

The Ghost Lover

Gillian Greenwood

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Extract

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TOMB WITH MY OWN MEANS. IT IS THE GOD
WHO WILL JUDGE MY CASE ALONG WITH HIM
WHO DOES ANYTHING AGAINST IT.

*Text on the false door of the tomb
of Redi-ness at Giza*

One

In that very first instant, I felt the information merely as a matter of shocking fact. But that's how death so often comes, or rather the news of it. The telling hardly carries the words and in this case the words said that my employer (and best friend in all the world), Toby Haddeley, had been killed, along with my darling girl, Alice, and I felt nothing but a coldness that seemed quite external, a chill that seemed to settle over me, as a part of me passed away too.

The report that came through, on the telephone, was unclear, but it seemed that they had been flying over the Crimea in a light aircraft, along with four others. All on board were dead. Sometimes at night in the weeks and months afterwards, I couldn't stop myself from imagining the sensation of those last minutes in that small plane, the plummeting, the speed, the smell of fuel, the imminence of death. And I wondered over and over why they had taken the plane. After all, I had made the arrangements myself. They had been due to travel by train, from Moscow down to the archaeological dig on the Black Sea coast, a newly found site in one of the Greek colonies. The trip was a birthday present from Toby to Alice, his god-daughter, though no doubt Toby had also been hoping (though he didn't admit it to me) that the trip might yield something special to bring back for sale.

When the news came, that's where I was, working at the gallery, as I had done for almost twenty years. There had been a time when I might have gone with Toby myself, but our business, Haddeley Antiquities, had grown to such an extent that one of us

had to stay behind to see to its smooth running. Toby's nephew, Kit Haddeley, was there, of course. He was working with us by then. But he was too recently out of the Army and regarded as still too green to leave on his own.

It was Kit who took the call. I was in the secure room, which we used as a vault, and I heard him call out my name. His voice was clear above the radio play I was immersed in, but of which I now have no memory at all. There was nothing obvious in his tone to alert me, as I remember, yet I stopped what I was doing at once. I had been happy, cocooned in the small steel-lined room. I had been unpacking a block of inscribed Egyptian stone, a section of a false door, the type of thing found in the better sort of tomb from the Third Dynasty and built as a threshold between this life and the next. It was the charm of proximity to such ancient artefacts that had kept me in the business for so many years, but when Kit appeared in the doorway of the vault, stiff and soldierly in his shock, and he told me that both his wife, Alice, and his uncle Toby were dead, I had wanted to take a hammer and smash the stone to pieces.

It was worse for Kit, of course. He had lost his wife, and it was natural in some ways that he should want to cling to me as someone whom Alice had loved. And so I stayed on at Millbury Street, in the big house he inherited from Toby along with the gallery. I stayed to keep him company and because I could not bear to leave Toby's house, the place where we had lived our odd lives together and where, I suppose, if I'm honest, I had acted as a sort of surrogate wife and unofficial housekeeper. It was a role I had taken upon myself, for good or ill, and one I chose to continue with Kit. And so we helped each other through the first terrible year, when grief would render us, alternately, desolate, and after that, well, it seemed to suit us both to continue the arrangement.

Over the years, I have felt, from time to time, that I went to live at Millbury Street against my better judgement, that it was a

sort of mistake, but I have always loved the house. It backed on to that stretch of the old canal to which time has lent a strange beauty, a remnant of an industrial past, softened by its proximity to Regent's Park and by foliage which the years had layered over soft warm brick. The garden swept down to the water's edge, the border a convex curve. It looked on to a small island in a wide basin, a sort of artificial lake where the painted longboats turned, an oasis fringed by willows and inhabited by geese and moorhens and an occasional swan. It was tall and white, four storeys high, and was set just out of reach of the gaze of the tourist boats that cruised around the far side of the island when summer came.

I can think about them now, about Toby and Alice, without wanting to cry, or without feeling angry, or feeling nothing, which can be worst of all. It's been more than ten years since their death, and life has moved on. I'm in my fifties, and Kit is forty-two and he no longer lives alone, alone apart from me, that is. It was me who introduced him to Isobel Whaley. She was the daughter of an old acquaintance, Jack Whaley, a man I hadn't seen since before his short-lived marriage to Isobel's mother, an American who, after the divorce, had gone back to the States with her daughter. And yet after Toby died, Jack, like several others, contacted me to offer condolences. It was a strange paradox of bereavement, I discovered, that people who had been strangers for decades felt compelled to get in touch, while those more familiar were sometimes too embarrassed even to telephone.

