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Opening Extract from...

Ferney

Written by James Long

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CHAPTER ONE

It was no accident. A single point of red winked in the distance. It was joined by a second and a third, then the road ahead was a string of red beads. Almost too late, the car slammed to a stop. Gally, who had been lost in thought, looked across at the man she had married.

'What's happening?' she asked.

His mind had been on next week's lectures.

Someone's crashed, he thought. He could see a truck, far ahead in the traffic, angled oddly across the road, but there were diggers and traffic cones and men in reflective jackets – a plausible excuse to keep that explanation at bay for another minute or two. 'Roadworks?' he suggested.

She said nothing, but stared ahead intently and he could hear her starting to breathe more deeply. In the short time they had been married, Gally had been Mike's pride, joy and, increasingly, a source of concern. He had become used to her mild claustrophobia, which, on a bad day, could force them to break a car journey every twenty miles, but what

was starting to happen to her now showed every sign of being considerably worse.

Gally was a poem with a missing line, a symphony with a discordant phrase. Mike was fascinated by her quirky reactions to everyday events. He was starting to get used to her nightmares, or at least starting to recognize the violent, thrashing commotion that would burst around him two or three times every week. Harder by far was the creeping absence which would invade her life for a few days at a time, a slow tide swamping every normally carefree corner of her self. He wanted to help her weather these personal storms. He wanted the smiling Gally, but he knew full well that nothing they had said, no part of the talking, had penetrated a single inch towards the hidden devils she faced.

Her breathing was louder now. 'Do you think someone's crashed?' she asked.

'Roadworks,' he repeated, 'I think it's just the roadworks,' trying to make it true. An uncomfortable fact surfaced in his mind. It was the second time today that she had shown signs of panic and he now realized it was at exactly the same place. They had passed these roadworks on the way down and there had been no sudden traffic jam, no brake lights to generate fear that time. She had been frightened all the same, gripping her knees and breathing in this same heavy way until they were well past.

A man in a safety helmet and a donkey jacket stumped towards them down the column of cars with a spade over his shoulder. Gally wound the window down. 'Has something happened?' she asked.

He had small, angry eyes and looked set on walking straight past until he registered Gally. He swung the spade down and leant on the handle. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'something happened all right. Stupid bloody man walked right in front of that truck, didn't he?'

'Is he . . . hurt?'

The man shrugged. 'Someone's looking after him. Silly bugger should be dead.' A voice shouted from somewhere behind them and the man, frowning, picked up his spade again. 'I'm bloody coming, aren't I?' he shouted back.

Gally turned to Mike. 'It *is* an accident.'

'But the man's all right.'

'He didn't say that.' Her voice trembled on the edge of control. 'Can we go?'

There were perhaps twenty cars ahead, jammed into a coned-off funnel. He looked in his mirror at the van, stopped tight behind him. 'There's no room.'

She moaned and it tore at his heart. 'Okay, Gally, hang on.'

Thirty yards ahead, there was a country lane going off to the left. He hauled the wheel over and drove on to the grass verge, glimpsing the startled face of the passenger in the car in front as they bumped past it. The exhaust pipe scraped on a stone and he looked uneasily ahead wondering what else might be hidden in the long grass. A sign, pointing down the turning, said PENSELWOOD.

Gally's mood changed sharply as soon as they were clear of the main road. As they drove up the lane she lowered the window and sniffed the air appreciatively.

'This is better,' she said. 'Much better. Thank you.'

'Have a look at the map, would you?' he said. 'It's in the glove compartment. We need to find a way back to the road.'

'Let's go on. I'd like to see Penselwood.' She lingered over the name. 'You never know. This might be the place.'

'I thought you wanted time to stop at Stonehenge?' he said. 'It's been a long day. There won't be time for both.'

Gally was unhappy in towns and in the three months since she had lost the baby the search for a cottage had provided a welcome distraction. It hardly mattered to Mike whether or not they found the right house. He didn't even know if he wanted one. The process of looking was enough. It was a search they conducted in their own different ways. Mike did everything in an orderly fashion. He would ring round estate agents, look through the local papers, read the details carefully and make an organized shortlist of the possible houses, listing their pros and cons. Gally would ruffle his hair absently as he showed her the photographs. She'd smile as they went round the houses, then suddenly, nostrils flaring like a gun-dog, she'd be off up the road, into someone else's drive, knocking at the door, asking complete strangers if they wanted to sell. Mike found it embarrassing, but for her sake he put up with it. For her sake, most people would put up with most things.

