



BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE BOTANIST'S DAUGHTER

KAYTE NUNN

The
FORGOTTEN
LETTERS
of ESTHER
DURRANT

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ESTHER DURRANT

ALSO BY KAYTE NUNN

Rose's Vintage

Angel's Share

The Botanist's Daughter

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*For my great-grandmother Phoebe Sly.
I wish that your story had ended differently.*

Like the touch of rain she was
On a man's flesh and hair and eyes
When the joy of walking thus
Has taken him by surprise.

‘Like the Touch of Rain’, Edward Thomas

CHAPTER ONE



London and Little Embers, Autumn 1951

It wasn't their usual destination for a holiday and the timing was hardly ideal. John and Esther Durrant generally took a week in Eastbourne or Brighton in the final week of August, so the far south-west tip of England was an odd choice, even more so considering it was early November. John, however, had been adamant. 'It'll do you good,' he said to his wife, in a tone of false jollity, when he suggested – no, *insisted* on – the trip. 'Put some colour back in your cheeks. Sea air.' Never mind that a bitter cold gripped the nation with the kind of weather that you wouldn't put the cat out in and Esther couldn't have felt less like a week away even had she spent the previous year down a coal mine. She also didn't understand why they were leaving Teddy behind with the nanny, but she couldn't begin to summon the necessary enthusiasm for an argument.

Before catching the train south, they dined at a restaurant near Paddington station. Esther wasn't hungry, but she allowed

John to decide for her nonetheless. After a brief perusal of the menu and dispatching their order to the black-clad, white-aproned waitress, he unfurled his *Telegraph* and spent the time before the arrival of their food absorbed in its pages. Winston Churchill and the Conservative Party had been returned to power she saw, noticing the headline on the front page. John was pleased, although privately she believed Mr Churchill terribly old and probably not up to the job. They didn't discuss politics anymore, for they saw the world quite differently, she had come to realise.

Esther managed a little of the soup that arrived in due course, and half a bread roll, while John cleared his dish and several glasses of claret. Then Dover sole and tiny turned vegetables, all of which he ate with gusto while she pushed the peas and batons of carrot around on her plate, pretending to eat. Her husband made no comment.

Esther declined dessert but John, it appeared, had appetite enough for both of them and polished off a slice of steamed pudding made with precious rationed sugar and a generous dollop of custard. He glanced at his watch. 'Shall we make our way to the train, my dear?' he asked, wiping the bristles of his moustache on a starched napkin. She couldn't help but be reminded of an otter who'd just had a fish supper: sleek, replete and satisfied with himself. He was wearing the dark suit – his favourite – and the tie she'd given him several birthdays ago, when she had been expecting Teddy and the future felt as if it were the merest outline, a sketch, waiting for them to paint it in bold and vivid colours. Something to look forward to, not to fear.

She nodded and he rose and reached for her hand, helping her to her feet. It was a short walk from the restaurant to the station, but Esther was glad of her thick coat and gloves. She'd not ventured from the house in weeks, the November weather

had been simply ghastly, and she shivered as she felt the wind slice through her outer garments and numb the tip of her nose and lips.

They entered the cavernous terminal and Esther was almost overwhelmed by the bustle and noise, the hissing of the giant steam engines and the raucous cries of porters as they effortlessly manoeuvred unwieldy barrows top-heavy with luggage. It was as if they were part of the opening scene of a play, the moments before the main characters take the stage. She might once have enjoyed the spectacle, found the purposeful activity invigorating, but today she gripped John's arm as he steered her towards Platform One. 'We'll be there in a jiffy,' he said, reassuring her.

Everywhere she looked, lapels were splashed with poppies, blood red against dark suits. A brief frown creased the pale skin of her forehead as it took her a moment to place them. Then she remembered: it would soon be Armistice Day. The terror, uncertainty and deprivations of the recent war were a scarlet tattoo on every Englishman and woman's breast.

Eventually, the train was located, tickets checked and they were ushered to their carriage by a porter. She took careful steps along a narrow corridor and they found their cabin: two slim berths made up with crisp cotton sheets and wool blankets the colour of smoke.

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief that they would not be expected to lie together. In recent months John had taken to sleeping in his dressing room and she was still not ready for him to return to the marital bed. 'I confess I am rather tired,' she said, pulling off her gloves. 'I might settle in.' She opened a small cupboard, put her hat on the shelf inside and hung her coat on a hook that was conveniently placed underneath.

‘I shall take a nightcap in the Lounge Car. That is if you don’t mind,’ John replied.

He had taken the hint. So much between them went unsaid these days. Esther turned around and inclined her head. ‘Not at all, you go. I shall be perfectly fine here.’

‘Very well.’ He left in a hurry, likely in pursuit of a dram or two of single malt.

She sat heavily on the bed, suddenly too exhausted to do more than kick off her shoes and lie back upon the blankets. She stared up at the roof of the cabin as it curved above her, feeling like a sardine in a tin. It wasn’t unpleasant: if anything, she was cocooned from the activity going on outside and wouldn’t be bothered by it.

Before long, a whistle sounded and, with a series of sudden jerks, the train began to move away from the station, shuddering as it gathered speed. After a few minutes it settled into a swaying rhythm and Esther’s eyelids grew heavy. She fought to stay awake. Summoning the little determination she still possessed, she rallied and found her night things. It would not do to fall asleep still fully clothed, only to be roused by her husband on his return from the lounge.

