



The **LAST**
REUNION

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‘But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour’d rage.’

HENRY V, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Author's note

The Burma Campaign of the Second World War has often been referred to as 'The Forgotten War'. The women of the Women's Auxiliary Service – WAS(B) – were recruited from England, India and Australia, and served alongside the soldiers, enduring the same arduous conditions and often operating under enemy fire. They were the closest to the frontline of any servicewomen in the entire war; many were mentioned in dispatches for their bravery and several were decorated at the end of hostilities. According to General Sir William Slim, Commander of the British 14th Army in Burma, these women showed 'the highest standard of devotion and courage'; while, as stated by Admiral of the Fleet, First Earl Mountbatten of Burma, 'living and working in the more uncomfortable conditions [yet] were able to do much to alleviate the hardships of the campaign'.

Yet few have ever heard of them, and almost all of them are now gone from this world. They are the forgotten women of the forgotten war.

ONE



Oxford, 1976

It was the work of a moment; a tiny revenge for a much graver crime. She had never stolen so much as a packet of sweets before. She did not, as a rule, lie, cheat or steal. But this was different.

She wiped a film of sweat from the back of her neck, lifting the damp strands of hair in an effort to cool herself. Her cotton sundress – madras, designed for an Indian climate – clung to her legs, and a blister had formed on her heel from the strap of her sandals. She'd experienced this kind of heat before, had almost forgotten how it sapped the spirits, how it became an act of will to carry on regardless.

She barely noticed the thin strips of grass that had bleached to the colour of bone alongside the pavement, the wilted flowerbeds and the leaves hanging limply from the trees. The summer had sweltered on for forty days without rain. Things were so dire that

the government had appointed a Minister for Drought. It was unheard of. Unprecedented. Records had tumbled.

She walked alone, her mind occupied with other matters, on her way to Beaumont Street. In her handbag was the newspaper clipping that had enticed her into the city on such an insufferable August afternoon.

She'd parked her car – a new Rover that purred like a kitten and was a dream to drive – along the wide boulevard of St Giles', a few minutes' walk from the museum. The city was subdued, students and dons long departed, their staircases silent, pigeonholes empty of the swathe of flyers and notes that cluttered them during term time. Tourists punted on the Cherwell with varying degrees of skill, or stopped for a beer in perhaps the Eagle and Child, The Bear or, if they could find it, The Turf. It was too hot to do anything but cool off with liquid of one kind or another.

Reaching the entrance to the Ashmolean, she glanced up at the tall classical columns and slipped gratefully into its frigid embrace. Nodding to the attendant, she cast about, looking for a sign. Her eyes locked on a stand that pointed to the exhibition. *Little Treasures. Netsuke from the Edo period.*

Her heart stuttered for a moment and her breath came in little puffs. 'Are you all right, madam?' the attendant asked as she leaned against the desk to steady herself.

'Yes, yes,' she said, in a voice that didn't sound like hers. 'Quite all right, thank you. The heat, you know.'

The attendant smiled. 'Nice to be in here, then.'

She straightened up, flashed a weak smile in return, then clutched her handbag to her side and walked towards the sign. It

stood at the start of a long corridor, and she began to walk faster, the soles of her sandals clicking loudly on the hard floor. She soon came to a halt at a doorway. The room beyond contained glass display cases dotted at intervals along its edges, with a large rectangular case occupying the centre.

She was the only person there.

Moving forward, she started at the left-hand side, scanning each of the cases, the tiny sculptures, searching for the one, the inch-high ivory that she knew as intimately as the freckles on her own skin: the ink-stained carved detail, the tiny flap behind the ear, the winking jet eyes.

She passed a carved cherry-wood snail, an octopus hiding its face behind twisted tentacles, a wide-eyed goldfish, two milky quails with tiny amber stones for eyes perched on a bed of millet, a wasp settled on a half-eaten pear carved from bamboo, a frog peering out from inside a sycamore key . . .

All remarkable in their own right, but not the one she sought.

