noted the time, my heart thrilling, wondering if I dared watch it. In the end I fell asleep before it finished. There was very little about Emmeline. A few publicity photos, none of which showed her true beauty, and a clip from one of her silent films, *The Venus Affair*, which made her look strange: hollow-cheeked; jerky movements like a marionette. There was no reference to the other films, the ones that threatened such a fuss. I suppose they don't rate a mention in these days of promiscuity and permissiveness.

But although I had been met with such memories before, Ursula's letter was different. It was the first time in over seventy years that anyone had associated *me* with the events, had remembered that a young woman named Grace Reeves had been at Riverton that summer. It made me feel vulnerable somehow, singled out. Guilty.

No. I was adamant. That letter would remain unanswered.

And so it did.

A strange thing began to happen, though. Memories, long consigned to the dark reaches of my mind, began to

sneak through cracks. Images were tossed up high and dry, picture-perfect, as if a lifetime hadn't passed between. And, after the first tentative drops, the deluge. Whole conversations, word for word, nuance for nuance; scenes played out as though on film.

I have surprised myself. While moths have torn holes in my recent memories, I find the distant past is sharp and clear. They come often lately, those ghosts from the past, and I am surprised to find I don't much mind them. Not nearly so much as I had supposed I would. Indeed, the spectres I have spent my life escaping have become almost a comfort, something I welcome, anticipate, like one of those serials Sylvia is always talking about, hurrying her rounds so that she can watch them down at the main hall. I had forgotten, I suppose, that there were bright memories in amongst the dark.

When the second letter arrived last week, in the same scratchy hand on the same soft paper, I knew I was going to say yes, I would look at the sets. I was curious, a sensation I hadn't felt in some time. There is not much left to be curious about when one is ninety-eight years old, but I wanted to meet this Ursula Ryan who plans to bring them all to life again, who is so passionate about their story.

So I wrote her a letter, had Sylvia post it for me and we arranged to meet.

The Drawing Room

My hair, always pale, is now flossy white and very, very long. It is fine too, finer it seems with each passing day. It is my one vanity – Lord knows I haven't much else to be vain about. Not any more. It has been with me a long time – since 1989, this present crop. I am fortunate indeed that Sylvia is happy to brush it for me, oh so gently; to plait it, day in, day out. It is above and beyond her job description and I am very grateful. I must remember to tell her so.

I missed my chance this morning, I was too excited. When Sylvia brought my juice I could barely drink it. The thread of nervous energy that had infused me all week had overnight become a knot. She helped me into a new peach dress – the one Ruth bought me for Christmas – and exchanged my slippers for the pair of outside shoes usually left to languish in my wardrobe. The leather was firm and Sylvia had to push to make them fit, but such price respectability. I am too old to learn new ways and cannot abide the tendency of the younger residents to wear their slippers out.

Face paint restored some life to my cheeks, but I was careful not to let Sylvia overdo it. I am wary of looking like

an undertaker's mannequin. It doesn't take much rouge to tip the balance: the rest of me is so pale, so small.

With some effort I draped the gold locket around my neck, its nineteenth-century elegance incongruous against my utilitarian clothing. I straightened it, wondering at my daring, wondering what Ruth would say when she saw.

My gaze dropped. The small silver frame on my dressing table. A photo from my wedding day. I would just as happily not have had it there – the marriage was so long ago and so short-lived, poor John – but it is my concession to Ruth. It pleases her, I think, to imagine that I pine for him.

Sylvia helped me to the drawing room – it still rankles to call it such – where breakfast was being served and where I was to wait for Ruth, who had agreed (against her better judgement, she said) to drive me to Shepperton Studios. I had Sylvia seat me alone at the corner table and fetch me a glass of juice, and then I reread Ursula's letter.

Ruth arrived at eight-thirty on the dot. She may have had misgivings about the wisdom of this excursion, but she is, and has always been, incurably punctual. I've heard it said that children born to stressful times never shake the air of woe, and Ruth, a child of the second war, proves the rule. So different from Sylvia, only fifteen years younger, who fusses about in tight skirts, laughs too loudly and changes hair colour with each new 'boyfriend'.

This morning Ruth walked across the room, well dressed, immaculately groomed, but stiffer than a fence post.