John had asked their daily woman, Mary, to pack for them both, telling Esther that she needn’t lift a finger. Normally she wouldn’t have countenanced anyone else going through her things, but it had been easier not to object, to let them take over, as she had with so much recently. She had, however, added her own essentials to the cardigans, skirts and stockings, and tucked away among her smalls was a small enamelled box that resembled a miniature jewellery case. She found it, flipped the catch and the little red pills inside gleamed at her like gemstones,

beckoning. As she fished one out, she noticed her ragged nails and reddened cuticles. A younger version of herself would have minded, but she barely gave them a second thought, intent as she was on the contents of the box. Without hesitating, she placed the pill on her tongue, swallowing it dry.

She put the box in her handbag, drew the window shades and changed quickly, removing her tweed skirt and blouse and placing them in the cupboard with her hat and coat before pulling a fine lawn nightgown over her head. After a brief wash at the tiny corner basin, she dried her face on the towel provided and ran a brush through her hair before tucking herself between the starched sheets like a piece of paper in an envelope. She was lost to sleep hours before John returned.



On their arrival in Penzance the next morning he escorted her from the train, handling her once more as if she were his mother's best bone china. She didn't object, for she knew he meant well. His concern for her would have been touching had she been able to focus her mind on it – or anything else for that matter – for more than a few minutes, but it was as if there were a thick pane of glass, rather like the ones in the train windows, separating her from him, the world and everything in it.

In Penzance harbour, John engaged a small fishing dinghy – 'hang the expense' he had said when Esther looked at him with a question in her eyes. 'There is a ferry – the *Scillonian* – but there was a nasty accident last month, she hit the rocks in heavy fog by all accounts, and anyway it doesn't call at the island we want to reach. I looked into the possibility of a flight – there's an outfit that flies Dragon Rapides from Land's End, which could have been awfully thrilling, but they only operate in fine weather.'

Esther had no idea what a ‘Dragon Rapide’ might be, but thought that a boat was probably the safer option. As he spoke, she glanced upwards. The sky was low and leaden, the grey of a pigeon’s breast, and the air damp with the kind of light mist that softened the edges of things but didn’t soak you, at least not to begin with. She huddled further into her coat, hands deep in her pockets. What on earth were they doing here? The boat looked as though it would scarcely survive a strong breeze. The hull was patched and its paintwork faded; translucent scales flecked its wooden rails and it reeked of fish.

‘Shall we embark?’ His face was hopeful.

Esther did as she was bid and climbed aboard, doing her best to avoid stepping on the purple-red slime that stained the decking. It was definitely the guts of some sea creature or other.

They huddled on a bench in the dinghy’s small cabin as the captain got them underway. Under a pewter sky and afloat an even darker sea, she was reminded of Charon, the ferryman of Hades, transporting newly dead souls across the Acheron and the Styx. The air was undoubtedly fresher here though. Sharply scented. Briny. Far more pleasant than the filmy London fog, which coated your hair, your skin, even your teeth with a fine layer of dirt. It roused her a little from her somnambulant state and she glanced about the cabin, seeing a dirty yellow sou’-wester, a length of oily rope acting as a paperweight on a creased and frayed shipping chart.

‘Look!’ John called out as they puttered out of Penzance’s sheltering quay. ‘St Michael’s Mount. Centuries ago the English saw off the Spanish Armada from its battlements. At low tide you can walk across the causeway. Shame we didn’t have time for it.’

‘Perhaps on our return?’ she offered, her voice almost drowned out by the roar of the engine and the sound of the water slapping against the hull of the boat.

John didn’t reply, looking out to sea instead. Had he even heard her?

‘Oh look! Kittiwakes.’

Esther raised her eyes towards the horizon; there were several grey and white gulls wheeling above them, their shrieks renting the air. To the left, a trio of torpedo-shaped birds whipped past. ‘And puffins!’ he cried. The new sights and sounds had invigorated him, while she was already feeling queasy as the dinghy pitched and rolled. She registered their fat cheeks and bright orange bills and was reminded briefly of a portly professor friend of her father’s. She tried but failed to match John’s enthusiasm, pasting what felt like a smile on her face and swallowing hard to prevent herself from retching.

The captain cheerfully pointed out the site of several shipwrecks but Esther did her best not to pay too much heed to his story of a naval disaster in the early eighteenth century, where more than fifteen hundred sailors lost their lives. ‘One of the worst wrecks in the whole British Isles,’ he said with a kind of proud awe. As he spoke, a lighthouse, tall and glowing white against the grey sky came into view. It hadn’t done its job then. But then perhaps it had been built afterwards, to prevent such a tragedy happening again.

They motored on as the rain thickened and soon a curtain of fog erased the horizon completely. Esther’s stomach churned and bile rose in her throat. Even John’s high spirits seemed dampened and they sat, saying nothing, as Esther fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief and pressed it to her mouth, hoping that she

was not going to empty the contents of her stomach onto the decking. She tried not to think about them mingling with the fish guts and salt water that sloshed just beyond the cabin. She gritted her teeth against the spasms of nausea while her insides roiled and twisted as if she had swallowed a serpent.

The boat pitched and heaved in the rising swell as the waves frothed whitecaps beside them. 'It's getting a bit lumpy,' said the captain with a grin. 'Thick as a bog out there too.' John hadn't mentioned the name of the particular godforsaken speck of land that they were headed for and Esther didn't have the energy to ask. She tried to think of something else, anything but this purgatory of a voyage, but there were darker shapes in the yawning wasteland of her mind, so she forced herself instead to stare at the varnished walls of the cabin, counting to five hundred and then back again to take her mind off her predicament. She was only vaguely aware now of John next to her and the captain, mere inches away at the helm. Outside, the sea appeared to be at boiling point, white and angry, as if all hell had been let loose, and she gripped a nearby handhold until her fingers lost all feeling. She no longer had any confidence that they would reach their destination. She had ceased caring about anything very much months ago, so it hardly mattered either way.

