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The Misinterpretation of Tara Jupp

Written by Eva Rice

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The Misinterpretation of Tara Jupp

Eva Rice



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,
organizations, places and events portrayed in it, while at times based on
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Me and Them

Like I said, everything began with Lucy. And why wouldn't it? Back then Lucy was fourteen and sensational, and quite capable of being the first person on the printed page of any book. She had an appeal that I know I am going to find hard to define, but I suppose I could start by saying that very few have even a little of what she had in spades. She was the Great Looker among us, and the only one of us girls to have inherited Ma's features; in fact, there was so little of Pa in her, it was as though she had been reproduced by binary fission. Photographs of mother and daughter made for curious viewing. Their physical make-up was so similar – the sludge-green eyes, the long, dark hair with its hint of a wave, framing identical, sharp noses and perfect cheekbones – yet it was as if Lucy's picture had been sprinkled with stardust. She was irresistible for the contradictions she inspired; without very much effort she combined a childlike humour with a proper, grown-up allure that made Eve seem merely frivolous.

It was odd; people felt compelled to discuss her the *whole* time. When we were growing up, no one ever stopped saying what a beauty she had become and what a heartbreaker she was

going to be, which always struck me as stating the blinking obvious. I mean, from the moment Lucy started to wear a bra, hearts started to break. If anyone, even now, were to ask me what I recall most about my life before the age of ten, it would be the continual presence of boys around my sister. They were all healthily afraid of Pa, particularly as he was the vicar, but not even the threat of his wrath could quell their passion for his eldest daughter. They were always very friendly to *me*, and frequently asked me to relay messages to her: '*Tell your sister I love 'er! Ask yer sister out to the pictures Saturday, will you?*' etc., and I would ask: '*Which sister?*' But I knew perfectly well. She was the only one of us capable of causing havoc simply by walking into a room.

My parents got married and had their first child when they were just nineteen. Ma was forever telling us all that 'in her day people didn't think twice, they just got on and married the first person who asked them' – a statement that never failed to make me queasy with anxiety. She met Pa in Manchester, where he was a cobbler's apprentice and she was spending six months teaching French in a school for the poor, opened by her philanthropic godmother, Lady Elizabeth Wray. Ma, brought up by indulgent, well-heeled parents in the soft-stoned beauty of Bath, was shocked to the very core by northern England – its smoke, fog and industry, its bitter cold, the bleak winter followed by a summer where the sunlight seemed not to sparkle but to spit on the water on the River Tame. Quite apart from learning French and helping Those Less Fortunate Than Ourselves, Ma was a keen amateur dramatist whose greatest pleasure in life was singing – she spent every spare evening listening to records or tramping down to the Theatre Royal to watch some gruesome cabaret or other. The story goes that one evening, after watching

an enthusiastic production of *Girl Crazy*, Pa nearly ran Ma over on his bicycle. Off flew her specs (she was almost blind without them), so he picked them up and handed them to her, and promptly asked her if she'd like to go with him to a dance that Friday night. Apparently Ma said yes before she'd even got her glasses back on, which means that either she was scared stiff of Pa's booming voice, or she was so lonely she would have agreed to go out with anyone who showed her the slightest bit of interest.

They went to the dance together, where they drank Guinness and talked about dogs, lemon drizzle cake and a mutual admiration for Arthur Conan Doyle, and that was that; he asked her to be his wife two months later. Pa's height (nearly six foot six) and his girth (gigantic), coupled with a speaking voice of such volume and confidence that in later years his sermons had people practically running out of church and throwing themselves into the nearest river to repent of their sins, made refusal unthinkable. Ma once told me that it had been as though Michelangelo's *David* had proposed to her, he was so strong, so sure, so *overwhelming*. 'Could I have a day or two to think?' would have been out of the question.

It mattered not one jot to Ma that they were from such different backgrounds; if anything Pa's working-class roots were part of the draw. Her own mother – who had despaired of the match until the evening before the wedding, when her spaniel, Warwick, fell into a well, and was rescued by Pa, a thick piece of rope and an excellent pair of boots – often used to say that it was precisely *because* of their differences that the marriage was such a success.

'Sarah Merrywell, you landed on your feet with that man,' my grandmother used to say. 'To think! You almost ended up in

the *theatre* – or worse – with an earl! He has saved you from the greatest threat there is.'

'What's that?' Ma would ask, winking at us.

'Oneself, of course.'