'Morning, Mum,' she said, brushing cold lips across my cheek. 'Finished your breakfast yet?' She glanced at the half-

empty glass before me. 'I hope you've had more than that. We'll likely hit morning traffic on the way and we won't have time to stop for anything.' She looked at her watch. 'Do you need to visit the loo?'

I shook my head, wondering when I had become the child.

'You're wearing Father's locket; I haven't seen it in an age.' She reached forward to straighten it, nodding approval. 'He had an eye, didn't he?'

I agreed, touched by the way little untruths told to the very young are believed so implicitly. I felt a wave of affection for my prickly daughter, repressed quickly the tired old parental guilt that always surfaces when I look upon her anxious face.

She took my arm, folded it over hers and placed the cane in my other hand. Many of the others prefer walking frames or even those motorized chairs, but I'm still quite good with my cane, and a creature of habit who sees no reason to trade up.

She's a good girl, my Ruth – solid and reliable. She'd dressed formally today, the way she would to visit her solicitor, or doctor. I had known she would. She wanted to make a good impression; show this film-maker that no matter what her mother might have done in the past, Ruth Bradley McCourt was respectably middle class, thank you very much.

We drove in silence for a way, then Ruth began tuning the radio. Her fingers were those of an old lady, knuckles swollen where she'd forced on her rings that morning.

Astounding to see one's daughter ageing. I glanced at my own hands then, folded in my lap. Hands so busy in the past, performing tasks both menial and complex; hands that now sat grey, flaccid and inert. Ruth rested finally on a programme of classical music. The announcer spoke for a while, rather inanely about his weekend, and then began to play Chopin. A coincidence, of course, that today of all days I should hear the waltz in C sharp minor.

Ruth pulled over in front of several huge white buildings, square like aircraft hangars. She switched off the ignition and sat for a moment, looking straight ahead. 'I don't know why you have to do this,' she said quietly, lips sucked tight. 'You've done so much with your life. Travelled, studied, raised a child . . . Why do you want to be reminded of what you used to be?'

She didn't expect an answer and I didn't give one. She sighed abruptly, hopped out of the car and fetched my cane from the boot. Without a word, she helped me from my seat.

A young woman was waiting for us. A slip of a girl with very long blonde hair that fell straight down her back and was cut in a thick fringe at the front. She was the type of girl one might have labelled plain had she not been blessed with such marvellous dark eyes. They belonged on an oil portrait, round, deep and expressive, the rich colour of wet paint.

She rushed towards us, smiling, and took my hand from Ruth's arm. 'Mrs Bradley, I'm so happy you could make it. I'm Ursula.'

'Grace,' I said, before Ruth could insist on 'Doctor'. 'My name is Grace.'

'Grace.' Ursula beamed. 'I can't tell you how excited I was to get your letter.' Her accent was English, a surprise after the American address on her letter. She turned to Ruth. 'Thanks so much for playing chauffeur today.'

I felt Ruth's body tighten beside me. 'I could hardly put Mum on a bus now, could I?'

Ursula laughed and I was pleased that the young are so quick to read uncongeniality as irony. 'Well, come on inside, it's freezing out. 'Scuse the mad rush. We start shooting next week and we're in a complete tizz trying to get things ready. I was hoping you'd meet our set designer, but she's had to go into London to collect some fabric. Maybe if you're still here when she gets back . . . Go carefully through the doorway now, there's a bit of a step.'

She and Ruth bustled me into a foyer and down a dim corridor lined with doors. Some were ajar and I peered in, snatching glimpses of shadowy figures at glowing computer screens. None of it resembled the other film set I had been on with Emmeline, all those years ago.

'Here we are,' Ursula said as we reached the last door. 'Come on in and I'll get us a cuppa.' She pushed the door and I was swept over the threshold, into my past.

It was the Riverton drawing room. Even the wallpaper was the same. Silver Studios' burgundy Art Nouveau, 'Flaming Tulips', as fresh as the day the paperers had come from

London. A leather chesterfield sat at the centre by the fireplace, draped with Indian silks just like the ones Hannah and Emmeline's grandfather, Lord Ashbury, had brought back from abroad when he was a young officer. The ship's clock stood where it always had, on the mantelpiece beside the Waterford candelabra. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get it right, but it announced itself an impostor with every tick. Even now, some eighty years later, I remember the sound of the drawing-room clock. The quietly insistent way it had of marking the passage of time: patient, certain, cold – as if it somehow knew, even then, that time was no friend to those who lived in that house.