Eventually, however, an island hove into view, and then another, grey smudges on the choppy seascape. Almost as soon as they had appeared they disappeared into the mist, leaving nothing but the grey chop of the water again. The captain's expression changed from sunny to serious as he concentrated on steering them clear of hidden shoals and shelves. 'They'd snag a small boat if you don't pay attention. Splinter it like balsa,' he said, not lifting his eyes from the horizon.

All at once the wind and rain eased a fraction, the fog lifted, and they puttered alongside a small wooden jetty that stuck out from a sickle curve of bleached-sand beach. Like an arrow lodged in the side of a corpse, Esther imagined.

The bloated carcass of a sea bird, larger than a gull, but smaller than an albatross, snagged her attention. Death had followed her to the beach. Her thoughts were so dark these days; she couldn't seem to chase them away. There was, however, some slight relief at having arrived, that the particular nightmare of the journey might soon be ended. For now that would have to be enough. 'Small mercies,' she whispered. She tried to be grateful for that.

The captain made the boat fast, then helped them and their luggage ashore, even as the boat bobbed dangerously up and down next to the jetty, its hull grinding, wood on wood, leaving behind flecks of paint. An ill-judged transfer and they would end up in the water. Esther stepped carefully onto the slippery boards, willing her shaky legs to hold her up.

Once they were both safely on land, the captain slung several large brown-paper-wrapped parcels after them. 'Pop them under the shelter and when you get there, let the doc know that these are for him – he can send someone down for them before they get too wet. The house is up thataway. A bit of a walk, mind and none too pleasant in this weather. There's not many that care to come this far.'

The pelting rain had begun to fall again, blown sideways at them by the wind and Esther silently agreed with him; she couldn't see the point of this wearisome journey, but John hefted their suitcases, looking at her with anticipation. 'Think you can manage it darling?'

Some small part of her didn't want to disappoint him and she nodded faintly, still no clearer as to exactly where they were.

The walk wasn't long, but the wind buffeted them this way and that and Esther was obliged to hold onto her hat, a small-brimmed, dull felt affair that did little to keep off the rain. She faltered as she almost tripped on an object on the path and stopped to see what it was.

The doll lay on its back. Naked. China limbs splayed at unnatural angles. Eyes open, staring vacantly at the sky. A tangled mat of dirty yellow hair strewn with leaves and feathers. Esther stepped over it, feeling as she did, a tingling in her breasts and a spreading warmth at odds with the blustery, chilled air. It was a moment before she realised what it was, bewildered that her body still had the ability to nurture, in spite of everything.

John strode ahead, his steps unfaltering. He didn't appear to have noticed the abandoned toy, or if he had, had paid it no heed. Angling her chin down, Esther drew her coat in closer, its astrakhan collar soft against her cheeks, her grip tight on the handbag at her elbow.

As if sensing she'd stopped, John turned to look back at her. 'Not far now.' His expression coaxed her forward.

She gave him a curt nod and continued on, leaving the doll where it lay. The path ahead wound steeply upwards and was pockmarked with shallow pools the colour of dishwater. Esther had to watch her step to avoid them. Her shoes were new, barely worn-in, not that she cared particularly about getting them wet. The avoidance of the puddles was an automatic action, a force of long habit, like so many were for her now.

A few steps further on she glanced up, seeing the grasses either side of them rippling and swaying, pummelled by the unrelenting gusts blowing off the ocean. Westwards, cliffs like fresh scars marked where the land ended, rising abruptly as if forced upwards from the earth's bowels. Huge boulders lay

scattered at their base, a giant's playthings. It was a wholly foreign landscape for someone used to red brick, stone, tarmacadam and wrought iron.

‘Nearly there darling.’ John’s tone was meant to encourage her, but it sounded a false note. Ersatz, her mother would have called it. And she would have been right.

CHAPTER TWO



Aitutaki, South Pacific, February 2018

Rachel eased herself from the arms of her lover, sliding from beneath the thin sheet, being careful not to wake him. It was not yet dawn, but a waxing moon cast a glow through the uncurtained window. She located her shift, tossed on the tiled floor the night before, and shimmied it over her shoulders, down onto her torso, smoothing it over her thighs. She twisted her long hair into a knot and worked a kink out of her back, twisting and rolling the stiffness from her shoulders. Picking up her sandals, she tiptoed towards the door.

As she laid her hand on the latch, she allowed herself a single backward glance. He was beautiful: Adonis-like, with skin the colour of scorched caramel, dark lustrous hair that she loved to curl around her fingers and full, curving, skilful lips. Young, as always.

Closing the door gently so as not to wake him, she stood outside the straw-roofed bure and gazed across to the lagoon. The moon glistened on the water, and a faint light was visible on the

horizon. On a clear night here, the sky was a sea of stars, with the Milky Way a wide belt arcing across the heavens. She would miss these skies more than the man she had just left behind. She checked her watch. Only three hours until her flight.

‘Rachel!’ The Adonis stood in the doorway. He had woken and found her missing. Damn. She’d lingered too long, taking in the beauty before dawn one last time.

She turned, meeting his gaze. ‘You knew I was leaving.’

‘Yes, but like this? No chance to say goodbye?’

‘I thought it would be easier.’

‘On you perhaps.’ He looked sulky, his lower lip jutting out.

