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Opening Extract from...

Last Fling

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Landscape at Iden

HUGO WAS CONSUMING a pear. Alone in the panelled dining room, he spread his napkin, peeled the freckled yellow skin with an ivory-handled fruit knife, quartered the juicy white flesh. Sun gleamed here and there, striking the rim of a glass, a silver blade, the fruit dish. This, in the afternoons, was the darkest room in a house positioned for darkness: sunk below a towering bank at the back, the long lawn up there bordered by conifers. He had bought it when he had money, soon after the war when large country properties like this were cheap, people struggling with death duties. No one else wanted to live there, no servant would come there: all that way out in the middle of nowhere, all those rooms to clean. When the agent showed it, unlocking the door to the huge hall, putting back the shutters, it had been empty for months.

He and Phyllida had been married just over a year. They climbed the great staircase, looked out of the master bedroom on to the drive, curving round uncut grass; scanned the tree-lined road, the glimpse of ditch and cornfield. They went into other bedrooms, while the agent looked for the stopcock; he came back, and ran rusty water into the ancient bath. Pipes banged and shook. They went down the back stairs, into the kitchen, where beetles scurried away beneath the vast black range. Outside, they climbed the flag-stoned steps up the bank,

walked over the lawn. The autumn sun came out and the conifers cast dramatic shadows. Behind this levelled stretch the ground rose again, became a wooded hillside.

They looked down on the house, so spacious and forbidding, and knew they would live there. Phyllida was young, just out of the Slade, and full of energy. Hugo, rather older, had his inheritance. He had survived the war, and he knew how to invest: this would be their grand project. He made his offer on the fourteenth of October, 1919, and had it accepted at once. When the girls arrived, the house was filled with life, with calling voices. It was full of them still, all these years later: he was surrounded by women, calling mostly to each other.

Late September, Sunday afternoon, an Indian summer. Outside, the heat was intense, the air full of butterflies, dragonflies, bees. In here, such cool, such shady quiet. Hugo finished the pear, his second, picked yesterday from the espaliered tree on the kitchen garden wall; his elbows rested on polished mahogany. He had noted Phyllida's sigh as she rose from the table, leaving china, silver, crumpled linen, glasses with a residue of wine, all for him to clear. Too much eating, too much sitting about: her unspoken rebuke, as she swept the girls out with her. They patted him vaguely as they passed, dropped a kiss on his balding head.

—Dear Daddy.

—We'll come and help you later.

A fly buzzed in through one of the tall casement windows, open to the front.

His geese were out there, asleep beneath the trees. Later he would go out with the bucket. Later he would clear the table. It was Sunday, there was plenty of time. He watched the fly, and reached for the jar of biscuits. Sleepy, sleepy Somerset. Up on the back lawn, Phyllida

had her easel out, stood obstinately before it in her sunhat, surveying mellow chimney stack and lichened tiles.

There had once been talk of doves — Think how lovely they'd look on the roof, said Hugo, but this, like so many things, had never happened. — We can do anything we want, he said, but of course they couldn't. He was given a snow-white goose and a gander: they bred, and he was happy. — Everything I want is here, he said. — You, the house, the girls — don't you feel that, my darling? Phyllida?

Madeleine had dropped her sandals on the step by the back door: they were just visible from up here, unfastened from slender hot feet as she went indoors for a drink. Bare feet on a tiled floor: what bliss. A scattering of geranium petals lay on the flags, brushed off in Phyllida's early morning watering of the pots, filling the tall grey can from the water butt. Down there, the darkness of the house was a refuge; up here on the baking lawn her hair clung to her head beneath the straw and a bead of sweat was trickling down her neck. She wiped it away, wiped a streak of burnt sienna on her shirt: the oils were almost melting. The painting had been troubling her for weeks; this meant her whole life was troubled. Should she flatten, foreshorten, dramatise? She wanted the plunge into darkness, the sunlit roof and dazzling grass above, and then the blank black windows on the façade, the fall into shadow, deep and endless. It was difficult, difficult. She could not get it right, could not decide.

A dragonfly darted in the air before her, was gone with a shimmer of wings. Bees sailed in and out of Hugo's hive.

— I will not be distracted, she said aloud, and dipped her brush.

The girls were upstairs, in Madeleine's bedroom. The curtains were drawn against the heat, across the open window; everything was shadowy and soft. Heaps of clothes lay on the bed — what to wear, what to wear? They had been trying on all morning — not that there was anywhere to wear a shred of it. In two days they would be back at school, Maddie in her last year, Florence with two long years to go. Ahead lay months of awful meals, double maths, deadly history, church, and Sunday walks in pairs.