Then, suddenly, there it was.

The fox-girl. Cleverly lit from underneath so that it seemed to glow of its own accord, luminous against the coal-black backdrop.

She held her breath and peered into the case, examining the tiny form for clues. There . . . there was the infinitesimal scratch on the right cheek, the worn skirt where a thumb must have rubbed it a thousand times over.

As she leaned against the glass, its bevelled edge slipped on the wooden case beneath and she sprang back as if it had given her an electric shock. She glanced around, but the room was still empty. Silent.

From then on, until she left the museum a few short minutes later, she felt as though she had stepped outside of herself, as though it were someone else's index finger that pushed the glass once more, as it moved half an inch across the felt, grated slightly on the wood.

It was the work of a moment to lift the glass with the tips of her lacquered nails and slide her other hand underneath, feeling the ivory ridges against her skin.

She took seven in all: the octopus, the birds, a curled-up cat licking its paw, an ivory camellia, a tiny dragon and of course, the fox-girl. She wanted to make it look like a common-or-garden theft, that no one piece was more important than another.

She dropped six of them into her open handbag, but she couldn't let go of the fox-girl, curling her fingers tightly around it, her hand a fist, the netsuke's edges hard against her palm. The sweat had dried on the back of her neck and she shivered, as though the earlier heat had been hours rather than minutes ago.

Using her nails again, she pulled the glass back into place and turned to leave, her heart thrumming like a tabla. As if in a dream, she floated past the attendant and emerged into the light where the day hit her with the force of a firecracker, its white heat blinding.

She'd walked two hundred yards along St Giles' before she let herself breathe out, half-expecting to hear sirens at any moment, to feel a firm hand clap on her shoulder.

Ignoring the curious stares as she entered the front bar of the Eagle and Child, she ordered a half-pint of shandy, drinking it almost straight down and then asking for another.



Two days later, there it was, on page four of *The Times*, in a narrow column, below the fold.

Stolen: seven rare and valuable netsuke

On 20 August, from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Douglas Pullman, curator of Asian artefacts at the museum, believes professionals carried out the theft of the Japanese netsuke, as it went undetected for several hours and the locked display case was undamaged.

She made a slight scoffing sound in the back of her throat. The case hadn't been locked. She read on:

Among them was the famed 'fox-girl', dating from the eighteenth century. A reward of twenty thousand pounds is offered for information leading to their recovery. 'Collectively, the current worth of these netsuke can be estimated to be in the region of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds,' said Mr Pullman. 'However, they are well documented, so will prove difficult to sell, unless the thieves have found a buyer with no scruples as to owning them. It is likely these pieces will stay hidden from sight for quite some time.'

The woman refolded the newspaper, placed it on the table in front of her and began to spread marmalade on her toast, a quiet smile tugging at her lips.

TWO



London, 1999

‘Behind every successful woman . . .’

Olivia struggled through the door to the office, furling her sodden umbrella, and winced at the stream of water that was rapidly soaking the expensive carpet, darkening the plush dove grey.

. . . is an unappreciated, unpaid assistant who works her butt off for little reward.

‘. . . stands a man. Sulking,’ she said instead, finishing the sentence for her boss.

‘Oh jolly good,’ said Elaine. ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head.’

Olivia held her tongue, allowing Elaine to gloat, and to explain. She’d lay bets the bonhomie wouldn’t last past lunchtime, but nevertheless she was curious about the cause.

‘The sale,’ Elaine said, a note of impatience creeping into her voice. ‘Last night at Bonham’s. Smashed the reserve on the lacquerware; the *inro* did particularly well. It’s one in the eye for Martinson.’ She leaned so far back on her swivel chair that Olivia was worried she might catapult through the window behind her, but Elaine stopped herself just before the point of no return.

‘I suppose it is,’ said Olivia.

Jeffrey Martinson was Elaine’s arch-rival. The only other London-based independent dealer in Asian art, and although on the several occasions Olivia had met him she had found him perfectly pleasant, a frosty encounter between her boss and Jeffrey had shown her that he and Elaine could barely stand to be in the same room.