Ruth accompanied me as far as the chesterfield and arranged me in its corner. I was aware of a bustle of activity behind me, people dragging huge lights with insect-like legs, someone, somewhere, laughing.

I thought of the last time I had been in the drawing room – the real one, not this facade – the day I had known I was leaving Riverton and would never be back.

It had been Teddy I'd told. He hadn't been pleased, but by that time he'd lost the authority he once had, events had knocked it out of him. He wore the vaguely bewildered pallor of a captain who knew his ship was sinking but was powerless to stop it. He asked me to stay, implored me, out of loyalty to Hannah, he said, if not for him. And I almost did. Almost.

Ruth nudged me. 'Mum? Ursula's talking to you.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't hear.'

'Mum's a bit deaf,' Ruth said. 'At her age it's to be expected. I've tried to get her in for testing, but she can be rather obstinate.'

Obstinate, I own. But I am not deaf and do not like it when people assume I am – my eyesight is poor without glasses, I tire easily, have none of my own teeth left and survive on a cocktail of pills, but I can hear as well as I ever have. It's only with age I have learned solely to listen to things I want to hear.

'I was just saying, Mrs Bradley, Grace, it must be strange to be back. Well, sort of back. It must spark all sorts of memories?'

'Yes.' I cleared my throat. 'Yes, it does.'

'I'm so glad,' Ursula said, smiling. 'I take that as a sign we've got it right.'

'Oh yes.'

'Is there anything that looks out of place? Anything we've forgotten?'

I looked about the set again. Meticulous in its detail, down to the set of crests mounted by the door, the middle one a Scottish thistle that matched the etching on my locket.

All the same, there *was* something missing. Despite its accuracy, the set was strangely divested of atmosphere. It was like a museum piece: interesting, but lifeless.

It was understandable, of course. Though the 1920s live vividly in my memory, the decade is, for the film's designers, the 'olden days'. A historical setting whose replication requires as much research and painstaking attention to detail as would the recreation of a medieval castle.

I could feel Ursula looking at me, awaiting keenly my pronouncement.

'It's perfect,' I said finally. 'Everything in its place.'

Then she said something that made me start. 'Except the family.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Except the family.' I blinked and for a moment I could see them: Emmeline draped across the sofa, all legs and eyelashes, Hannah frowning at one of the books from the library, Teddy pacing the Bessarabian carpet . . .

'Emmeline sounds like she must have been a lot of fun,' Ursula said.

'Yes.'

'She was easy to research – managed to get her name in just about every gossip column ever printed. Not to mention the letters and diaries of half the eligible bachelors of the day!'

I nodded. 'She was always popular.'

She looked up at me from beneath her fringe. 'Putting Hannah's character together wasn't so easy.'

I cleared my throat. 'No?'

'She was more of a mystery. Not that she wasn't mentioned in the papers: she was. Had her share of admirers too. It just seems not many people really knew her. They admired her, revered her even, but didn't really *know* her.'

I thought of Hannah. Beautiful, clever, yearning Hannah. 'She was complex.'

'Yes,' Ursula said, 'that's the impression I got.'

Ruth, who'd been listening, said, 'One of them married an American, didn't she?'

I looked at her, surprised. She had always made it her business *not* to know anything about the Hartfords.

She met my gaze. 'I've been doing some reading.'

How like Ruth to prepare for our visit, no matter how distasteful she found the subject matter.

Ruth turned her attention back to Ursula and spoke cautiously, wary of error. 'She married after the war, I think. Which one was that?'

'Hannah.' There. I'd done it. I'd spoken her name aloud.

'What about the other sister?' Ruth continued. 'Emmeline. Did she ever marry?'

'No,' I said. 'She was engaged.'

'A number of times,' Ursula said, smiling. 'Seems she couldn't bring herself to settle on one man.'

Oh, but she did. In the end she did.

'Don't suppose we'll ever know exactly what happened that night.' This was Ursula.

'No.' My tired feet were beginning to protest against the leather of my shoes. They'd be swollen tonight and Sylvia would exclaim, then she'd insist on giving them a soak. 'I suppose not.'