When Isobel accepted Kit's proposal I had assumed that I would finally have to move out. I offered to go. I didn't wait to be asked. But it was Isobel who wanted me to stay. The house was so big, she said, and it made her nervous to be on her own when Kit was away, as he sometimes was.

So after they married, I moved into the annexe at Millbury Street, one which Kit converted specially. I still had a small flat of my own in Victoria, rented out to a nice young woman who

worked at the House of Commons and the money she paid me provided me with a supplement to the salary I received at the gallery. The annexe was over the garage, like a mews house in itself, with its own entrance, but it was also possible to go into the main house through a door on the first-floor landing. There was a small door in the outside wall of the garden which I sometimes used if I wished to be private, rather than going through the big gates. Back in the old days, the early Toby days, there would be a white peacock or two striding across the lawn, their long tails trailing behind them, but I was always rather afraid of them, of their ghostly whiteness and the terrible cries they made as they sat, grotesque and outsized, on the roof of the garage. But now, of course, the birds, pale and eerie even in life, are long dead, along with all the rest, along with Toby and with Alice.

I liked Isobel, on the whole. She was her father's daughter, and the fact that she was so very different from Alice was a good thing, I always thought. It wasn't just the physical contrast, though that was striking. Alice had been tall and dark, rather like Kit in fact (they say, don't they, that people often marry their mirror image). Isobel, on the other hand, was small and curved and blonde, and as such gave an impression of soft simplicity. It was an impression which deceived. She was a clever girl who had all her wits about her. There was a stability about her in contrast with Alice's more mercurial moods. And I believe she loved Kit and made him happy again, and for that we all loved her in return, or at least I did. There were those who had some reservations, Kit's mother Margaret for one, though it is hard to know who could have satisfied her.



The day the whole business began, or rather didn't begin exactly, but began to make itself felt, I bumped into Isobel at the tube station, on the way home from work. It was early April and raining and we huddled together under my umbrella as we walked

towards Millbury Street. It was Isobel's birthday and her father Jack and his latest *amour*, Helen, a GP he had met through his work as a clinical psychologist, were coming over to help us celebrate.

As we reached the gate, Isobel tugged at my arm, insisting that I come straight in with her for a drink before either of us thought about starting dinner, with which I was going to help. I still did a great deal of helping, continuing to look after them both, just as I had done for Kit, and for Toby before him. I didn't need a lot of persuading to accept her invitation. I don't like to drink alone, though I do, quite frequently, and although it was only five thirty, the glass of wine she was offering would go down well. I would have preferred whisky, of course, a taste I shared with her father, but at that time of day, Isobel might disapprove.

I watched her as she let us both in. She stood inside the door-frame, her short raincoat riding up her legs as she mouthed the numbers of the alarm to herself, pressing the buttons high on the inside wall. Then she stopped in her tracks and held up her hand.

'Listen,' she said, her small childlike face turned up and to one side. 'Listen to the noise.' I could hear only the birds on the nearby water, the geese and the moorhens, their cries rising above the slow rumbling of a car on the far side of the wall.

'What?' I said. 'What noise? The birds?'

'Yes,' she said. 'They're noisy today, don't you think?' *No more than usual*, I thought, following her down the stairs to the large family kitchen, and she turned her head back to me. She was thoughtful. 'It made me think of the peacocks, the ones you told me about that used to be here. Just for a moment, I fancied it was them. That I could hear them.'

'Just the geese,' I said firmly. It struck me as an absurdly fanciful thing to say, geese sounding nothing like peacocks, and it was uncharacteristic. Isobel was an artist, it was true, but she was a portrait painter and, though expressive, she was rather pragmatic in her American way, certainly not given to whimsy.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs she kicked off her shoes, and

still wearing her coat, walked straight to the fridge. She took out an open bottle of wine and poured me a large glass, and herself an apple juice.

‘Maybe I’m hearing things,’ she said.

‘Aren’t you having a drink?’ I said. ‘I can’t drink alone.’