She’d only just started the job and had been full of excitement at attending her first London sale. As they walked into the room, Martinson had held the door open for them, greeting Elaine warmly. Olivia had been taken aback to see her boss sweep through the doors with not a word of acknowledgment, leaving Olivia trailing in her wake.

‘Oh, don’t mind her, darling,’ he whispered to her. ‘She’s hated me since I supposedly poached one of her best clients. Of course I did no such thing.’

‘Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,’ said Olivia dryly, putting a hand to her mouth as if she’d said more than she should have.

Martinson rewarded her with a knowing smile as he smoothed back his already immaculately pomaded hair and adjusted the lapels of his jacket.

Elaine hadn’t exactly said as much, but Olivia was aware that it wouldn’t help her career prospects if she were seen to

fraternise with the enemy, however cordial he might be. After that, whenever she attended a sale, she made sure not to be seen talking to Martinson, in Elaine's presence at least, though he always gave her an acknowledging nod or subtle wave.

Elaine kept a tight control of the activities, proceeds and staff of her eponymous company, Cholmondeley's (pronounced 'Chumley' in that peculiar, posh English way of eliminating entire syllables from certain words), guarding her clients fiercely and keeping potential vendors even closer. It was undoubtedly the reason she had been so successful, building up the two-and-a-half-person agency (in addition to Elaine and Olivia, Reg the accountant came in one day a week) over nearly three decades until it was one of the country's most respected, albeit one of the smallest. 'Niche. Boutique. Expert and absolutely discreet,' Elaine had said when she interviewed Olivia.

'Anyway, you're late.' Olivia was jerked back to the present as Elaine narrowed her eyes accusingly.

'*Religieuse?*' Olivia offered, swallowing a tickle in her throat and hoping to placate her boss with her favourite pastry. 'They're from that place you like. The new one near Sloane Square. *Le Merveilleux*.' She'd been delayed not only by the detour to the patisserie but, more importantly, by a phone call from Brand's, an art-detection agency that had contacted her – in the strictest confidence – shortly after she joined Cholmondeley's. She knew better than to mention the latter reason. 'It's bucketing down outside, so I can't vouch for the state of them.'

'You'll make me fat,' Elaine replied, before relenting. 'Oh, go on then. Put it on a plate, won't you? A coffee wouldn't go amiss either. *Cafetière*, not that instant muck.'

Olivia, who by this time had unbuttoned her coat and hung it on the hat stand by the door, walked the four steps to the tiny kitchenette and flicked on the kettle, pulling a tissue from a box on the side as her nose began to run. She blew noisily and hoped she wasn't coming down with something; she couldn't afford to be sick.

The offices were the ground floor of a tiny mews house – originally built as stables – in Belgravia. When Olivia first saw it, she had sighed and gone quite limp at the perfection of the cobbled lane, the white-painted square window frames and the pretty window boxes overflowing with pink geraniums. It was everything she'd imagined a hidden corner of London might be, dreaming about it from her girlhood bedroom on the other side of the world.

Three months of tedious day-to-day tasks, of working two jobs (the other at a bar in the evenings and at weekends that actually paid her rent) and of not putting her education – a degree in art history and a Masters in Asian art – to full use hadn't tarnished the shine of living in the city. 'It's an internship,' Elaine had said, as if that excused the requirement to offer a salary. 'With a view to a permanent role, if things work out.' It was a vague promise, but Olivia remained hopeful. She ignored the occasional flicker of guilt at the retainer she received from Brand's. The art-detection agency had suggested what they referred to obliquely as an 'arrangement'. They paid her a trifling amount, but it helped with the rent on her dingy South London bedsit. All they asked was that she keep her eyes open and if she came across a hint of anything dodgy, to pass on the information. She was morally

opposed to stolen art, so it made for an easy decision; and besides, a girl had to do what she could to get by.