She tried, but couldn’t feel sorry for him. He was young and gorgeous and would soon find someone else. Eager female research assistants would be falling over themselves to take her place. ‘You’ll be fine,’ she said.

The sultry climate of the islands, where a permanent sheen of perspiration covered the skin, together with their remoteness, meant that relationships sprang up as quickly as the plants that flourished here. Generally their roots were as shallow, too.

‘Come here?’ It was more a question than a statement.

Rachel steeled herself against the pleading tone even as her footsteps led her back to him. Taller and broader than her, he easily enveloped her in his arms. ‘I’ll miss you,’ he murmured into her hair.

‘You too.’ Her voice was brusque, hiding anything softer.

‘Somehow I doubt that,’ he laughed. ‘You have the blood of a lizard.’ He released her and placed his palm below her collarbone. ‘There is a stone where a heart should be.’

They weren’t entirely unfair comments and she didn’t have time to argue with him.

‘Stay in touch, eh?’

She gave a noncommittal shrug.

He kissed her forehead and hugged her once more before releasing her. 'Au revoir Rachel. Travel well.'

She almost raced along the path to her bure in her haste to get away.



An hour later, she burst through the doors of the tiny airport and dumped her backpack at the check-in counter. '*Kia orana* LeiLei,' she greeted the dark-skinned woman waiting to take her ticket.

'*Kia orana* Rachel.' She gave her a smile that split her face. The island – atoll to be precise – was small enough that Rachel had got to know most of its permanent inhabitants in the time she'd spent there. LeiLei, who did double-duty checking in passengers on Air Pacific and mixing fresh coconut piña coladas at Crusher Bar – both with equal enthusiasm – was a favourite.

LeiLei examined her ticket. 'Flying home?'

'Something like that.' The real answer was a complicated one. Growing up in a military family, Rachel had been to six different schools by the time she was twelve, moving from place to place, leaving friends behind and being forced to make new ones almost every year. She still remembered the name of her best friend when she was five. Erin. Could still recall the curly hair that never stayed in its pigtails and the swarm of freckles across her face. The two of them had been inseparable from their first day in Mrs Norman's kindergarten class, sitting next to each other, spending every recess and lunchtime together. Rachel had cried as though her heart would break when her parents told her they were moving away. The next time it happened, she made a deliberate decision not to give her heart to people or places again. It was undoubtedly part of the reason she was still a rolling stone.

Home had, for a few years in her teens, been Pittwater, at the northern tip of Sydney. Accessible only by boat. She'd loved those years living with the rhythm of the tides, never more than footsteps away from salt water, so it came as no surprise that after graduation she sought research postings on islands or waterways.

It was on Pittwater that she learned to drive a small aluminium boat powered by an outboard motor that passed for transport in that corner of the world. At fifteen, she was part of the tinny tribe, ferrying herself and her younger brother to and from the high school on the mainland and racing their friends across the sheltered waters, something they'd been expressly forbidden to do. She learned to pilot the tiny boat through pouring rain and bustling gales, as well as on days where barely a breath of wind rippled the water's glassy surface and none of them hurried to lessons.

She'd learned where to find the plumpest oysters and when to harvest them; where the shoals were shallowest and likely to ground the tinny. To appreciate the beauty of the pearly light of dawn during the solitary joy of a morning kayak, her paddle pleating the water into ripples that stretched out in her wake. It had been hard to leave and go to university in the city.

When her dad had retired, he and her mother had returned to Pittwater, to a house built into the side of a hill and surrounded by gum trees and overrun with lantana.

She planned to squeeze in a week or so with them on her way through Australia, but hadn't rung. Wanted to surprise them. Her mouth watered at the thought of her mum's scones, warm and spread thick with homemade jam. They'd be disappointed she wouldn't stay longer, but she couldn't help that.

Rachel shed lives as easily as a snake its skin, starting afresh somewhere new every couple of years, never stopping to look back. The new posting, to a group of islands off the coast of southern

England, was an interesting one – to her anyway. She would be studying the unattractively named *Venus verrucosa*, or warty venus clam. Another bivalve, if rather smaller than her beloved pa'ua. Clams, it seemed, had become her thing.

She was to survey the islands, estimating the *verrucosa* population to determine changes and their correlation to ambient and sea temperatures. She would be entirely on her own, not part of a group as she had been previously, and it was this, as much as the actual project, that most appealed to her.

The irony that she studied sessile sea creatures, ones that barely moved once they fixed themselves to the ocean floor, when she drifted through the world like weed on the current, was not lost on her. Unlike the clams that cemented themselves to the seabed with sticky byssal threads, she never became attached, to anything, anywhere or anyone.

'Safe travels,' said LeiLei, coming around the counter to engulf her in a plump, sweetly scented hug and handing her back her passport. 'Come and see us again soon.'

She smiled at her friend, turned and didn't look back.

CHAPTER THREE



London, Spring 2018

Rachel arrived in London at the same time as a vicious cold snap. Its effect on her was made worse by the fact that she'd come straight from a sultry southern hemisphere autumn. Before flying north, she had spent a couple of weeks in Pittwater catching up with her parents and siblings. Her parents both looked older than the last time she'd seen them more than three years earlier, although they still appeared to be spry.

Her father, long retired from the navy now, spent most of his days vigorously attacking the weeds that threatened to engulf their home, attempting to marshal them into the same kind of order that he had once imposed on the sailors under his command. Her mother busied herself with an endless round of yoga, twilight sailing and baking for what seemed like the entire community. They both lived as if in perpetual motion and Rachel sometimes wished she had half their energy.

