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I Heard That Song Before

Mary Higgins Clarke

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I grew up in the shadow of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping.

By that I mean I was born and raised in Englewood, New Jersey. In 1932, the grandson of Englewood's most prominent citizen, Ambassador Dwight Morrow, was kidnapped. Furthermore, the baby's father happened to be the most famous man in the world at the time, Col. Charles Lindbergh, who had flown the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in his single-engine plane, the Spirit of St. Louis.

My grandmother, who was eight years old at that time, remembers the blazing headlines, the crowds of reporters who congregated outside Next Day Hill, the Morrow estate, the arrest and trial of Bruno Hauptmann.

Time passed, memories faded. Today Englewood's most prominent residence is the Carrington mansion, the stone-castlelike structure that I had stolen into as a child.

All these thoughts went through my mind as, for the second time in my life, I went inside the gates of the Carrington estate. Twenty-two years, I thought, remembering the inquisitive six-year-old I had been. Maybe it was the memory of my father being dismissed by the Carringtons only a few weeks later that made me suddenly feel self-conscious and awkward. The bright October morning had changed into a windy, damp afternoon, and I wished that I had worn a heavier jacket. The one I had chosen now seemed much too light both in color and fabric.

Instinctively, I parked my secondhand car to the side of the imposing driveway, not wanting it to be the object of anyone's scrutiny. One hundred and eight thousand miles on the speedometer takes a lot of starch out of a car, even one recently washed and mercifully free of dents.

I had twisted my hair into a bun, but the wind tore at it as I walked up the steps and rang the bell. A man who looked to be in his midfifties, with a receding hairline and narrow, unsmiling lips, opened the door. He was dressed in a dark suit, and I wasn't

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sure whether he was a butler or a secretary, but before I could speak, without introducing himself, he said that Mr. Carrington was expecting me and that I should come in.

The wide entrance hall was illuminated by light that filtered through leaded stained-glass windows. A statue of a knight in armor stood next to a medieval tapestry depicting a battle scene. I longed to examine the tapestry, but instead I dutifully followed my escort down a corridor to the library.

"Miss Lansing is here, Mr. Carrington," he said. "I'll be in the office." From that remark I guessed he was an assistant.

When I was little I used to draw pictures of the kind of home I'd love to live in. One of my favorite rooms to imagine was the one in which I would read away my afternoons. In that room there was always a fireplace and bookshelves. One version included a comfortable couch, and I'd draw myself curled up in the corner, a book in my hand. I'm not suggesting I'm any kind of artist because I'm not. I drew stick figures and the bookshelves were uneven, the carpet a splotched multicolored copy of one I'd seen in the window of an antique rug store. I could not put the exact image in my mind on paper, but I knew what I wanted. I wanted the kind of room I was standing in now.

Peter Carrington was seated in a wide leather chair, his feet on a hassock. The lamp on the table beside him not only illuminated the book he was reading but spotlighted his handsome profile.

He was wearing reading glasses, which sat on the bridge of his nose and slipped off when he looked up. Retrieving them, he laid them on the table, removed his feet from the hassock, and stood. I had caught occasional glimpses of him in town and had seen his picture in the papers, so I had an impression of him, but being in the same room with him was different. There was a quiet authority about Peter Carrington that he retained even as he smiled and extended his hand.

"You write a persuasive letter, Kathryn Lansing."

"Thank you for letting me stop in, Mr. Carrington."

His handshake was firm. I knew he was studying me just as I was studying him. He was taller than I had realized, with the narrow body of a runner. His eyes were more gray than blue. His thin, even-featured face was framed by dark brown hair that was a shade long but which suited him well. He was wearing a dark brown cardigan with a rust thread running through the weave. If I had been asked to guess his job from his appearance alone, I would have said college professor.

I knew he was forty-two years old. That meant he would have been about twenty the day that I crept into this house. I wondered if he had been home for that party. It was possible, of course -- in late August he might not yet have gone back to Princeton, where he had been a student. Or, if he had already started school, he might have come home for the weekend. Princeton was only an hour-and-a-half drive away.

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He invited me to sit down in one of the two matching armchairs near the fireplace. "I've been wanting an excuse to have a fire," he said. "This afternoon the weather cooperated."

I was more than ever conscious of the fact that my lime green jacket was more suitable to an August afternoon than to midautumn. I felt a strand of hair slip over my shoulder and tried to twist it back into the bun that was supposed to anchor it.

