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The Burial

Written by Courtney Collins

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The Burial

COURTNEY COLLINS



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For my mother, with love



‘The truth of the heavens is the stars
unyoked from their constellations
and traversing it like escaped horses.’
Jean Giraudoux, ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’

‘This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.
My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.’
Pablo Neruda, ‘Tonight I Can Write’

‘How could we ever keep love a-burning day after day if it wasn’t
that we, and they, surrounded it with magic tricks . . .’
Harry Houdini

This is a work of fiction—inspired by art, music, literature and the landscape, as much as the life and times of Jessie Hickman herself.

PRELUDE TO DEATH

WHO HASN'T HEARD of Harry Houdini? The Big Bamboozler. The Great Escapologist. The Loneliest Man in the World.

It is 1910. Harry Houdini, the World's Wonder, the Only and Original, is up to his armpits in mud. Intractable fingers of seagrass and kelp surge around him. With his eyes open, he can see movement and murky shadows.

He knows that above him twenty thousand people—stevedores, clerks, women in hats—anticipate his death. They line Queens Bridge three deep. Past Flinders Street Station, all the way to Princes Bridge, they crane their necks and jostle for a view. Some have fallen over, tripped on hems and the clerk's pointed shoe, to see him, the World's Wonder, dive into the Yarra, handcuffed and wrapped in chains.

Slapped by seagrass, shrinking from shadows, Houdini brings his wrists to his mouth. With his teeth he pulls out a pin, one from each handcuff. The cuffs fall free and sink further down.

Houdini grabs at the weeds around him to anchor himself. They are loose and rootless, like slack rope. It is as if the river has no base—just layers and layers of sediment floating upon each other.

He tucks up his short legs and digs his knees into the sludge. His knee scrapes against some rock or reef and he reaches down to follow its seam. He runs his hand over a moss-covered thing, smooth, becoming fibrous, until his fingers catch in the familiar loops of a chain. The chain is thick and he follows its links until his hands hit up against a leg iron. And though he is running out of breath and he has yet to free himself from the locks around his neck, his hands seize around the thing within the leg iron. It breaks off. An ankle? A foot? Certainly not rock.

The thing is a thing of limbs.

Houdini gags. He takes in water. The taste is rotten. The thing of limbs is so eaten away by fish that Houdini's grasp has freed it. He is still clutching part of its brittle remains when the larger part of the body floats up and over him. It is the bluntest of shadows.

Houdini beats into the sediment with his legs, stirring up a cloud of silt and other undiscovered things. He swims upwards at an angle, away from the cloud, away from the body, and reaches into his swimsuit for a key. He is just below the surface, veiled by murky water, when he finally frees himself from the locks around his neck. He breaks the surface and raises the locks above his head. Twenty thousand people cheer.

His wet curls conceal his face from the crowd as he turns in the water, searching for the body, the bloated mass. The river reveals nothing but ripples moving unevenly out to sea.

Houdini treads water, waiting for a boat. His chest aches. The rowers move too slowly, their oars striking and slicing the water in a rhythm that does not match the urgency he feels. He coughs and spits as they grow nearer. Finally, one of the rowers reaches down to him while the other balances the boat.

You swallow the river, Mr Houdini?

Houdini does not answer. He grips the man's arm and hauls himself up and into the boat.

Houdini is silent as the two men row him back to shore. His eyes continue to search the surface of the water but there is no sign of the bloated body and he cannot think of how to explain it or who to tell.



I

IF THE DIRT could speak, whose story would it tell? Would it favour the ones who have knelt upon it, whose fingers have split turning it over with their hands? Those who, in the evening, would collapse weeping and bleeding into it as if the dirt was their mother? Or would it favour those who seek to be far, far from it, like birds screeching tearless through the sky?

This must be the longing of the dirt, for the ones who are suspended in flight.

Down here I have come to know two things: birds fall down and dirt can wait. Eventually, teeth and skin and twists of bone will all be given up to it. And one day those who seek to be high up and far from it will find themselves planted like a gnarly root in its dark, tight soil. Just as I have.

This must be the lesson of the dirt.

Morning of my birth. My mother was digging. Soot-covered and bloody. If you could not see her, you would have surely smelt her in this dark. I was trussed to her in a torn-up sheet. Rain and wind scoured us from both sides, but she went on digging. Her heart was

in my ear. I pushed my face into the fan of her ribs and tasted her. She tasted of rust and death.