She spent most of her time there on the verandah overlooking the water, reading or watching the bright lorikeets flash by. She and her dad kayaked in early morning stillness, holding their breath as the rising sun chased away wisps of fog that hung over the water.

Her younger brother was on the other side of the country, but one Sunday, her older brother and sister drove up from their homes in the city, bringing with them Rachel's nieces and nephews, several of whom were now well into their teens but still loved to hear her stories of turtles and stingrays, whale sharks and giant clams, particularly the pa'ua. She showed them photographs of *Tridacna gigas* and *Tridacna derasa*. 'They were introduced from Australia actually,' she explained, flicking through the pictures on her phone. 'And no two are the same. A bit like fingerprints.' They delighted in the vibrant purple and turquoise, jade and scarlet, tiger-striped and cheetah-spotted markings of their mantles. 'They can live for more than a century and weigh up to two hundred and fifty kilos,' she added as they jostled to get a better view.

'No way!' Jasper, her nephew exclaimed. He was still young enough to be impressed by such things.

Later, as they sat outdoors, toasting the last rays of the sun with glasses of cold white wine and slapping away the mozzies, Rachel let herself imagine what her life might be like if she too lived in Sydney. She wasn't sure if it was a frightening or appealing prospect. She loved her family, but even they could get too much for her sometimes.

'It'd be nice if you could make it for Christmas one year Noes,' her brother said. Noes – short for 'nosey parker' – had been his childhood nickname for her: she had liked to spy on him, torn between wanting to join in games with him and his friends and standing on the sidelines, an observer. 'The kids will be gone before we know it and I know it would make Mum happy.'

‘What would make me happy?’ her mother asked, stepping out onto the verandah.

‘Coming back here more often,’ said Rachel. ‘Especially for Christmas.’

‘I can’t deny that,’ said her mum, placing a reassuring hand on Rachel’s shoulder. ‘But you have to live your life as you choose. If nothing else, I’m proud we gave you all the gift of independence.’

‘Some of us took it more literally than others.’ Her brother was only half-kidding.

‘One year. I promise,’ said Rachel, meaning it. She didn’t think either of them believed her.



Now, on a freezing grey day and completely underdressed (she was wearing her lucky T-shirt with *don't sweat the detials* printed on the front), Rachel caught the tube to South Kensington, arriving exactly on time for her appointment with Dr Charles Wentworth. He was the supervisor of the project she was about to undertake and worked in the Life Sciences department at the Natural History Museum.

They’d spoken via a pixelated Skype call, the connection sporadically dropping out, while she was in Aitutaki, and he’d followed up by email with confirmation of the job and this appointment.

She found the research offices and presented herself to the receptionist. The room was warm and she felt herself begin to defrost, curling and uncurling her fingers as the feeling returned to them.

‘Ah hello there, you must be Miss Parker.’ She looked up to see the man in front of her holding out a hand in greeting. ‘Dr Wentworth. But call me Charles.’

‘Rachel,’ she said getting to her feet and taking his hand. He had a firm grip and cool, dry skin and she decided she liked the look of him. Heavy tortoiseshell glasses balanced precariously on the end of his nose, his shoulders had the slightly hunched look of someone who spent too many hours looking through a microscope and his tie appeared to have some of his breakfast clinging to it. Egg yolk, if she wasn’t mistaken. His smile was warm and genuine and she found herself returning it easily.

He led her into his office and proceeded to outline the previous study and what it had entailed, handing over several thick manila folders of information. ‘They pertain to the original work and also outline what we expect you will address in your paper, but basically you’ll be looking at this one particular clam and determining any indicators of ecosystem change.’

‘Yes,’ said Rachel. ‘*Venus verrucosa*.’

‘Indeed. I gather from our previous conversation that you are something of a fan of such bivalves, though I confess, this hardly compares to the spectacular species you have been studying on Aitutaki.’

As he said this, a dreamy look came over him. It often did, Rachel had noticed, when people mentioned the tropical islands of the South Pacific, Tahiti, Bora Bora, the Cooks . . . Gauguin had a lot to answer for.

She inclined her head. ‘Nevertheless, this is equally as important.’

‘Oh absolutely. It’ll form part of a nationwide study on the effects of climate change on our marine life, and the rate at which the increasing acidification of our waters affects their growth patterns.’ His eyes shone behind his glasses. ‘The Scilly Isles are a favourite of mine. If I didn’t have to put my children through school, I’d be down there like a shot.’

'I've heard they're stunning,' she said politely, noticing that his attention had been diverted elsewhere as he rifled through the paperwork on his desk.

'Ah, yes, here it is.' He held a sheet aloft and peered at it. 'There's just a slight hiccup with the funding, but not to worry, I'm certain it will all sort itself out. Paperwork, details . . . that's all.'

Rachel felt a faint stirring of alarm. She'd quit her previous job for this.

'Haven't quite got it signed off, but it'll all be tickety-boo in a week or so,' he added.

Tickety-boo. She hoped that meant what she thought it did.

'No need for you to be concerned dear girl . . .'

Rachel ground her teeth. She was a thirty-five-year-old woman, not someone's 'dear girl'. She held herself in check. Charles Wentworth *was* her supervisor and she was depending on him for this job.

'Should I delay my journey?' she asked, hoping his answer would be a negative one. She had no desire to cool her heels in London any longer than necessary. Big cities were an anathema to her: they were dirty, crowded and exhausting. They sapped her spirit and she found herself becoming irritable and anxious the more time she spent in them. London, with its kamikaze cyclists threatening to wipe her out every time she tried to cross the road, and the press of people on buses and the tube in rush hour, made her especially claustrophobic.