Gally had the power to light up those around her with a transforming energy, but that power was eclipsed all too often. There was no malice in her troubles. They were a pain she inflicted only on herself. She was unsettled by

travel, but always restless, searching for new places that never seemed to give her what she sought; there was a deep hurt within her. Her mother, an elderly and bitter woman to whom her connections were puzzlingly loose, always turned away from Mike's questions, on the rare occasions when they talked at all.

'It was her father's death,' Gally's mother had said, once and once only. 'It's a thing to forget.'

The woman had stared at him with flat, sealed eyes that showed the depth of denial in her and promised extreme anger if he dared to press her further. It filled him with a fear that the hurt would one day claim Gally entirely.

When they first went to bed together, she had stopped him with a hand on his chest. He thought she was having second thoughts but all she said was, 'I have bad dreams. You mustn't mind.'

Seeing her in perfect nakedness for the first time, her words had passed him by until he was shocked awake by the thrashing, screaming figure at his side in the early hours of the morning.

She had sobbed something that sounded like 'the burn man' as he held her and tried to calm her, but in the end she went back to sleep and in the morning she had been so embarrassed that he hadn't asked any more.

If that was the bad side, the good side was so good that, when his mind sprang back into the private world of organized intellectual thought from which she so often dragged him, it made him feel desiccated, dull and only half real. She was illogical, unpredictable and overloaded with intu-

ition, but people all around her seemed to shine brighter when she came near.

He thought back two years to the moment when he had first noticed her – only two years; a monsoon that had ended his drought, a man who feared he had missed his prime altogether, then found bestowed on him the most unexpected gift. They were both tall, but where he stilted along, stiff legs in uncertain conflict with the ground, she had flowed as she walked off the London streets into his lecture, her dark chestnut hair in liquid motion round a wide, smiling face. Most of the students arrived as they always did in little knots, buzzing with lightweight conversation until the moment when he could compel their silence and unroll a thick layer of medieval history, like sound insulation, across the lecture theatre. A few who lived only in the cerebral world came in by themselves, moving quickly, with downturned eyes, to their isolated places where they would perform fussy rituals with pens, impatient for him to start.

She also came in alone, not furtively but with total assurance, looking round at all the people, who were clearly strangers to her, with an open, interested air that said she knew exactly who she was and why she chose to be there. He was quite sure she'd never come before, because he would certainly have noticed. Though it was the very stuff of his professional life, something in him still rebelled against giving lectures, making his voice the conduit of destruction by which his perfect notes were shredded and distorted into amateur, imperfect ears. Very nice, he'd thought momentarily. Very, very nice. But then she had to

take second place to the strain of keeping track of what he wanted to say.

At the end, perfectly, she had chosen to approach him and she had shaken his beliefs. 'Hierarchies and social order: The evidence of the Domesday Book' had been the subject of the lecture. She had stood nearby, waiting her turn as a handful of students, more eager to make an impression than to gain knowledge, advanced ill-thought-out ideas and misunderstood his answers. When they had all gone, she finally spoke.

'Would you mind if I said that people aren't quite like that?' she had said.

'What?'

'It was very good. I enjoyed it, but I think you were describing lists, not people.'

He had frowned and wished immediately it had been a smile. 'We have to rely on our sources. Domesday is the best record we could hope to . . .'

'No, I know, and I really liked listening, but I just feel it's a mistake to make it sound like the people stepped out of its pages, all fitting in columns. It's like someone in a thousand years' time trying to describe us now, when all they've got to go by is a train timetable.'

His surprise at this unaccustomed temerity was kept in bounds by the fascination of staring into her huge eyes. He tried to hold his ground.

'That's a pretty big subject. You have to remember that society was a whole lot more rigid then. There wasn't room for much divergence.'

She just smiled and shook her head and said, with total certainty, 'People don't change. There are all sorts now and there always have been.'

'They didn't have much cultural elbow-room to be different. Not until the fifteenth century or so.'

'How do you know it changed then?'

'We've got material; the Paston letters – correspondence from then on.'

'Ah. It's the letters then, isn't it? That's what changed. The evidence, not the people.'

'I've never seen you before. Are you a student here?'

She had put her hand to her mouth in sudden alarm. 'Oh no, I hope you don't mind. I sometimes just pop into lectures if I'm passing. I love history, you see. Isn't that allowed?'

He didn't care whether it was allowed – he only cared that it removed the ethical barrier to asking her to lunch with him, and he'd been warming himself in her flame ever since. There had never been any doubt on his part. A photograph might not have made her look pretty in frozen cross-section, but life showed her to be lovely, always moving, often smiling, exhaling happiness and unstinting interest, leaving behind her a warm trail of returned smiles from all those on whom she had turned that illuminating face. When her unpredictable darkness claimed her, she would battle to keep it to herself or, failing, search out a corner to hide it.