In the wind, in the squall, I became an encumbrance. She set me on the ground beside her horse. Cold on my back and wet, I could see my breath breathe out. Beside me, her horse was sinking into the mud. I watched him with one eye as he tried to recover his hooves. I knew if he trod on me he would surely flatten my head like a plate.

Morning of my birth, there were no stars in the sky. My mother went on digging. A pile of dirt rose around her until it was just her arms, her shoulders, her hair, sweeping in and out of the dark while her horse coughed and whined above me.

When she finally arched herself out of the hole in the ground she looked like the wrecked figurehead of a ship's bow. Hopeful as I was, I thought we might take off again, although I knew there was no boat or raft to carry us, only Houdini, her spooked horse. And from where we had come, there was no returning.

She stood above me, her hair willowy strips, the rain as heavy as stones. Finally, she stooped to pick me up and I felt her hand beneath my back. She brought me to her chest, kissed my muddied head. Again I pushed my face into the bony hollow of her chest and breathed my mother in.

Morning of my birth, my mother buried me in a hole that was two feet deep. Strong though she was, she was weak from my birth, and as she dug the wind filled the hole with leaves and the rain collapsed it with mud so all that was left was a wet and spindly bed.

When the sun inched awkwardly up she lowered me into the grave. Then, lying prone on the earth, she stroked my head and sang to me. I had never, in my short life, heard her sing. She sang to me until the song got caught in her throat. Even as she bawled and spluttered, her open hand covered my body like the warmest blanket.

I had an instinct then to take her song and sing it back to her, and I opened my mouth wide to make a sound, but instead of air there was only fluid and as I gasped I felt my lungs fold in. In that first light of morning my body contorted and I saw my own fingers reaching up to her, desperate things.

She held them and I felt them still and I felt them collapse. And then she said, *Shhh, shhh, my darling.* And then she slit my throat.

I should not have seen the sky turn pink or the day seep in. I should not have seen my mother's pale arms sweep out and heap wet earth upon me or the white birds fan out over her head.

But I did.

SOON IT WAS light enough to see the birds stripping bark with their beaks and the morning was full of the sound of their screeching. My mother stood on my grave, packing down the dirt with her feet. She slid across the smooth river rocks and plunged her arms into the water. Blood, ash and dirt ran down as dark estuaries to her wrists. She turned her hands over in the water until they were clean, until she could see the loops and whorls of her skin magnified.

She said, *Could I cut off my own hands?* And in saying that, she did not sound like my mother at all.

The knife at her belt still had my blood on it. She set the blade at an angle to her wrist but, although she may have doubted it herself, it was not in my mother to cut off her hands or to kill herself. Her hands trembled with her own wish to live and she dropped the knife into the river. She went after it like she was going after a fish but she did not catch it. Instead, she brought up a lump of sand and scrubbed her palms until they were pink and raw. Then she held them up to the sun and said, *Ghost hands*, as the sun seemed to pass straight through them.

My mother raised herself from the edge of the river, sloped over rocks, back to my grave. She sank down on all fours and smoothed

over the dirt with her arms and the backs of her hands, erasing her footprints. Back and back she crawled, cancelling her tracks and the tracks of her horse, scraping and roughing the earth until she hit water.

She stood knee-deep in the river next to her horse, surveying the ground to be sure she had vanished all traces. To any other observer, they would have appeared as fixed and haunted as two swamped trees. But my mother was not one to linger.

It was the thought of my father that impelled her then. *What if he's not dead?* she said. But there was no one or nothing that could answer back except her own unease, and she pulled herself up onto her horse and turned it into the river. Then they pounded against the current, away from me, away from my grave.

DEATH IS NOT a simple exit.

When my mother cut my throat she thought she was saving me from some protracted death. But in truth she would have done better to burn me down to ashes with my father than to plant me in the dirt. For it is in the dirt I discovered I have eyes to see and ears to hear, and I can see and hear beyond logical distance and beyond logical time. And with all of these peculiar senses the dirt has brought to life, I wonder if, in our wish to live, my mother and I may not be made of something the same. And then who is there to blame but nature?

When my mother set me down in my grave, the dirt came through like some surrogate mother. It gave me rich feed—food and words and company. It kept me warm and it kept me safe. But still, my mother is my mother. And even with this most generous succour, all that the dirt could muster, I have clung to the simple idea of her returning.

But over time, this simple need for her to return to me, to pick me up and hold me, has sprouted like the most unruly seed and I have found myself tormented and longing for all and everything around her.

Forward and back I have tracked her.

Morning of my birth, had I known what I know now, I would have yelled out. I would have kicked and screamed. But I did not know then that my mother could leave me. I did not know then to fear death or to resist it.