'Oh I don't think that will be necessary,' he said breezily. 'It's a mere formality. I must say,' he said, sifting through some more papers, 'your references are excellent.'

Rachel had got on well with her previous supervisor, and although he had been sad to see her leave, had promised to sing her praises. She smiled and sent a mental note of thanks to him.

‘Now, why don’t we talk about what you will be expected to produce. Since you will be unsupervised down there, I – and the higher-ups – will need a weekly report emailed to us outlining your activities and progress.’

Rachel nodded. ‘Of course. That won’t be a problem at all.’

‘As I mentioned when we last spoke, there’s a cottage: two-up two-down.’ He caught her puzzled look. ‘Two rooms upstairs, and two downstairs,’ he explained.

‘It sounds more salubrious than my last accommodation,’ she reassured him, thinking of the one-room thatched-roof bure that she had shared with an ever-changing insect population.

‘Jolly good then. I think that about covers it. Did you have any questions?’

She shook her head.

‘Well, then good luck and I expect you’ll be in touch if anything does come up. Nice T-shirt by the way.’

Rachel smiled again. After her meeting, her next pressing task was to kit herself out with a new wardrobe suitable for the northern hemisphere winter.

He stood up and Rachel did the same, shaking hands once more before stowing the folders in her daypack and retracing her path to the entrance. She needed to find an outdoor gear store for waterproofs, hiking boots and thermal layers. A cold wind bit through the thin cotton of her top and she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered as she hurried in the direction of the nearest tube station.

CHAPTER FOUR



Little Embers, Autumn 1951

‘Ah here it is,’ said John. Esther followed his gaze. The path had come to an abrupt end in front of a low wall, over which she could see a large, two-storey house made from the same stone standing on its own on a small rise. There were patches of yellowing lichen on the walls, flaking, white-painted window frames, a deep lintel and a steeply pitched, gabled roof. Thin grey smoke emanated from a row of chimney pots at either end but was quickly snatched away by the wind. A dark green creeper had almost engulfed one end of the house, as if a creature were in the process of swallowing it whole.

‘This is a most odd kind of place for a holiday,’ she said, turning to her husband, who was wrestling with a gate, remembering as she did that she had promised before God to obey him. Apparently that now included coming to the ends of the earth with him on what she could only determine was little more than a whim.

Theirs had been a marriage while not exactly of convenience then certainly of expedience, the product of post-war euphoria, a sense of possibility in the world again, but that the day should be seized lest it be lost forever. Her father of course had said that she was too young, but her mother – always the pragmatist – hadn't objected. Young men were thin on the ground, too many of them had perished on foreign soil, and Mother had warned that even beautiful, clever girls – especially clever girls – would find themselves without a beau if they weren't careful.

They met at a church social; his parish being only a couple of miles from hers. Esther was down from university for the holidays, and despite her preference to stay in and study *The Poetics*, a friend had persuaded her to tag along. She'd spotted John across the hall, his height and direct gaze in her direction marking him out among a homogeneous sea of heads. He had brought her a cup of punch, she remembered, apologising for the lack of ice, as if it were somehow his fault. She was charmed, as much by his two left feet when they danced the jive (he apologised for that too) as by his ready smile and quiet manner, so different from the loud, brash men she had previously encountered. He asked to see her again the next day, taking her for a stroll in a nearby woodland and doing nothing more than holding her hand. 'If we went to the pictures we wouldn't be able to talk to each other,' he said. 'And that would be a terrible shame.' She experienced a small thrill at those words. Perhaps here was a man who wanted intelligent conversation from a woman, not merely a decorative accessory to hang on his arm and his every word.

That he was a banker held little interest for her but pleased both her parents no end. 'A steady income,' her mother had said. 'A respectable job,' chimed her father.

Esther had hesitated only briefly in accepting John's proposal after a few months of walking out together. They had both determinedly ignored the tiny chip – a mere splinter really – on his shoulder that while she was studying at Cambridge, he had gone straight from school into the city.

They were married the week after her final examinations in a simple ceremony at her parish church. Her father escorted her down the aisle and handed her to John like a parcel being transferred from one man to another. She went from being Esther Parkes to Esther Durrant in the blink of an eye.

She didn't attend her graduation ceremony, held in the autumn of that year: by then she was three months' pregnant and even being upright made her retch uncontrollably.

Esther found herself in a partnership that was, if not exactly exciting, at least solid and dependable. She'd sometimes wondered if there might not be more to a marriage than the gentle affection that existed between them, but the fact of an honest, good man who loved her was not to be taken lightly. John was never going to surprise her (to delight her was more than one could reasonably hope for), but she knew others fared worse. All things considered, she counted herself a fortunate woman.

Teddy had come along before they had even been married a year and there had been no question, even on her part, of her taking up employment, nor of continuing her studies past her undergraduate degree. In the first year after his birth, she had thrown herself into motherhood with all of the zeal she had once reserved for her studies, determined to be the perfect mother, the good wife. Teddy, and John, wanted for nothing from her.

She refused to countenance an unspoken fear that her brain felt as if it was turning into the mush she spooned so tenderly into Teddy's perfect waiting mouth. She found herself numbed by

the routine of feeding and changing, and the daily outing with him in the large Silver Cross pram, pushing it around the hilly Hampstead streets. At the end of the day, when Teddy eventually went down to sleep, she was too exhausted to concentrate on anything very much. The words of even her favourite books swam in front of her.