He was by any standards a difficult man, was Pa – fixated on tennis, of all things. While most lads around Pa's way and of his age yearned to be like Thomas 'Tommy' Browell, the genius footballer for Manchester City, Pa would rather have been Wimbledon winner Tony Wilding. His enthusiasm for the game had come from his own father who, before the war, had ploughed horses on a big estate north of Yorkshire where a tennis court next to the cowsheds had provided the farmhands with hours of entertainment. To my grandfather's great disappointment, Pa was no good at the sport himself, but what he did have was a great understanding of how to play, and a voice loud enough to bellow instructions from the net.

Very early in their marriage, Pa made two promises to himself. The first was to improve his first service, the second was to *take* his first service. Yes, Pa's second fixation was God, who he claimed he had always known would 'get him in the end'. A year after he married Ma, Pa decided that nothing was going to stop him from joining the Priesthood, and Ma (who, apart from anything else, recognized that Pa was a showman at heart) encouraged him. Their move to Cornwall came back down to the old tennis racket (ha ha). Pa was offered a substantial parish in York, a glorious church with a junior choir twice winners at the Eisteddfod, but he and Ma rejected it in favour of the Rectory, in the village of Trellanack, near Truro, because the house contained within its limited grounds an ancient tennis court. No matter that we would never have the money to restore the court to former glory, no matter that the Rectory – despite being designed

by Pugin – had damp patches on the bedroom ceilings from blocked gutters on the leaking roof, an outside lavatory and a reputation for being haunted – Pa had been struck blind by the loveliness it all and the strange notion that he would sire a tennis prodigy through whom he could live – or play – vicariously. He reasoned that if he and Ma had plenty of children, the probability of having at least one with an iota of talent and drive in the sporting arena was fairly high. He was a man of conviction and determination, and with every one of us that appeared, fresh hope for Wimbledon victory emerged.

And plenty of us appeared; my parents had children very easily. The first born was E.J., in 1938 – a year after she and Pa first met. He wasn't called E.J. when he was born, of course, he was merely Jack, but 'Errant' became a prefix when he started skipping school and then much later on decided to become an artist and moved to France. Growing up with Jack at the start of the register was a tough thing: he was that infuriating sort who never remembered birthdays but had that way of making everyone feel so delighted when he appeared that all his sins were instantly forgiven. Eighteen months after him came George, who had poster-boy looks yet wanted to go into the Church like Pa – our mother suggested that it was a sensible choice as it would be the only place he would be able to escape the swooning girls. A year after George came Lucy, about whom you already know plenty. Then came the twins, Florence and Imogen, and fifteen months after, little old me. Bringing up the rear a most unusual eight and a half years later came Roy and Luke, a year and a half apart. Ma felt that she couldn't leave Roy on his own, so far behind the rest of us, which is why she decided to have another baby to keep him company – but I will come to that in a minute.

We lived under Pa's iron thumb, and abided (when he was looking our way) by his twin philosophies: Hard Work Pays Off and Many Hands Make Light Work – a convenient one with a family the size of ours, and one which Lucy was always challenging with her lazy-girl's mantra: 'Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth.' Yet despite his forcefulness and his desire to have everything in order, Pa, an only child himself, could often be found sitting in his study with a slightly stunned look on his face when we were all at home, almost, Lucy said, as though he'd inadvertently wandered into the wrong house and was trying to work out the quickest way to grab his wife and leave.

Ma gave birth with the same attitude with which she laid a fire or prepared a Sunday roast – with minimum fuss and maximum efficiency. She also claimed that before every one of us was born she knew whether we were girls or boys. She even managed to give birth to Imogen just eight months after Florence, hence them being known as the twins when they weren't really twins at all. What happened was that Ma had popped out Florence, and fallen pregnant a mere six weeks later. Imogen then arrived early (a trait that was to become a habit), and weighed only four and a half pounds, but Ma wrapped her up and put her in the cot with her closest sister for comfort. The doctors warned her that she might always be a little backward, but she wasn't at all, except she stuttered when she was nervous or excited, which unfortunately for Imogen was most of the time.

Imogen was Ma's favourite. She never said so, but I think all of us sensed it. She was a sweet and good and generally helpful girl who aged eighteen became a teacher in the village school, and liked making jam and didn't mind picking up spiders and throwing them out the window. She always said, 'Happy landing, Mr Spidey!' which drove Lucy crackers.

'How do you know it's a mister?' she would ask crossly.

'Because a lady spider would never spend so long in the bath.'

When we were little, Ma's preference for Imo bothered Lucy very much.

'Of all the choice she had, what on earth makes *her* so special?'

'Maybe it was the fact that she was born six weeks early,' George would say.

'I heard E.J. say you should never trust anyone who's ever early for anything.'

'Well, he *would* say that.'

'What do you mean?'

'Beautiful people are never early. They know the rest of the world will wait for them.'

'Oh, shut up.'