‘Please,’ she said. As she handed me the glass I could see paint on her fingers that she had failed to remove. She had been to her studio in Paddington. For the portraits she did on commission, she preferred her sitters to come to neutral territory. ‘Drink. It’s my birthday.’

‘Many happy returns then,’ I said, lifting my glass.

‘I want to tell you something, Josie,’ she said. ‘Kit knows, but no one else, yet, because . . . well, you know why.’

I waited politely, knowing what was coming.

‘I’m pregnant again.’ Isobel almost whispered her news as if to utter the words aloud might invite in something malevolent.

I put down my drink and kissed her, squeezing her hand.

‘Congratulations, Isobel,’ I said. ‘That’s wonderful.’ And it was, of course, but it came with a shoal of complications.

‘Yes, it is, isn’t it?’ Isobel looked down and for some reason I felt embarrassed for her. She seemed not at ease with her news. ‘So no drinks for me, even on my birthday.’ Isobel pulled a face. ‘It’s a small price to pay, I suppose.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it must be a bore for you, I can imagine.’ I couldn’t imagine, in fact, going nine months without a drink, and I was relieved that by this stage in my life I was unlikely to have to do so. ‘But wonderful news, Isobel. Really.’

She nodded, but again she seemed reticent.

I thought it best, for the moment, to leave it be. Getting pregnant had not been easy. They had had to turn to IVF and then there had been two or possibly even three disappointments prior to this pregnancy, so I could understand Isobel’s uncertainty. And then there was a secret, one that Kit had confessed to me late at night when, anxious, he had come to my flat for comfort and whisky as he had so often done in the past. It was all his fault, he

said. His sperm count was very low, and he had had to agree, reluctantly, that they would use a donor. Any baby they might manage to have would not biologically be his.

Isobel picked up the pile of letters that the daily help had left on the kitchen table. Most of them were for Kit, but there were a couple addressed to her. One envelope was handwritten and addressed to 'Isobel Haddeley'.

'Boring,' she said. 'It's from that small gallery near the bookshop. I bought a picture there a couple of years ago and now they send me stuff all the time.' The other looked more formal, typed, to 'Mrs Kit Haddeley'. She threw it down on the table. It was the sort of thing Isobel disliked, hating the etiquette that reduced her to being a mere adjunct of Kit's. It was a view with which I could only partially sympathise. It seemed a small price to pay for everything else that marriage to Kit had delivered.

Isobel pushed the letters aside and picked up a third. She stared hard at it, then held it up in front of me. It was in a small blue envelope and the name was printed in neat block capitals: MRS ALICE HADDELEY. She reached, without thinking, for her glass of juice as she examined it again, turning it over, looking at the postmark which appeared to be unidentifiable. She pulled out a chair and sat down. By now she seemed almost to have forgotten I was there, and I found myself thinking how odd it was that we were both still wearing our coats.

'What do you think, Josie?' she said. 'What do you make of this? What could it be?'

There had been letters for Alice Haddeley before, very occasionally, and they were always slightly shocking, especially for Isobel. I suppose they were a reminder of Kit's existence prior to this one that he shared with her, a reminder of the wife who had preceded her. But the other letters had been formal, typed. They had been bureaucratic glitches that had conjured a dead woman's name from an imperfect system. This one was different. The letter's firm address and the compactness of the folded paper seemed to reach out to the living.

‘It will be an oversight,’ I said. ‘Some unfortunate muddle of names.’

I could see that she was tempted to open it, not just out of curiosity but as if under a sort of compulsion. But she didn’t, of course. It was for Kit to open, not her, and even had I not been present, I’m sure she would not have done so.

We sat at the table, not speaking; it wasn’t unusual for us to sit in companionable silence. It had become clear to both of us, soon after Isobel moved in, that we would have little problem living at close quarters. Neither of us worried about such things as pauses in our conversations, and I was naturally accommodating. I have had to be.

Isobel continued to stare at the envelope which lay now between her elbows, her hands flat on the table.

‘I don’t usually think about her much, you know,’ she said. ‘About Alice. Is that wrong of me? Even though she’s everywhere. In the house, at the gallery, in you too, Josie. But it’s as if she’s something quite separate. As if we all lived other lives that don’t impinge on hers. But this sort of thing . . .’ She picked up the letter and put it in the pile addressed to Kit, slipping it under the largest so that she couldn’t see it. ‘This sort of thing makes me . . .’

