

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Proof of Love

Written by Catherine Hall

Published by Portobello Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

For my mother and father, with love

Published by Portobello Books 2011

Portobello Books
12 Addison Avenue
London
W11 4QR

Copyright © Catherine Hall 2011

The right of Catherine Hall to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Quotation from ‘The Study of Mathematics’ in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* by Bertrand Russell. Copyright © 1917 The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. Reproduced by permission of The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation Ltd.

“You’re My Best Friend” Words and music by John Deacon © 1975, reproduced by permission of EMI Music Publishing Ltd/Queen Music Ltd, London W8 5SW

“A Whiter Shade Of Pale” written by Gary Brooker, Keith Reid, Matthew Fisher, published by Onward Music Limited. Reproduced by permission.

Excerpt from “Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening,” from the book *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company. Copyright 1951 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author’s imagination and not to be construed as real. The author’s use of names of actual persons, living or dead, and actual places is incidental to the purposes of the plot and is not intended to change the entirely fictional character of the work.

A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978 1 84627 235 6

www.portobellobooks.com

Typeset in Adobe Sabon by
Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed in the UK by CPI William Clowes Beccles NR34 7TL

One

THE SUN WAS ALMOST AT ITS PEAK WHEN DOROTHY WILKINSON noticed the black speck moving down the mountain. It was nearly noon and she was hungry for her lunch. Sitting in the shade of an oak tree, she opened her knapsack and took out a hard-boiled egg. She picked off its shell, dipped it into a newspaper twist of salt, then took a bite, chewing thoughtfully as she watched the ant-like figure inch its way along the narrow road. It was too big to be a sheep, not big enough for one of the rare cars that dared attempt the challenge of the pass. Taking another bite, she leaned back against the tree, waiting. As the speck crept around a bend, it became a shape: a large-framed, old-fashioned bicycle, ridden by someone hunched low over the handlebars as if he were hanging on for his life.

‘Idiot!’ she muttered to herself, half admiring, half amused.

Taking a ham sandwich from its greaseproof wrapper, she went

on eating as she followed the bicycle's jerky progress, moving forward a little, stopping abruptly, its rider lurching over the handlebars, then setting off again, a few yards at a time. She found herself tensing, as if she were riding it herself, holding her breath in anticipation of every jolt.

Let go! she thought, and as if its rider had somehow heard her, the bicycle suddenly began to pick up speed, wobbling at first, gathering momentum, then moving faster until it became almost a blur. It raced down the hill, looping around the snaky curves of the road, disappearing into dips then hurtling back into sudden view. As it came over the final hurdle, a humpback bridge, it left the road and flew through the air, crashing back onto the tarmac to shudder across a cattle grid. After a brief and painful squeal of brakes, everything was mercifully still.

*

At the bottom of the hill the rider stood, blinking and dazed, not quite able to believe he had at last come to a halt. His shoulders heaved as he filled his lungs with gulps of air, tasting the melting tar, giddy with the terror and exhilaration of his descent. For a moment he did not move, feeling only the thudding of his heart, then turned to look at where he had come from. Jagged crags reached for the sky, the opening between them no more than a crack, the road curving along the contours of the mountain. It made him dizzy to remember it.

Flexing his hands, stiff from gripping the handlebars, he turned back. He had the curious sensation of being in a landscape that he almost but not quite recognized. The valley stretched out in front of him, scooped out of the mountains and carpeted with fields split by dry stone walls: an infinity of rocks. Oak trees grew along their edges, dividing them from the hills.

The road wound along the valley bottom like a river, glittering in the sun. A little further from where he stood was a track that led off it, up into the fells. A sign was propped against the wall where it met the road, uneven letters on a slab of grey-blue slate, leaking little rivulets of paint.

Eggs for Sale, 10p/doz.

He wheeled his bicycle forward and looked inside the rusting biscuit tin. It was filled with brown eggs, twelve of them, flecked with dirt and wisps of feather. Picking up the jam jar that stood next to it, he shook it, listening to the dull clink of coins against glass.

He was cautious by nature, but there was something that he liked about the dripping letters, the jam jar and the eggs. He found them oddly reassuring. Besides, he was tired, from the heat and from his journey, and from the thoughts that had filled his head as he cycled, thoughts he had come north to escape. Turning the handlebars, he began to push his bicycle along the dusty track.

*

Hartley Dodds was finishing his lunch when the dogs began to bark, hurling themselves against the door of the barn in which he had locked them. He sat at the table, methodically chewing his last mouthful of potato. The barking was accompanied by a low, warning growl from the old dog chained up outside, rumbling under the rest of the cacophony. As the growling grew louder, he put down his knife and fork, then drained his mug of tea. The others watched as he stood up, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, walked across the room and flung open the door. The barking stopped immediately.

Squinting in the sunlight, he jerked his head in the direction of the awkward figure standing in the middle of the yard. The man came forward, glancing nervously at the tethered dog, keeping his bicycle

between himself and the snarling animal. He was oddly dressed for summer heat, in walking boots, a heavy tweed jacket and flannel trousers held in at the ankles with bicycle clips. His hair was dark with sweat, his face flushed. As he came closer, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and patted his forehead in an oddly formal gesture, as if to make himself presentable.