This is all I know: death is a magic hall of mirrors and within it there is a door and the door opens both ways.

MY MOTHER PITCHED her horse against the river. After the rain the current was strong and the water was unknowable. She searched for the split tree she had taken as a marker but through her tiredness the trees all looked the same and then, in narrowing her eyes to see them better, they looked more and more like men than trees, all leaning into the river.

She could not let them find her.

The water was suddenly deep, deeper than she recalled it, and her heart rose inside her as Houdini's feet scraped and slipped against the river stones. She did not let go of his reins. She urged him on and squeezed her thighs against his back and tilted her hips forward until at last, with a great surge, his feet found land.

They had crossed the river.

There was more daylight than my mother wished for and on this side of the river their tracks were still visible. The rain had softened them, but they held their form.

She stepped Houdini carefully over them, slow and pained, until the impressions of his hooves forward and back were so close it was impossible to tell which direction they had set off in first.

The forest floor was a webbed mess of fallen branches and ferns and they galloped over it at full pelt. Their tracks would only matter again when she reached the boundary of Fitz's house.

She rode out into Fitz's clearing and angled Houdini along the fence line until they reached the first gate. He was shying and even if she had wanted him to, he would go no further than the gate.

She swung herself down and unbuckled the saddlebag. Pulling out Fitz's boots, she drained them of water then walked towards the upper gate barefoot. The long grass was a carpet flattened by rain. She walked past livestock which shifted around her in a silent stupor. From the beginning of the upper gate, there were no trees; Fitz had cleared them all.

There was still smoke rising from the house. Only part of it had tumbled, only part of the roof collapsed. Half looked like it was sliding into a hole while the other half was perfectly intact.

She slid her feet into Fitz's boots, which were heavy—and even heavier wet. The leather against her toe was cracked, a monument to Fitz, to his kicking. Her skin was smarting within them and her bruised hip pained her as she walked. She was thinking that a bruise should not outlast a man. A boot may last, but the bruises he made should vanish with him.

Please be dead, she said. And it was not the first time she had said it.

She pressed her weight into the boots and stepped inside the house. The kettle was still sitting on the stove amid remnants of the chimney.

She moved further into the remains of the house and felt heat rising into her feet.

Fitz? she yelled.

She pulled up the hatch to the cellar. She could not remember closing it. The boards were creaking and parts of the house were still hissing with flame and damp as she leant into the mouth of the cellar and searched out the form of him. There was not enough light to see, but for small lit patches splattered against broken glass. She held on to the edge of the hatch and leant in further.

Fitz, you fucker, she called. *Where are you?*

And then, leaning in, she saw him.

Or some of him. An arm. The torso. The strange patterning of burnt skin. A smell rose up of him. The smell of vinegar and onions, just as he had always smelt, and before she could cover her mouth from the stench of it she was vomiting into the cellar.

She was on all fours and the house was sucking the life from her. There was hardly any strength left in her as she wiped her mouth and rolled onto her back. The shock of the morning had finally hit her. Any part of her that was not numb was trembling.

But this is *my* mother.

Lying on her back she pushed with her legs and her feet what mess and rubble she could into the mouth of the cellar. She heard it all crash in around the remains of Fitz and the sound of it consoled her. She did not look back into the cellar but turned herself over and launched herself, unsteadily, to standing. Still wearing Fitz's

boots, she staggered from the house and all the way down to the wet grass, collapsing into it.

Fitz was well dead.

She could breathe.

Beyond the house and Fitz's forest, the mountains spread out north and west. The sight of them, the magnificent stretch of them, was enough to bring my mother to her feet again. She swayed through the paddock towards the gate. Cattle moved quietly around her, looking dim.

When she reached the gate she used it to step up onto Houdini's back. She took his mane and steered his head to face the highest point of the mountains. Then she leant in close to his ear and said, *My friend, even if I fucking die and rot upon your back, do not stop until we get there.*

MORNING OF MY mother's birth was not like my own. She was vital, for one.

Her father, Septimus, had taken her in his arms as soon as Aoife, her mother, had given birth to her in a washtub on the porch.

It was 1894. The night was clear and the sky was full of stars and Septimus watched on like some anxious pop-eyed insect, pressed against the window of his shed. Aoife bellowed and roamed outside as the midwife, Mrs Peel, tried to steer her back to bed.