Florence didn't mind that Ma preferred Imogen. She just did her own thing and listened – from a very young age – to a great deal of jazz and blues. I was music mad, as anyone with any sense was, and had a thing about a Jewish firecracker called Alma Cogan whom I had spied on the television a couple of times, and who looked like a princess from another land in her outrageous frocks. E.J. bought me one of her records for my ninth birthday, and I played it until it was too scratched and worn to play any longer. There was no one else on the planet I would rather be – I even called *both* my teddy bears Alma, to the irritation of all. But it was Ma who made us play and sing *ourselves.* She would sit at the piano with us every night, singing her heart out as though none of us were there, her eyes half closed, her children worshipping at her feet. She didn't sense us there at all. She was up onstage somewhere, staring out at the lights. She was, while she sang, the girl that she had been before she met Pa. All I ever wanted to do was to learn to play the

piano like her, and by my sixth birthday I had taught myself shaky versions of much of the score from *Carousel*. Naturally in love with the instrument, I would sit for hours on end practising until interrupted. It was something that Ma encouraged, just like she pressed upon us that as soon as you could open your mouth to talk – you should sing.

Two of us were better singers than the rest: Lucy and me. The others could hold a tune pleasantly enough – with the exception of George, who had Pa's booming timbre without ever landing on the right note at the right time. I sang because it was something I couldn't *not* do, it consumed me, swallowed me whole. I listened to instruction, I read music, I learned my craft from the masters, and, as a result, I soared ahead even further. Lucy sang for fun, and nearly always with an expression of amused indifference, as if she could take it or leave it, but if she *was* taking it, then she had the clout to keep up with the best of them. Naturally enough, this annoyed me. Why the voice had been given to Lucy, and not to Imogen, who adored opera, made me question the fairness of the Almighty. Ma realized very quickly that she wasn't going to get anywhere by pressing her dreams on to Lucy – so she directed them all at me instead.

As soon as she recognized that I could impersonate Alma, I had Ma's complete attention, the full, chaotic force of her unrealized dreams.

'I wish I could sing like you, Tara,' she would say to me when everyone else had spilled out of the dining room and upstairs to bed.

'You *can*, Ma,' I said, eight years old and puzzled by her, because I believed it to be true.

'If I had had your voice, I would have done something with it.'

'Like what?'

Ma would shake her head at the sheer width of possibility.

'I would have used it to become famous. I would have travelled the world, married a film star—'

'But you married Pa!'

'Exactly.' She looked at me, then down at her hands. 'Use what you've got, Tara.'

'How do you mean?'

Ma pulled a thread from the hem of my nightie and snapped it off. She never answered the question.

And it was hard, being part of such a large family; difficult to make voices heard, whether asking for the marmalade across the breakfast table, or for help with homework. Ma was a brilliant yet strangely distant mother, full of contradictions. She was irresistible when something made her laugh, but impenetrable when she disliked someone or something we had said to her. When she was cross, she spoke like a child about wanting to run away from everyone and everything, yet when she was happy it seemed she had the wisdom of all the world within her five-foot-five frame. She couldn't resist giggling when she saw pretty men staring at her, but glared at the boys who whistled at Lucy. She held all of us in the palm of her hand, Pa especially, and she knew it. Her real delight had been with newborn babies; Pa was later to tell me that when each one of us learned to walk and talk, she mourned. Then she would be pregnant again, so the aching ceased. Sometimes she would try to tell us how it felt to carry a baby inside you for nine months. It felt alien, something that I couldn't ever imagine happening to me. She often spoke as though she wouldn't always be with us, something that never struck us as odd at the time.

'You'll always look after the rest of them, won't you?' she'd say to E.J. when he was home.

'Hmm.'

'Just in case.'

'In case of what?'

These short bursts of conversation failed to prepare us for when it happened. Her last baby, our youngest brother, Luke, had been a difficult birth, her worst by some margin. She had gone into labour very suddenly one afternoon, two weeks early; she was at home with only thirteen-year-old Lucy by her side, and Lucy, of all of us, was the most impractical, the one who felt sick at the sight of blood and turned green at the concept of pain.

By the time the midwife arrived, all Lucy had managed to do was surround Ma with glasses of water. A complication with the position of the baby resulted in her losing an awful lot of blood, and the speed at which it happened meant that she gave birth in her bedroom without a midwife. Luke had been the wrong way round, and two weeks later Ma still hadn't properly recovered. She was told that she had a severe infection, and just ten days after this she went to sleep and never woke up. Lucy was wrecked by her death, convinced that it was somehow her fault. It wasn't of course, but Lucy was thirteen and terrified. She once told me that she felt certain that if it had been Imogen with Ma when she was bleeding, she would have known what to do, and Ma would have lived.