— I survived it, said Phyllida, whose school it had been. — I even enjoyed some of it. What did she know? It hadn't mattered about the School Certificate for her: she knew she was going to be a painter, had left and gone up to London — at Maddie's age! She talked about it still: the Antiques Room, the Life Class, the Summer Exhibition; the parties, the picnics, the dancing on the grass. London, London! Everything had happened there, everything was fun and alive.

— And then she met Daddy, said Flo, holding up a silky camisole, the colour of *café au lait*. — And then they came here. Where nothing ever, ever happens. Why? Why did they do it?

— You know why, said Madeleine, all older sister, yawning after all that lunch. — It was a sort of vision, wasn't it, something dramatic. Things like that only happen once.

Her school trunk stood in the corner with the lid up. They had been into town with their mother and bought new shoes and gymslips; everything was washed and ironed and mended now; she had done almost all her packing.

— I haven't started, said Flo, dropping the camisole. This was the last Sunday of the endless summer holidays. Everything was endless: the holidays, the term; she was

waiting and waiting for things to begin. Here were all these lovely clothes from her mother's day, here they were dressing up like babies, playing at it all, with not a party to go to, not one ounce of glamour or excitement, only the dusty road, the echoing house, her parents.

Had she always felt like this?

—Why did they get married? she demanded, picking up an indigo blue kimono.

—Stop it, said Madeleine, winding a turban round her head.—You know why. Daddy fell in love. He walked into a gallery after the war and saw her in a crowd of people and knew she was the one. Just as they knew about moving here. Why do you keep asking? Of course—she tucked in the ends of *eau-de-nil* silk—of course she loved him too.

—They hardly talk, said Florence, slipping into the kimono.—And we're all just stuck here. She walked over to the long dim looking-glass. Those white and crimson water lilies embroidered on the blue, that square-cut sleeve—she held up her arm and watched it fall away. Should she let it all lie open, or tie it at the waist with satin ribbon?

—I love this house, said Madeleine.

When this baby is born, when this baby is walking, when the dining room is finished, when this painting is done—then I shall be happy. Thus had time passed for Phyllida.

Had she always been like this? She couldn't remember, knew only that life, always, lay in the future. Even when she was painting, doing what satisfied her as nothing else, it was always, When I get this right; it was always a struggle. So of course, when she was young, and had seen the house on that autumn afternoon, life seemed

to beckon as never before. All that emptiness, waiting to be filled. All that neglected grandeur, waiting to be restored. London, where she had met her new, improbable husband, faded like a dream. She was a fragment there, a mote in a swirling shaft of dust. Here—she could claim, she could conquer. Happiness was only waiting: soon she would be there.

And now—oh, now! If she put this canvas away, stacked it up in the studio with all the others, abandoned the whole idea and started again—then she would do it all quite differently. If she were Nash, if she were Nicholson—she had seen their work in London, in the spring, the catalogue was in the drawing room—she would cut to the bone, cut out every detail. Geraniums! Lichen! What nonsense. She needed only the drama of design: the slope of a roof, the dizzying perspective, that long dark fall. Or perhaps she should think still more boldly—about the strangeness of building a house here at all, against a towering bank, with no other house for miles on either side. Strangeness: that was the key to being modern. If she were Paul Nash she would place the house in the cornfield across the way—adrift, alone, mysterious, with the bank closing in behind it. Or he would take the flight of steps and place it in the lane: there, without reason, stretching to the sky. You would look at it and feel unsettled; you would look at it and wonder about its meaning, and something in you would be moved, without you knowing why.

That was what she had felt in the spring, up in a London gallery again and gazing at an endless shoreline made of planes of muted colour; at a window frame floating over a winter garden, an autumn landscape so still it felt as if time had stopped for ever. *Landscape at Iden*: a stack of logs, a trug, a screen; the shadow cast by a single pole;

a field beyond studded with angular bare trees; a distant gate to hills, motionless clouds. Muted ochres and greys and then that strip of blue, those watchful clouds. No one could explain it: why the screen was there, why the pole, how that shadow was cast in a sunless place. Why a serpent coiled along the fence. And no one could explain why that conjunction of objects, that stretch of land, could pierce you with an ache of longing and recognition.

Why had she ever thought she had something to say?

Better to stop, stop now, and face the truth.

—But if I don't paint I shall die, she said aloud, and then, in an access of self-loathing, flung down her brush on the grass.

Hugo, doing the dishes in the shady kitchen, heard her cry, looked up but could not see her. Then he did: she was striding across the lawn in a fury, closer now to the edge of the bank, the top of the long flight of steps. Would she come down? Would she let him soothe her? She strode past: a streak of cotton smock and yellow sunhat and she was gone. He gave up: no, he must never give up. And he lifted a Doulton plate—the last of his grandparents' dinner service—and put it, dripping, into the rack.