Ruth straightened in her seat. 'But surely *you* must know what happened, Miss Ryan. You're making a film of it, after all.'

'Sure,' Ursula said, 'I know the basics. My great-grandmother was at Riverton that night – she was related to the sisters through marriage – and it's become a sort of family legend. My great-grandmother told Grandma, Grandma told Mum, and Mum told me. A number of times, actually: it

made a huge impression. I I always knew one day I'd turn it into a film.' She smiled, shrugged. 'But there are always little holes in history, aren't there? I have files and files of research – the police reports and newspapers are full of facts, but it's all second-hand. Rather heavily censored, I suspect. Unfortunately the two people who witnessed the suicide have been dead for years.'

'I must say, it seems a rather morbid subject for a film,' Ruth said.

'Oh, no; it's fascinating,' Ursula said. 'A rising star of the English poetry scene kills himself by a dark lake on the eve of a huge society party. His only witnesses are two beautiful sisters who never speak to each other again. One his fiancée, the other rumoured to be his lover. It's terribly romantic.'

The knot in my stomach relaxed a little. So their secret is still safe. She doesn't know the truth. I wondered why I had supposed otherwise. And I wondered what sort of misguided loyalty had made me care either way. Why, after all these years, it still mattered to me what people thought.

But I knew that too. I had been born to it. Mr Hamilton had told me so the day I left, as I stood on the top step of the servants' entrance, my leather bag packed with my few possessions, Mrs Townsend weeping in the kitchen. He'd said it was in my blood, just as it had been for my mother and for her parents before her, that I was a fool to leave, to throw away a good place with a good family. He'd decried the loss of loyalty and pride general in the English nation, and had vowed he wouldn't allow it to infiltrate Riverton. The war hadn't been fought and won just to lose our ways.

I'd pitied him then: so rigid, so certain that by leaving service I was setting myself on a path to financial and moral ruination. It wasn't until much later that I began to understand how terrified he must have been, how relentless must have seemed the rapid social changes, swirling about him, nipping at his heels. How desperately he longed to hold on to the old ways and certainties.

But he'd been right. Not completely, not about the ruination – neither my finances nor my morals were the worse for leaving Riverton – but there was some part of me that never left that house. Rather, some part of the house that wouldn't leave me. For years after, the smell of Stubbins & Co. beeswax, the crackle of tyres on gravel, a certain type of bell and I'd be fourteen again, tired after a long day's work, sipping cocoa by the servants' hall fire while Mr Hamilton orated select passages from *The Times* (those deemed fit for our impressionable ears), Nancy frowned at some irreverent comment of Alfred's, and Mrs Townsend snored gently in the rocker, her knitting resting on her generous lap . . .

'Here we are,' Ursula said. 'Thanks, Tony.'

A young man had appeared beside me, clutching a makeshift tray of motley mugs and an old jam jar full of sugar. He released his load onto the side table where Ursula began distributing them. Ruth passed one to me.

'Mum, what is it?' She pulled out a handkerchief and reached for my face. 'Are you unwell?'

I could feel then that my cheeks were moist.

It was the smell of the tea that did it. And being there, in

that room, sitting on that chesterfield. The weight of distant memories. Of long-held secrets. The clash of past and present.

'Grace? Can I get you something?' This was Ursula. 'Would you like the heating turned down?'

'I'm going to have to take her home.' Ruth again. 'I knew this wasn't a good idea. It's far too much for her.'

Yes, I wanted to go home. To be home. I felt myself being hoisted up, my cane thrust into my hand. Voices swirled about me.

'I'm sorry,' I said, to no one in particular. 'I'm just so tired.' So tired. So long ago.

My feet were aching: protesting their confinement. Someone – Ursula, perhaps – reached out to steady me. A cold wind slapped my damp cheeks.

I was in Ruth's car then, houses, trees and road signs rushing past.

'Don't worry, Mum, it's all over now,' Ruth said. 'I blame myself. I should never have agreed to take you.'

I put my hand on her arm, felt her tense.

'I should have trusted my instincts,' she said. 'It was stupid of me.'

I closed my eyes. Listened to the hum of the radiator, the pulse of the windscreen wipers, the drone of the traffic.

'That's it, you have a bit of a rest,' Ruth said. 'You're going home. You never have to go back again.'

I smiled, felt myself drifting away.

It is too late, I am home. I am back.