Until today, she had only been apart from him once since his birth, and that was when his little brother arrived. Her breath caught as she was pierced by a memory and she swallowed, tasting ashes.

‘Don’t worry about a thing, my dear. We’re here to meet an old friend of mine.’ John interrupted her thoughts, giving her a look that was meant to reassure, but instead only served to mildly irritate her.

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before we set out? I am not sure that I am disposed to call on people, especially strangers,’ she objected.

‘But, I said, he is not a stranger,’ he explained in a patient tone. ‘And I think you will find him most agreeable company. He’s been very generous to invite us to stay.’

As they were quibbling over John’s decision to bring them to such a place, the front door of the house opened. In the gloom, Esther couldn’t make out much, but John strode forward confidently, leaving her no choice but to follow.

As she came closer, a heavy-set woman, white hair pulled back from her face and a bright-patterned apron straining against her ample bosom, loomed into focus. ‘Ah, hallo there,’ her husband called. ‘Dr Creswell is expecting us. John Durrant, and this is my wife, Esther.’ He glanced at Esther who was looking mulishly at him, her arms wrapped around her waist, huddled against the wind. She was cold and tired and didn’t appreciate being dragged

to the end of the country to meet complete strangers. The minute she was alone with John she would tell him so. It was the first flare of real feeling she'd had in months.

The woman – the housekeeper she supposed – ushered them into the hallway, furnished with a tall grandfather clock that chose that moment to sound the half-hour, its solemn brassy tone causing Esther to start in surprise. Recovering herself, she shrugged off her coat and eased off her gloves, noticing as she did that her fingers emerged bloodless and pale. She allowed the woman to take her coat and hat but held onto her handbag. The house, although dim, smelled of beeswax and damp wool, and it was at least warmer inside than out.

'Just through here, if you'd be so good as to wait. Dr Creswell will be with you shortly.' The housekeeper's vowels were rounded and friendly, much like her figure. She moved rather more swiftly than one would expect for one so large and fast disappeared, swallowed up by the gloom of the corridor.

They had been shown into the parlour, lit only by the glow of an oil lamp and a small fire burning in the grate. Esther sniffed, smelling wood smoke, a rich aroma that was infinitely preferable to the dusty, acrid coal that generally burned in London hearths. There was a large rug strewn with a faded flowered pattern and three wing-backed chairs upholstered in sombre olive green arranged to face the fire. A mahogany escritoire was pushed up against one wall, and a large window looked out over the path upon which they had arrived. In a corner, next to a chaise longue, sat a rather impressive-looking gramophone, its fluted brass horn a bright and shiny flower in the shadowy room.

Esther perched on the edge of one of the chairs, set her handbag on the floor but kept her gloves in her hands, twisting them tightly together. John took the chair next to her, saying

nothing. The clock in the hall ticked loudly, counting out the seconds as they sat. Time seemed to stretch, but in reality it must have only been a few minutes before the door burst open.

The man who came into the room was tall, with thick wavy brown hair, the shade of which reminded her of a newly shucked conker, unruly eyebrows matched his hair and he had a strong, square jaw. He was wearing a tweed jacket that hung off his spare, lanky frame and his trousers were the baggy corduroys of an off-duty farmer. The bowl of a briar pipe was firmly grasped in one hand. His cheeks were ruddy, as if he'd just that moment come in from a walk and he brought with him the sweet smell of gorse and tobacco. 'Ah, there you are. Durrant, old man. How good to see you. Sorry to keep you waiting.'

It was his voice that captured her attention. Low and gentle, with a faint huskiness, like sandpaper. She'd never thought of herself as the kind of woman to be affected by something as simple as the timbre of a voice, but she could have closed her eyes and been lulled to sleep by it.

Esther and John both rose, and the man extended his hand to her husband and they shook hands with hearty familiarity.

'This is my wife, Esther,' said John, a protective arm at her back.

'Indeed. Splendid,' said the man. 'A pleasure to meet you.' He studied her as an art critic might examine a painting, his searing gaze quite at odds with his soft voice, and she felt almost flayed at his careful regard of her, as if he could see the blood pulse in her veins, could penetrate the dark, empty heart of her. She looked away, studying the floor.

'Darling, this is my old friend Richard Creswell. We were at Radley together.' John was unusually buoyant. She suspected it was to make up for her poor mood.

‘Rather a long time ago now, eh?’ Esther looked up and noticed that the doctor’s eyes – a light shade of blue that reminded her of swimming baths – crinkled at the edges when he smiled and his teeth were white and even.

She briefly touched her fingers to his – the lightest of contacts – and then huddled her arms tight around herself again, though they offered little protection from his unsettling gaze. She hadn’t had an appetite for society nor polite conversation for some time now, and had hardly spoken to a soul save for the daily woman, John and Teddy, and Nanny of course, for the past several months. She didn’t appreciate this situation being foisted upon her.

‘Welcome to Embers.’

‘Embers?’ she said faintly.

‘The house. It gets its name from the island. It was built around, oh, seventy years ago now. Apart from a couple of cottages on the westward shore, it’s the only dwelling. Must have been something of an effort to get the materials here and construct it, though it’s likely that some of them were the result of shipwreck bounty. Rumour has it that, in years past, islanders used to attach lanterns to the necks of their cows so that passing ships might mistake them for boats at anchor and be lured onto the rocks.’

‘A deadly harvest,’ said Esther, noting that he, however, appeared to relish the anecdote.