He washed up everything, china and silver, and glass in a fresh bowl of water, setting the glasses to dry on a worn old tea towel, catching the glints of light from the sun which was sinking slowly, over the wooded hill beyond the bank. The house faced east-west, in summer the best possible position: with the bedrooms at the front you woke to sunrise, breakfasted in good morning light, the perfect start to the day. You gardened and saw to things up at the back in coolness, shadow and dew; in the heat of the afternoon you read and rested—or painted, if you were Phyllida; as the sun moved slowly round,

you lit the drawing room fire. He lit one every evening, even in summer, marking the transition between day and evening as it should be marked: with a drink, with brightness before the dark.

Life was simple here, simplicity and routine the key to happiness. And though he was no artist he loved beauty above everything: loved the glint on those glasses (he dried his hands); the dull gleam of old gold picture frames in the passage down to the drawing room; Phyllida's paintings, hung all along the corridors and in almost every room—how good she was, if only she could see it. That portrait of the girls; the cat, sleeping all afternoon. How well she had done the house—the curtains and bedspreads from Liberty sales, his family furniture settling in so well, everything belonging together. Of course, he had had money. The truth was he had less money now. School fees and running the place and living on interest without adding to capital, half shrunk away in the slump: it all went before you knew it. Still—everything was done and settled, not a teaspoon needed, and even if war came they would be safe down here. Thank God he was too old for service now. They could live out of the kitchen garden if they had to, pot rabbits if they had to. Nothing like rabbit stew.

He went to the open back door and looked up the dark bank.

—Phyllida?

No answer.

He'd leave her to it, calm her down later with tea. Time she had a show again, give London a try: he'd suggest it. And he stood there in the shadow, listening to the afternoon: the droning bees, his geese at the front, stirring themselves as the day grew cooler. Time they were fed and watered. He picked up the bucket, filled

it from the tap on the waterbutt — this, too, he loved, that rush of water, the sight and sound of it — and carried it round the side, hearing now, from deep within the house, the gramophone start up. The girls must be down, playing — 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' for the millionth time. Did they never tire of it? And he took the bucket round to the front and the good old geese got to their feet beneath the trees and greeted him.

Madeleine, in the turban, Florence in the kimono, were flung out across the drawing room sofa, singing languorously along. It was much cooler down here than up in the bedrooms and Flo's mood had softened.

— *They asked me how I knew my true love was true . . .*

You weren't supposed to like the sound of your own voice, but she couldn't help it.

Perhaps one day a man would come quietly up behind her as she sang and stand listening there until she turned around, and jumped, like the people in *Private Lives*, which Maddie had seen and told her all about.

— *Some day I'll find you, moonlight behind you, all of our dreams will come true . . .*

— You always had a very sweet voice, Miranda.

Perhaps she could change her name.

Madeleine lay on the cushions, drinking everything in: the last of the roses, dropping dusky petals on to the window table; the funny old screen, which had been her grandmother's, all Victorian decoupage and yellowing varnish; the portrait of her and Flo which her mother had done when they were little and which Daddy always said was his favourite thing in the house. In two days' time they'd be travelling back to school, where everything was plain and hearty. She would try to hold on to all the things she loved. The room smelled of ash from last night's fire;

dusty sunlight filtered through the window; the gramophone record hissed and sighed, and the singer sounded a hundred miles away.

—*I of course replied,*

Something deep inside cannot be denied . . .

Would she, could she, ever feel like that? Would she walk into a gallery, as her father had done, back from the war and lonely, that was how she imagined it, and see someone walking through the crowd, looking at pictures as he liked to look at them, holding a glass in his hand and turning, catching her eye? Would they know straight away it was real?

The record was winding horribly down, and the singer began to sound as if he was dying, all deep and strangled.

—Put it on again.

—You do it.

But Flo would not move.

—I'm in a trance, she said.

Hugo, returning with the bucket, heard the strains of the song floating out once more.

—*They asked me how I knew my true love was true . . .*

Though the girls had been playing the song off and on all summer, though he knew it by heart, he stood listening now with sudden aching sadness. Not good to keep thinking about the past—that beautiful, golden, filigree of the past—he knew it; most of his thoughts were not worth having anyway, he knew that, too. Hold on to now, be glad of the moment, that was the way to stay steady. But the moment—this moment—was not as it should be, a slow and contented summer afternoon. In two days' time the girls would be gone, and then how empty the place would feel again.