I have a master's in library science, my passion for books having made that a natural career choice. Since graduation five years ago, I've been working at the Englewood Public Library and am heavily involved in our community's literacy project.

Now I was in this impressive library, "with my hat in my hand," as my grandmother would say. I was planning a fundraiser for the literacy program and wanted to make it spectacular. There was one way I was sure I could get people to pay three hundred dollars for a cocktail reception, and that would be if it were held in this house. The Carrington mansion had become part of the folklore of Englewood and the surrounding communities. Everyone knew its history and that it had been transported from Wales. I was certain that the prospect of being inside it would make all the difference in whether or not we could have a sellout event.

I usually feel pretty comfortable in my own skin, but sitting there, sensing that those gray eyes were taking my measure, I felt flustered and ill at ease. Suddenly I felt, once again, like the daughter of the landscaper who drank too much.

Get over it, I told myself, and stop with the "gee-whiz" nonsense. Giving myself a brisk mental shake, I began my well-rehearsed solicitation. "Mr. Carrington, as I wrote you, there are many good causes, meaning many reasons for people to write checks. Of course it's impossible for anyone to support everything. Quite frankly, these days even well-off people feel tapped out. That's why it's essential to our event to find a way to get people to write a check for us."

That was when I launched into my plea for him to allow us to have a cocktail party in this house. I watched as his expression changed, and I saw the "no" word forming on his lips.

He put it gracefully. "Miss Lansing," he began.

"Please call me Kay."

"I thought your name was Kathryn."

"On my birth certificate and to my grandmother."

He laughed. "I understand." Then he began his polite refusal. "Kay, I'd be happy to write a check . . ."

I interrupted him. "I'm sure you would. But as I wrote, this is more than just about money. We need volunteers to teach people how to read, and the best way to get

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them is to make them want to come to an affair, and then sign them up. I know a great caterer who has promised to reduce his price if the event is held here. It would just be for two hours, and it would mean so much to so many people."

"I have to think about it," Peter Carrington said as he stood up.

The meeting was over. I thought quickly and decided there was nothing to lose by adding one final thing: "Mr. Carrington, I've done of lot of research about your family. For generations this was one of the most hospitable homes in Bergen County. Your father and grandfather and great-grandfather supported local community activities and charities. By helping us now, you could do so much good, and it would be so easy for you."

I had no right to feel so terribly disappointed, but I did. He didn't respond, and without waiting for him or his assistant to show me out, I retraced my steps to the door. I did pause to take a quick glance to the back of the house, thinking of the staircase I had sneaked up all those years ago. Then I left, sure that I had made my second and final visit to the mansion.

Two days later Peter Carrington's picture was on the cover of Celeb, a national weekly gossip rag. It showed him coming out of the police station twenty-two years ago, after being questioned about the disappearance of eighteen-year-old Susan Althorp, who had vanished following the formal dinner dance she had attended at the Carrington mansion. The blaring headline, IS SUSAN ALTHORP STILL ALIVE?, was followed by the caption under Peter's picture: "Industrialist still a suspect in the disappearance of debutante Susan Althorp, who would be celebrating her fortieth birthday this week."

The magazine had a field day rehashing details of the search for Susan and, since her father had been an ambassador, comparing the case to the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby.

The article included a summary of the circumstances surrounding the death of Peter Carrington's pregnant wife, Grace, four years ago. Grace Carrington, known for drinking heavily, had given a birthday party for Carrington's stepbrother, Richard Walker. Carrington had arrived home after a twenty-three-hour flight from Australia, observed her condition, grabbed the glass out of her hand, dumped the contents on the carpet, and angrily demanded, "Can't you have a little mercy on the child you're carrying?" Then, claiming exhaustion, he went up to bed. In the morning, the housekeeper found the body of Grace Carrington, still dressed in a satin evening suit, at the bottom of the swimming pool. An autopsy showed that she was three times over the limit of being legally drunk. The article concluded, "Carrington claimed he went to sleep immediately and did not awaken until the police responded to the 911 call. MAYBE. We're conducting an opinion poll. Go to our Web site and let us know what you think."

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A week later, at the library, I received a call from Vincent Slater, who reminded me that I had met him when I had an appointment with Peter Carrington.

"Mr. Carrington," he said, "has decided to permit the use of his home for your fund-raiser. He suggests that you coordinate the details of the event with me."

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