I could see that she felt that to hold on to the letter further would be an admission of some kind. I couldn’t remember the last time I had heard her mention Alice. I had, in fact, always rather admired the way she sidestepped the subject when other people referred to it. And I had always assumed that it was something she and Kit had resolved before they married. Certainly he no longer talked about Alice, or not to me.

It had become harder and harder to recall her. There were photographs, of course, and I had a strong sense of the last lunch we had had together, just before she and Toby left for Russia. Alice had been bright with excitement that day, almost too bright; I had been a little concerned at her over-elation. But her plans had

been clear, and her preparations thorough and I had been mesmerised by her, as always. I had promised to look after Kit, and she had hugged me to her as we went our separate ways. And now, I thought, I could hardly bring to mind her lovely face. We hadn't forgotten her exactly, I knew that. We had simply put her away for the time being. We had wrapped up her memory and interred it. And we were surely right to have done that.

I could hear the wall clock ticking as Isobel continued to stare at the spot between her arms where the letter had been a moment ago. Her hands were still spread flat on the table. Her mobile face seemed almost to ripple in its confusion. It was this inability to conceal her feelings on occasion that ruffled her mother-in-law, Margaret Haddeley. Margaret was an old-school type who distrusted expression of feeling, and she distrusted her artistic, American daughter-in-law on principle. 'That girl needs more backbone,' she had said to me one day, when I remarked on Isobel's sensitivity. 'She's far too emotional. I'm not surprised she appears not to be able to carry a child.'

Even for Margaret, whom I had known and tolerated now for over thirty years, such callousness was shocking, but she had loved Alice very much and she had found it hard to accept Isobel in her place. Now as we sat together, looking at the letter, Margaret's words formed in my head once again. I felt protective towards Isobel, and I reached across the table to put my hand over hers.

'It will be something and nothing, the letter, I promise.'

Isobel turned to me and smiled. 'I know,' she said, 'you're right.' The concern had faded quickly from her face. 'Must be the hormones,' she laughed, delighted, it seemed, at the very idea. 'You're coming over later, Josie?'

'I'm going to start supper here, then change,' I said.

'Come early and have a drink before dinner, won't you? Dad would like that.' She hesitated for a moment. 'Do you mind me leaving supper to you?' she added. I shook my head. 'Then I think I'll go and have a bath,' she said.

✱

Half an hour later I made my way back up the stairs to the ground floor, then on up to the first floor and through the interior door to my flat. It was quicker than going all the way outside again and across the courtyard. And it was still raining. I liked to use the outside entrance on principle, but neither Kit nor Isobel ever appeared to mind me using the first-floor connection, so on days like this I took advantage of it.

I hung up the raincoat I was carrying in the small hallway. It was a recent (and fashionable) purchase which I was delighted by, and which had satisfied my attachment to new clothes for a month or two. I switched on the radio to fill the silence and poured myself a small glass of whisky from the bottle I kept in the kitchen cupboard. I couldn't get the memory of Margaret's cruel remark out of my mind and I recalled a conversation I had had with Isobel's father, Jack, one evening, here in my flat. He had been holding forth about Margaret, about her inability to accept the idea of a second wife for Kit.

'You'd think she'd be happy for him,' he said. We had both drunk too much whisky, a *sine qua non*, of course, of our relationship.

'It was easier for me,' I replied. 'Even though I was so fond of Alice.' And then I heard myself say, 'You know, I think that at the back of my mind, I always felt that Alice might die young, though not in that way, of course. That was unexpected.'

I'd never said such a thing before, but Jack was a man who elicited secrets, with no apparent prompting.

'Ah, so you wished her dead?' he said. Jack had retired from the clinic where he'd worked, but he still taught, and saw private clients for analysis, and he was still given to gnomish utterances, especially when tipsy.

'I didn't wish her dead,' I protested. 'I said I had a feeling that she might die young, that's not the same thing.'

'Sounds like it to me,' he said. 'And not so surprising.'

'Stop being provocative.' It was an idiotic thing to say, for there was nothing Jack liked more than provocation.

‘Well, from what you’ve told me,’ he said, ‘which isn’t much, Alice could be difficult.’

‘Only when she was unwell,’ I said, ‘when she had her episodes, which were rare.’

‘The mentally unwell are difficult,’ he said. ‘And I should know.’