Occasionally Elaine allowed her to handle the rare, precious artefacts. As she stroked shiny lacquer undimmed by the centuries, or polished a piece of carved jade, she liked to imagine their creator, working away in a small, cluttered workshop, hopeful that someone might find their art beautiful and desirable, oblivious to the fact that they would one day command stratospheric prices across the world, that they might be fought over at auction, stolen from galleries and private collections, or disappear in the chaos of war and unrest.

Elaine gave Olivia the title of assistant, though they both knew that she was over-qualified for the job. What it actually boiled down to was general dogsbody: maker of hot drinks, opener of letters, lick of stamps, occasional organiser of Elaine's personal life, and – Olivia's pet hate – filer of every document that came into the office, of which there were far too many. She probably could have secured a more senior position at another dealer, though it was a small industry and there weren't many specialists, even in London. But Cholmondeley's was one of the best, particularly when it came to Asian art, and she'd bargained with herself that the experience would be invaluable even if the pay was, for the time being, non-existent.

Olivia had stopped at the patisserie aiming to sweeten Elaine up before she raised the subject of a three-month review. She delivered the cream and choux pastry – not dissimilar in shape to Elaine's well-upholstered frame – on a Meissen plate, setting down a matching cup and saucer. She inched aside a raft of papers to make space on Elaine's desk, the surface of which

always looked as though a hurricane had swept through in the night. She had made the mistake of tidying the wide expanse of mahogany only once; not something she would repeat. ‘Now I can’t find a bloody thing,’ Elaine had fumed at the time and Olivia feared she might dismiss her on the spot.

She stood back now and was on the point of opening her mouth to ask the question she had been silently practising on the way into work, but the phone trilled and she was left gawping like a goldfish. Elaine glared at the handset in front of her and reached for the pastry. ‘Get that, will you, please?’

Olivia retreated to the front office and picked up her extension. ‘It’s Mr Berkeley, about last night’s sale,’ she called out, after placing him on hold.

Elaine waved to her to put it through and Olivia could see her lean back on her chair once again, settling in for a congratulatory chat with one of her most lucrative clients.

Olivia went to her desk and turned on her computer. A filing tray on her desk almost overflowed with paperwork and she promised herself – again – that today would be the day she tackled it. The filing was stored at the back of the office in an airless, windowless box room that smelled of dust and old books. Twelve filing cabinets left scarcely enough space to open the drawers. It wasn’t a pleasant place.

Olivia had just bitten into a Rich Tea when the phone rang again; a red light indicated that Elaine was still on one of the other lines. ‘Good morning, Cholmondeley’s,’ she said, her voice muffled by a mouthful of crumbs.

‘What’s that? I say, do speak up!’ said an imperious-sounding woman’s voice on the other end.

‘Sorry,’ Olivia said, swallowing hurriedly. ‘This is Cholmondeley’s. How may I help you?’

‘Elaine. Is she there?’ The accent was as crisp and precise as a blade.

‘I’m sorry, Elaine’s in a meeting.’ Elaine’s preferred line. ‘May I take a message?’

‘Oh drat. Ouch. Get down, will you?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I’m sitting with a lapful of puppies.’ A series of yips and whines echoed down the line. ‘Bette had her litter overnight. Five of the blessed whelps. Took me quite by surprise.’

The woman’s tone was neither pleased nor annoyed, and Olivia wasn’t sure whether to offer congratulations or commiserations.

‘You’re new, aren’t you? Australian?’ the voice prompted.

‘Er, yes . . .’

The woman rattled on. ‘Charming accent. You sound just like an old friend of mine. Now, where was I? Oh yes. Listen, dear, tell Elaine that Beatrix has decided to sell. The netsuke. Including—’ There was a rustle and another series of yips, a muffled curse as the woman dropped the phone. ‘The fox-girl,’ she added, *sotto voce*.

A piece of biscuit caught in Olivia’s throat and she had to hold the phone away from her mouth as she coughed to dislodge it. Despite the heat pumping out from the radiator, a chill ran through her, giving her goose bumps beneath her sweater.