Mike wondered almost constantly what she saw in him. Neither had any conscious recognition that there was a

faint echo of her face in his. The spacing of his eyes, the geometry of his cheeks, was such that if age made her gaunt, then in thirty or forty more years she might look just a little like he did now. That and something in their scent was enough for the chemical spark. History did the rest. He responded to her passionate need to discuss what came before, understood it and could stoke the fire with facts. History was soothing to her, indeed sometimes the only way she could be calmed when her unexpected, terrible sadness would strike. At her hospital bed after the miscarriage, she had wanted him to tell her old tales of kings and queens.

The offer from Georgetown University had been in the wind for three or four months, but he hadn't mentioned a word until he knew it was firm. Washington seemed to offer a new start. He tried to prepare the way, shifting his tales to American history, but those stories failed to hold her interest. When he told her outright that he had been offered the teaching job he had always dreamed of, she tried to fake it, tried to pretend there was nothing she would like more than to go to America with him, but the nightmares redoubled and her anxiety during her waking hours was so terrible to see that, in the end, he asked her outright if the thought of moving scared her. After a long silence she told him that, yes, it did.

He turned the job down for her without saying another word, but a small, bitter, irrepressible voice kept telling him that he had just given up the best chance his career would ever be offered. It was a heavy, heavy blow to him,

but he tried not to add to her suffering by letting her see it, tried not to mind when it became clear, as she recovered, that moving was exactly what she did want, as long as it wasn't away from England. He didn't understand the sense of that, but he went along with it because he had never expected to be offered the delight of love and this was nearer than he could have hoped of getting to it, despite the price he had to pay.

So, when her physical recovery allowed, they had started on a quest in which he felt largely a passenger. They always went west. He tried to show her the Suffolk coast but she was merely polite about it. She amassed a box of Ordnance Surveys covering the whole of Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset. He offered her Devon but it was beyond the range of her passion. She did not just want a house – she wanted a story. The villages they visited in search of the haven she needed were judged by their part in history, and usually found wanting. Only old cottages would do and the ones that came nearest were the ones where the owners could tell a tale or two of their past.

They came to a junction of lanes. 'I think we ought to go home,' Mike said. 'It's going to take ages to get back to London.' He was thinking of the work he had to do, dusting down his lecture notes on early maritime trading links.

'Just this one, I promise. Penselwood's down there, it says. I want to see Penselwood. This is much more the sort of place.'

So close to the road that caused you pain, he wondered.

Perhaps it wasn't the road, perhaps it was some chance arrangement of the cones or the colour of the digger.

'If you'd said that before we wouldn't have wasted all day round Castle Cary,' he grumbled. Then it struck him: 'Penselwood? I'm sure I know that name.'

'A battle?'

'Maybe.'

She smiled happily, knowing she'd won as he turned the car down the lane.

They did a slow tour of scattered houses without ever being sure they had found the centre of the village. There was one 'For Sale' sign, but the tiny cottage behind it had fake carriage lanterns and fake bottle glass in plastic window frames and they didn't even stop. Eventually, they turned and came back to where the road forked.

'Nothing there,' said Mike, relieved that she hadn't decided to knock on anyone's door.

'Try down here,' she said, pointing down the fork the other way. 'It probably goes back to the main road anyway.'

He could see no reason to suppose that was true, but he did as she asked and they had only gone a short way down the narrow, curving lane when she said, 'Stop a minute.'

'What for?'

'I just want to look.'

He didn't argue because he could see that she was back – that higher Gally who always eventually came out from behind her clouds.

From anywhere else but that precise spot they might not have noticed it, or so Mike supposed at the time, but as

soon as Gally got out she pointed at the ivy-covered silhouette of the chimney poking up behind the trees.

'There's a house in there,' she exclaimed in delight. 'Right where I wanted it to be.'

'A house?' he said as he got out to join her. 'Where?'

To the north, beyond a sparse screen of trees, pasture stretched uphill. The ground to the south of the lane fell gradually away to the flat farmland stretching past Gillingham to Shaftesbury's distant ridge. A trio of beeches on the edge of the road almost hid the house, the hint of a gable showing man's intruding straight edges to those who looked hard enough. She was already at the gate, a rotten, slimy thing held by bent wire and baler twine. There was a small clearing beyond, perhaps a farmyard once, and he followed her through, feeling like a trespasser, envying her ease.