But when Aoife caught sight of Septimus at the window, backlit by a fire, his hair sticking on end, she raised her fist to him, and then she slipped. She fell backwards into the washtub and as she did a contraction seized her. When it passed, her legs and neck and arms went limp and she hung over the tub like some overwatered plant.

Septimus watched as Mrs Peel disappeared and returned again, her arms full of candles and lanterns. She set them all around Aoife's feet, exclaiming, *None of God's creatures shall be born in the dark!* She went about lighting them like a zealot.

Aoife had begun writhing and screaming, *Get it out! Get it out!* And

as she writhed a wave of water spilt out of the tub and collected the candles and the lanterns and put them all out.

Mrs Peel tried to hold down Aoife's legs but they were splitting around her like scissors in the dark. Aoife did not want the child inside of her and she did not want it out. Septimus clutched his heart and cast his eyes skyward. He saw Centaurus there, marking his bow, and the Southern Cross sparkling like some talisman around an upturned neck. He thought at least the beauty of it augured well.

In no time, as this was Aoife's fourth, Septimus heard a trembling wail.

He jumped up, ran to his furnace, thought to put the fire out, changed his mind, caught his shirt on the tin of the door, freed himself, then sprinted across the lawn. He took the child in his arms and Mrs Peel cut the umbilical cord and then they wrapped my mother in a cloth.

A daughter, said Septimus, leaning down to Aoife to show her.

You take care of her, said Aoife. *I just want to sleep.*

Mrs Peel helped Aoife inside and Septimus stepped out onto the lawn, my mother curled against his chest. He kissed her damp head and held her above him. She cried and then her little face, still crinkled by the passage of birth, opened up. Septimus saw it as he felt it then: Centaurus drawing his bow among other constellations and firing an arrow straight into his heart. He held my mother and he knew he could never, in all the world, love another trembling creature so much.

•

Years later, when my mother asked him what stars he saw on the morning of her birth, he could not describe them. He would only say, *Darling, there were constellations wrapped in the visible sky and the sky below the horizon, and they were all spinning by some force and design. There was a carnival, a parade, on the day you were born and it was spinning around the poles of the universe.*

And although Septimus did know what he saw in the visible sky (an archer, an arrow sent forth), with his own passage through life he had begun to believe more that there was no design in it at all—that the stars themselves were just nebulae visible but indistinct to each other, silhouettes shifting against other luminous matter.

But he did not want to tell that to his daughter.

WITH HER GAZE fixed on the mountains, my mother rode all day. Her eyes grew hot and her neck felt too weak to hold her head. Yellow grass streamed endlessly beneath her and she did all she could not to slip sideways into it.

She was losing blood. It soaked into her trousers and the thick skin of her saddle. On the brink of passing out, she lay against the neck of her horse. He was a dam of hot and cold and the feeling was not like riding, it was like sinking and sinking was her fear. She fixed her back like a steel beam and faced the distance.

There was so much distance.

The mountains seemed further away now than ever and as she tried to focus on the sharp edges of the cliffs where they cut into the sky, they shifted like an unsteady backdrop, one way then another. The sun was full and bleaching and nothing was solid.

She rode on.

She held herself upright for as long as she could. But even her determination was not enough. Soon she fell against her horse's back and dropped the reins completely.

Houdini, a stallion, a Waler, moved easily from a gallop to a long-striding walk, and the weight of my mother across his back was enough to balance her. He turned east towards the thin arc of river and did not falter from his even step until he reached its bank. Then he shook her from his back and she fell onto the sand.

Hitting the sand she came to. She did not know where she was. She could see Houdini drinking from a part of the river she did not recognise and edged her way to it, put her mouth against it and drank the water until it revived her. She had enough energy then to peel off her sand-encrusted trousers and turn them over to the shallows. Red clouds bloomed out.

My mother was not one to say *Oh dear* or *Oh my*. She was one to say *Fuck*. And often. It was a word she had finetuned in prison. Half naked by the river, looking down between her legs, that was what she said: *Fuck, Houdini. I've gone and bled a trail.*

There is never a good day to die. And you'll see my mother was not the quitting kind. But there is courage in blood and she had lost so much of it. She did not have the strength to get back on her horse.

To the north of her were the shifting cliffs and ridges of the mountains. Even if she could have ridden solidly, just to get to the base of the first rise of the mountain range was a whole day's ride. Beside her was the river. If she rolled herself into it and floated down, it would deliver her directly back to where she had come

from, the place to which she could not return. Above her was the clearest, bluest sky with no cloud or apparition and it seemed to be sinking down upon her. She covered her face against it.

Fuck, Houdini was the best assessment.