Had she heard correctly?

‘I say, are you there?’

Olivia gathered her wits. ‘Yes, Mrs . . .’

‘Pelham. Beatrix Pelham.’ The woman spelled it out as Olivia wrote it down on a sticky note. ‘Elaine has my number.’

There was a click as the woman hung up and Olivia was left staring at the words she’d written.

The fox-girl. Possibly the rarest netsuke ever carved. Certainly the most valuable. Olivia clearly remembered the day she first saw a netsuke; she was a teenager, and they featured in the pages of an old book her father had owned on Japanese art. He’d pointed out the fox-girl as one of his favourites. Made from creamy ivory stained with ink, it depicted the figure of a girl wrapped in a cape, the hood of which had fallen down to reveal the face of a fox. As she studied it, her father told her the story of the *kitsune* of Japanese mythology, a wise old fox that was said to be able to assume the form of a beautiful girl who would seduce a man before eating his liver or heart. She had been immediately fascinated by the rather gruesome legend; looking back, it had been partly responsible for propelling her towards studying Asian art for her Master’s.

Later, as a first-year student, Olivia had come across a grainy black-and-white photograph of the fox-girl, taken sometime in the seventies when it was loaned as part of an exhibition at the Ashmolean in Oxford. It was, like all netsuke, small enough to fit in the palm and carved ‘in the round’, in three dimensions. Attributed to master carver Gechu, who was thought to have lived in Osaka, and fashioned in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

The Rolex watch of its time.

Late one sultry summer afternoon a thief or thieves had forced open the locks on one of the glass cases where the fox-girl,

and several other rare and valuable netsuke, were displayed and made off with them before an alarm could be raised, so the newspapers stated.

The fox-girl had not been seen since, though rumours of its whereabouts had swirled for decades. Reports had occasionally surfaced of sightings in private collections as far flung as Tokyo, New York, even here in London, but each time they had turned out to be false, generally inferior reproduction copies, or netsuke in a similar style but lacking the delicacy and finesse of the original.

She'd been intrigued to learn that netsuke, the toggles traditionally used by Japanese men to secure small containers to their *obi* (the wide sash that wrapped around their kimonos), had become, by the twentieth century, highly collectable artefacts. Generally no bigger than a couple of inches, they were often exquisite three-dimensional reproductions of fruits, animals, mythical creatures, even gods, and could be carved from cherry wood, ivory or even nuts. 'They feature two carved channels or holes by which the *inro* (container) cord is secured,' her father had explained. 'The *netsukishi's* skill at placing these is almost as important as their mastery of form.'

As she thought about the fox-girl, her hand strayed to the thin leather cord of her necklace through which was fastened the one netsuke she owned. It wasn't a pretty creature, featuring the trunk and tusks of an elephant, the eyes of a rhinoceros and the tail of a cow, but it was a *baku* – a chimera said to swallow bad dreams. It had been a graduation gift from her parents and she had worn it like a talisman ever since.

She glanced down at the note again, tore it from her pad and went into Elaine's office. Her boss was still on the phone, her chair now turned to face the window and her back to Olivia. She stuck the note where Elaine would be most likely to see it, on top of a pile of other notes, some of which were so old they featured the sun-faded, curving script of Olivia's predecessor.

Instead of returning to her desk, she picked up the overflowing basket of paperwork and walked down the corridor. If Elaine should ask, she would have a cast-iron reason for being in the filing room.

When she was there, she dumped the basket on top of one of the cabinets and went to the drawer marked N-Q then riffled through its contents until she found the file marked 'Pelham'. The initials 'MOB' were cryptically scrawled in pencil on the top.

She found a space on the floor to sit, drew up her knees and leaned against one of the cabinets before opening the file. She could feel herself holding her breath as she began to scan the contents, searching for any mention of the fox-girl. Could the secret of its whereabouts, unseen for twenty-odd years, rest somewhere within these dusty manila covers?