‘I suppose so. Apparently the original owner lived here by himself. A hermit of sorts,’ he continued. ‘Mad old fellow.’ Dr Creswell boomed a rich, deep laugh that was, Esther imagined, honed on schoolboy rugger fields and cavernous dining halls. It bounced off the room’s high ceilings, giving her the impression of boundless bonhomie and a welcome as warm as the fire. She relaxed her grip on her gloves. Perhaps this would not be the ordeal she imagined.

‘And is there a Mrs Creswell?’ Esther was shocked at her outspokenness and her curiosity; it seemed that she had lost her ability to make polite conversation, to interest herself in the superficial. She rather thought, however, that he wouldn’t be the kind of man who would mind.

‘Not one that would put up with me,’ he said with a generous smile that went some way to contradict his comment.

‘Richard has been here, what . . . nearly three years didn’t you say old chap?’ John interjected.

‘About that,’ he replied, not explaining what had brought him there, nor what kept him on this bleak, windblown isle. ‘Now how about some tea? I expect you worked up something of a thirst on your walk up here, not to mention a chill. It’ll warm you right up.’ He clapped his hands together with enthusiasm. ‘There’s no sugar to spare, I’m afraid, though we do have Darjeeling – a gift from a grateful patient,’ he explained. As he was speaking, the door to the drawing room opened, and the housekeeper bustled in with a tray. ‘Ah, thank you Mrs Biggs,’ he said as she set it on the table before them.

Esther wondered idly what kind of patients would come all this way to see him. Or perhaps he had a practice on one of the larger islands they had passed on their journey here?

‘Shall I be mother?’ His voice interrupted her musings and Esther flinched.

‘Oh, I do beg your pardon.’ The doctor looked mortified and Esther felt almost sorry for him. ‘Slip of the tongue.’

She smiled thinly and felt a pang of longing for Teddy again, for the satin feel of his skin, and the way his thick blond hair lay flat to his scalp after a bath. He’d become quite a chatterbox in recent months, and spoke with a delightful lisp that charmed everyone who came across him. She still couldn’t understand

why they hadn't been able to bring him with them. It would be a very long week without him.

Dr Creswell busied himself pouring tea and then handing yellow-and-white flowered cups and saucers to John and herself. There was a matching plate on which three plain biscuits rested, but she had no desire for one. Her hand shook as she raised the china cup to her lips and she had to concentrate to avoid spilling it.

Dr Creswell and John began to reminisce about their schooldays and Esther was free to let her gaze wander about the room. It was spare, no extraneous decorative touches that the lady of the house might perhaps have brought, but scrupulously clean: not a mote of dust had been allowed to rest on the polished *escritoire* nor on the windowsills. Stacked next to the gramophone were a number of vinyl records. She recognised Prokofiev, Schumann, Delius, Satie. She had enjoyed concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, the London Symphony Orchestra, the summer Proms series, but there had been no such outings in the summer last gone by. Once, music had been a pleasure, filling the rooms of Frogmore, accompanying her afternoons, the background to quiet evenings at home after Teddy was in bed, but that had been many months ago, before . . . before . . .

She was wrenched back to the present by the realisation that Dr Creswell had asked her a question, had repeated it several times judging by the furrow between his eyebrows. 'I beg your pardon,' she said, the barest hint of apology in her voice. 'My attention was elsewhere.'

She noticed John and the doctor exchange a look of understanding. Their complicity rankled, but good manners meant that she let it go unremarked.

'No matter, Mrs Durrant. I was merely asking if you had a pleasant journey.'

‘Oh, oh, yes, I suppose.’ She glanced at her husband for confirmation. ‘The sleeper was more than adequate, though the boat journey left something to be desired,’ she said dryly. She put her cup down on the table and stood up. ‘A little air, if I may. I’m sorry, I feel rather dizzy all of a sudden.’ She walked towards the window and raised the sash. A gust of wind blew towards her and she leant into its chilly embrace, taking several deep breaths. After a moment she lowered the frame and turned back to them both, seeing Dr Creswell crumpling up a small piece of paper in his hand and depositing it in the pocket of his jacket. John didn’t seem to have noticed; he was looking at her with a mix of sorrow, regret and what seemed like relief. Even in her numb state, she was attuned to the way her husband treated her differently now. He said he didn’t blame her for what had happened, that it wasn’t her fault. Over and over he had said it, but she knew better than to believe him. After all, she blamed herself, so why shouldn’t he?

‘Finish your tea, darling. Before it gets cold.’

Esther nodded, but as she was about to return to her chair an old map, framed and hung on the wall, caught her eye. It showed a scatter of islands and at the bottom left a small boat being rowed by a serpent, and the words *There be Dragons* in flowing script.

‘Oh, take no notice of that,’ Richard laughed. ‘The dragons here became extinct a long time ago.’

Esther raised an eyebrow but sat down again, taking a deep draught of the now lukewarm tea. The dregs felt chalky on her tongue but that was nothing unusual – kettles coughed up limescale unless they were regularly cleaned. Perhaps the housekeeper wasn’t as efficient as she looked.

Dr Creswell and John moved on to the topic of the increasing London fogs and she sat back in the chair, letting the conversation swirl around her once more. Unaccountably sleepy, she leant her head back against the antimacassar and her eyelids fluttered closed. She felt almost as if she were in a fog herself.

As she drifted towards unconsciousness, her mind flickered back to the doll, muddy and abandoned, that she'd seen on the path. Should she have picked it up? Was there a child crying somewhere because they had lost their favourite toy? How could that be, on such a wild and remote island where no one save for the doctor and his housekeeper appeared to live? It was very curious indeed. She must remember to ask John about it.



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