'Imo's not a doctor,' I remember Jack saying to her. 'She wouldn't have done any better than you.'

'Too good for us,' whispered George, his new suit falling off his skinny frame at Ma's funeral. 'She was just too good for us.'

The day after Ma's funeral another thing happened that Lucy

and I would never forget. We fell off the bike we were sharing – I was sitting on the handlebars while she pedalled downhill – and both of us ended up in hospital. Lucy was allowed to leave after an hour, but I was sick – so bad was the pain, and the bewildering harshness of knowing that Ma was gone forever. My ankle was bandaged and I went home three days later, and the village felt black then – and every afternoon afterwards and throughout the whole of that bitter winter. Without Ma the world felt horrible. That was the only word I can think of when I look back on that first year without her. *Horrible.* I couldn't seem to lose the limp from that fall – it was a slight, but nonetheless noticeable, thing – a constant reminder of that time, a physical pain stemming from my left foot that symbolized an anguish that we *all* felt.

And after she died, all we Jupp children became more ourselves than ever.

Jack became more Errant than ever before – it was the year after Ma's death that he vanished to France without leaving so much as a note for the rest of us. George became more convinced than ever that he wanted to follow Pa into the Church, and gave up staring at girls on the bus. Imogen became more anxious, her stutter more pronounced. Florence became spikier, harder to read, more fixated with obscure jazz. Lucy was the worst affected of us all, though we didn't find out how until much later. In all, it was as though Ma's complex and contradictory character had been dispersed throughout all of us, with one aspect of her personality assigned to each of her children.

And me? I became more awkward and difficult, and obsessed by horses, who I decided were my only friends in the cruel world, etc., etc. In the years after Ma died, I took to – how shall I put it? – *borrowing* horses whenever the urge to ride became too much to bear. I fancied myself as a gypsy, and would set my

alarm and sneak out of the house early in the morning and saunter through the village towards the biggest and grandest place in the district: Trellanack House.

Built in 1764 by the Wells-Devoran family, Trellanack's surrounding park was awash with ponies. The current Lady W-D was a former Olympic three-day-eventer, who – aged sixty-one – collected Shetland ponies like we collected cigarette cards. We only ever saw her in church, where she sat with her daughter Matilda, who went to boarding school and never spoke to any of us, though we were bonded by the unhappy coincidence that her father had died of pneumonia just two months after our mother. Pa had to conduct the funeral service, and famously broke down while quoting from St Mark – something that filled me with shame and love at the same time when I heard about it from Thomas, Pa's indiscreet verger. Pa's tears for our mother were the only ones that fell on the day Sir Lionel Wells-Devoran was buried; the owner of Trellanack House was not a man who appeared to have inspired love in anyone. Certainly his wife seemed curiously unaffected by her husband's departure – she was full of hearty Good Morrows at Easter and Christmas, and seemed to have acquired a spring in her step that none of us had noticed before. She must be as tough as an old bridle, I thought, and Matilda too. I certainly don't think she would have been especially thrilled to know what I was doing on her land, but oh! It was so easy!

I merely had to stand at the bottom of the mile-long drive and hold out half an apple to have whichever animal I liked. Most conveniently for me, there was a dip in the park that meant it was possible for me to scramble under the post-and-rail fence, mount the nearest horse and ride as much as I liked without being seen from the house. I had fabricated a halter from an old

girdle belonging to a visiting Roman Catholic priest friend of Pa's, and would slip this formerly holy vestment over the horse's head and ride bareback for a thrill-making twenty minutes or so, before leaping off again and returning home to breakfast as though butter wouldn't melt in my mouth. I can't say that I didn't get nervous – according to Thomas the verger, Sir Lionel was reputed to haunt the house and grounds wearing a life-jacket and shouting for his mother (he had survived the *Titanic*, aged five) but then Thomas liked putting the wind up me and seeing me frightened. My sisters were amused by my equine exploits, and George admired my cunning, yet to me it was nothing to do with providing entertainment, nor being rebellious. It was all about wanting to move all the time, to be a part of something bigger than myself.

When I was riding, I could forget that Ma had gone, I could forget that I didn't know where I was going. Singing and riding took me somewhere different, in both the literal and metaphysical senses. And riding at Trellanack was like being transported to a strange, wonderful dreamscape, where I could forget everything in the power of movement. Those early-morning jaunts saved me from the cruel stab of missing Ma and I had no intention of stopping – not for anyone.

Above all, when I was on a horse, or part of the choir, I was something more than Lucy Jupp's sister. Back then – it was all that I lived for.