Where had Phyllida gone off to?

How had he ever thought he could keep her happy?

He set down the bucket by the waterbutt and stood looking up at the bank. If he went up and found her returned to the easel he would only interrupt her; yet he needed to know she was back from wherever she'd gone, just needed to know she was here.

—*When a beautiful thing dies, smoke gets in your eyes . . .*

Surely, for once, they could play something else. He went back into the house, walked down over the worn rugs in the corridor and opened the drawing room door.

There they were, singing like angels, all dressed up again, draped across the sofa like something out of Leighton. Light of his life.

—Hello, my darlings.

—Oh. Hello, Daddy.

They opened their eyes and gazed at him from some faraway place.

—Have you done the washing up?

—We were going to help you.

—Never mind.

—Where's Mummy?

—Gone for a walk. I expect she'll be back soon.

The record was winding down again, all those long vowels getting longer and longer until the whole thing became a joke.

—Could you put it on again, Daddy? As you're there.

—What about something else?

And he walked over to the table and looked through the pile of records in their brown paper sleeves.

—What about this?

He slipped it out, Phyllida's favourite. Perhaps if she heard it, returning, it would change her mood.

—*In the wilderness build me a nest, and remain there, for ever at rest . . .*

But as soon as he heard it he knew he was wrong, and how had he not seen it before? This song was not about returning, but leaving for ever, and why should it bring her back to him? What would ever do that?

—Daddy? What are you thinking about?

—Nothing, he said, as he said so often.—Time for tea.

—He's so *ordinary*, said Florence, when he had gone.

Phyllida came back; they had tea on the lawn. The girls took off their dressing-up things and carried up the tray and the cake; he followed with the scalding teapot. The easel had been turned away, and stood facing the wood on the hill. The table was in the shade of the conifers, but even so—

—It's so hot.

—Where did you go for your walk, Mummy?

—Just along the wood. She took off her sunhat and fanned her face.—What have you been doing with yourselves all afternoon? Are you packed?

—Almost.

—I was thinking, said Hugo, digging into the cake,—I was thinking you should have a show. Up in town, I'm sure we could arrange it. That chap in Cork Street, he thought you were terrific.

Phyllida looked at him.

—What do you think? he asked her.—Do it now, I'd say, before things get tricky.

—What do you mean? asked Florence, wiping honey from her fingers.—What kind of tricky?

—He means the war, said Madeleine.—Don't you, Daddy?

—Of course, it might not happen. But I was thinking after lunch, how lucky we are here, so self-contained, all our fruit and veg—

—But won't you have to fight?

—Too old, said Hugo, and really felt it now, under Phyllida's gaze.

—I do not, she said slowly,—Want to have a show. Can you not understand that?

—Well, of course, if you're not ready . . .

—Not ready, not good enough. I don't even want to discuss it.

Hugo, averting his eyes from her gaze, caught the look between his daughters and felt his guts begin to knot.

—Well, now, he began, searching for a change of subject, and then, as a sudden pain, real pain, began to grip him, could not stop his groan, or the clutch at his bulging stomach.

—What? Daddy? What is it? Madeleine had her hand on his arm.

He closed his eyes, and felt himself swim into blackness.

—Put your head down, Phyllida commanded, and he did.

—Get him a glass of water, Flo, said Madeleine, and he heard her get up, and run over the grass.

—Daddy?

—I'm all right, he murmured, and waited for the water. When it came—Here you are, Daddy, here you are—he drank slowly, felt the life flood back.

—That's better. He wiped the back of his neck, opened his eyes, saw them all looking at him.—Sorry. I feel better now. He put the glass on the table, noticed his hand was trembling. Still—the pain was fading.

—Shouldn't have had that second pear, he said.—Indigestion, that's all.

—I'd leave that cake alone if I were you, said Phyllida.

—Quite right. Quite right. Well, now—where were we?

Nobody could remember, nor wanted to. And as he eased himself back into the afternoon, the bees sailing by and the sinking sun turning the windows of the house to gold, he thought how wonderful it was to feel well, it was all that mattered, that and having his family around him; and everything, in the end, would come right, he was sure of it.

Phyllida poured more tea, he kept to water. The cat came out from a long afternoon in the shade and everyone talked to her and about her. After a while, the girls got up and flopped down on the grass; after a while, they fell asleep.

—Sorry I was so tactless, he said to Phyllida.—About the show, I mean.

—It doesn't matter.

—Getting cooler, now.

She pulled her sunhat over her eyes and withdrew. And he sat there watching them all, his darlings, as the shadows deepened, and far above a little light aircraft came droning over from somewhere, leaving its smoky trail.