*

The two men looked at each other warily. The farmer stooped in the low porch, his dark eyes pools of suspicion. Lines were etched into his skin, his features carved by the elements over a lifetime of working outside. Battling his environment had aged him; deep furrows ploughed between his eyebrows and down each side of his mouth. His clothes might have been worn by his father and his grandfather too: heavy hobnailed boots, dark trousers, a checked cotton shirt, well mended but fraying at the collar and cuffs.

Standing opposite, sweat trickling down his back, the newcomer felt raw and out of place. He was beginning to regret his decision to turn up the track, made on the flimsy reassurance of a box of eggs. He knew that when he spoke he would stammer, and he knew it would not be interpreted kindly. The farmer's expression remained impassive as he explained that he wanted to spend the summer working. But when he quickly added that he did not need to be paid for it, the farmer looked at him thoughtfully, assessing the breadth of his shoulders under the folds of his jacket. At last he nodded.

'There's a hut on't fell. Me brother sleeps in it at lambing time. You can have that.'

*

The farmer led the way as they climbed halfway up the mountain that reached high behind the house, walking in silent single file

along the narrow path. By the time they arrived, the newcomer was panting, his shirt heavy with sweat.

The farmer grunted. 'This do you?'

An eager nod.

'Tea's at five. I'll tell me wife to lay another place.'

He turned and set off back down the path, striding through bracken that reached almost to his waist.

*

The newcomer pushed gingerly at the peeling door, uncertain of what might lie behind. It opened onto a single room with rough, unplastered walls. Half-burned twigs and ash littered the makeshift fireplace, spilling out across the earthen floor. The only furniture was a narrow iron bedstead, covered with a woollen blanket and a rolled-up sheep's fleece at its head to serve as a pillow. Next to it, on the floor, was a candle stub stuck onto a saucer, charred matches melted into the pool of wax around it.

He let out a long sigh of relief. The room was small, but to him it was wonderful. He walked over to the bed and sat down, shrugging off his knapsack, then his jacket. For a while he was motionless, feeling his muscles begin to relax as he listened to the sheep bleat in the valley below. Then he folded his jacket neatly and hung it over the bedpost, undid the buckle of his knapsack, loosened its drawstring and took out its contents: a change of shirt and underpants, razor and soap, a well-washed towel, a penknife and a small stack of books. He stood up, holding the books in his hands, and looked about the room. On a small shelf above the fireplace was a ram's horn, curled in on itself like a shell. He arranged his little library on the shelf in order of size, lining the edges up neatly, using the horn as a bookstop, making adjustments until the tip of it faced the room directly.

He was tired from his journey, long days in which the landscape had slowly changed from flat plains to marshy midlands to peaks, as if England grew higher the further north he went. He had ridden through small towns and sullen suburbs, along back roads and bridleways, canal paths and country lanes, his heart pumping as he pushed down on the pedals, his mind always working, picking at his preoccupations. He had slept in pubs and hostels, in ditches and on benches, waking each day to unaccustomed sunshine. It had been warm on his face in the mornings, then hot on his shoulders as it rose high in the sky, beating down on him as he pedalled towards his uncertain destination.

Now he lay down on the bed, his body sinking into the thin mattress. Old sweat, tobacco and wood smoke rose from the blanket to mingle with the fusty smell of wool. From where he was lying, through the doorway, he could see the back of the farm, the tight-stretched washing line in the garden, its row of white sheets bleaching in the sun. Beyond it, on the other side of the valley, was another range of mountains, peaks misty in the afternoon haze, a flock of sheep grazing on its lower pastures. He traced the rocky frontier of a dry stone wall, taking pleasure in its neat construction. He had made the right choice, he thought. Here there would be no distractions. It was the perfect place to grapple with the problems he so badly needed to solve. For the first time in weeks, Spencer Little smiled to himself, and promptly fell asleep.

*

Later that evening, Hartley Dodds was playing dominoes at the Black Tup.

‘He says he’s a student. From down south. At Cambridge University. Doing maths.’

Titch Tyson matched a six to a six. ‘Clever bugger, eh?’

‘I reckon the lad’s a bit cracked. Silly sod came over the pass on a pushbike. In’t middle of the day! He wants his head looking at. We haven’t had a summer this hot as long as I can remember.’

‘And what’s he doing here?’

‘He says he’s on his holidays. Funny sort of holidays, if you ask me.’

‘He says he wants to think,’ Thomas Dodds said quietly.

Hartley shook his head at his brother. ‘He could do his thinking anywhere. That’s what he’s meant to do at his college. He doesn’t need to come here for that.’

The three men reached for their tankards and took long draughts of beer.

‘Anyhow, he doesn’t want paying,’ said Hartley. ‘It’s a free pair of hands.’

Titch added another domino to the line that had started to spread over the table.

‘What does Mary reckon to it?’

‘Eh?’

‘About having a student staying with you.’

‘Not much. She’ll not mind.’

He grinned slyly. ‘I wouldn’t go leaving my wife alone with a clever bugger this late at night.’

Hartley spluttered into his pint.

‘Don’t be daft, man.’

Thomas coughed and rose to his feet. ‘I’ll get another round in.’