It was not much more than a shell, and a green, wet-looking shell at that, though it still had a roof. Long and low, the jumbled lines of stonework told of changes over the busy years. The roof-line took a curtsey towards the far end. Stone lintels topped glassless window frames filled with ivy, and from the middle of the house a buckled wooden-latticework porch jutted out, tilting down on to its knees from the weight of the creeper that had massed on it. The door was a sheet of stained plywood, held in place by a diagonal plank that spelled closure and abandonment. Everywhere there were creepers, wild bushes and saplings; nature's demolition team inching apart the mortared joints of man's temporary work. On the far side of the clearing,

pines burst up through the deep undergrowth that covered the lower slope of the hill. Beyond the house, in among the bushes, were angles of walls, buried stumps of old stone outhouses and a collapsing corrugated-iron shed.

Gally turned slowly right round with her arms outspread then hugged herself and jumped up and down. 'It's perfect,' she said. 'This is it.'

Mike felt a cold shudder that started at his chequebook. 'It's a ruin.'

'That just means no one's had a chance to spoil it.'

'It will cost a fortune to fix.'

'How do you know?'

'It's not for sale.'

'Well, you can't have it both ways. If it's not for sale, it won't cost a fortune.'

He smiled, turned and squeezed between the bushes and the end wall. The far side of the house was covered in cracked rendering. The ground fell away into a little valley, choked with the soapy corpses of fallen trees, fused under a shroud of moss. Gally moved past him and went down on her knees in the leaf-mould and the brambles, delving with her fingers into the dense decay.

'Look,' she said. A line of flowers he didn't recognize was pushing its way through. In front of them, a row of curved tiles edged what had once been a flowerbed.

'Someone loved this once. Think what it would look like if we cleared the valley. We could plant daffodils all the way down.' She got up. 'Come on,' she said, grabbing his hand and pulling. 'Let's look inside.'

The plywood sheet where the door had once been was no obstacle. It was nailed to a rotten frame that crumbled as she pushed it. 'Hang on,' he said. 'I don't know if we should . . .'

'It's all right.' She sounded excited. 'No one's going to mind.'

It seemed to him suddenly that going inside would be a good idea. The desolation they would find would persuade her this was not the comfortable country haven she craved and for which they had searched all these past weekends. That thought overcame his scruples about trespassing, but once indoors he soon found the house was not on his side in the matter. Under the vegetation, the roof was obviously still good. It still felt like a house. She stopped in front of him, seemed about to speak, but then moved on. They were in a passage that ran the length of the building, filled with green ivy half-light. Four large rooms opened off it in a line. There were stone flags on the floor in the first three, covered by decaying domestic jetsam – tiles, yellowing magazines and a discarded boiler, red with rust. Below each window there was an arc of damp on the stones, very clearly defined, where the house had said, 'Stop, that's far enough.' Apart from that it was dry; damaged by intruders, not by weather. Horsehair plaster hung in long dusty strips from the walls and holes had been poked in the ceilings so that splintered laths dangled, rimming the edge of the holes like exit wounds.

'Oh dear,' he said. 'It's a bit past it, isn't it?'

Her voice had soft wonder in it. 'Poor thing. It's been so brave. It just needs some love.' She turned away from him. 'It's all right,' she said, 'we're here now.'

They went on into the room at the end and he heard her give a small, sad groan. Here the house had suffered its death wound. The far end wall was bulging, cracked and crumbled, roof timbers sagging into a gap, unsupported as the gable leaned outwards. There were no flagstones here, just wooden floorboards with their strength almost gone and white mould spreading across them. One had been pulled up. There was a cast-iron range in the end wall and the nearer corner steps led down into the darkness of a cellar. Gally moved towards it and the floorboards creaked and cracked under her. Before she got to the first step, her foot caught a lump of plaster lying on the boards and it shot forward into the hole, but instead of an eventual thump there was an immediate splash. Mike knelt and peered down. Six inches below the level of the floor, black water glinted, sullen and disconcerting. The cellar steps disappeared into it. Fragments of dried, rotten wood from the boards drifted down on to it as he looked and he saw them move with deliberate speed out of sight beyond the fringes of the hole in the planking.

'It's a stream,' he said aghast. 'It's running water.' He stood and stepped back, heard a footfall on the boards behind him and knew immediately with a rush of shaming fear that where there had been two of them, there were now three.

He turned and found himself face to face with an old man, gazing at him with grim, questioning suspicion. Two clear eyes locked on his, challenging his presence with disconcerting authority.