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A Place for Us: Part 3

Written by Harriet Evans

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Part Three
The Past and the Present

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

Christina Rossetti, 'Up-Hill'

Martha

One day, many years ago, Martha had had a premonition of death.

She never tried to explain it to anyone else: it sounded too unlikely. They had had an early supper, and she was in the kitchen one evening, washing up, while David worked in his study. Cat was asleep upstairs; she must have been around twelve or so.

It was one of those still-light spring evenings, where the birds sing softly, the black earth is alive with promise, and the cool air is sweet. *Rhapsody in Blue* was playing on the radio. Martha loved Gershwin, and she was banging a wooden spoon on the sink in time to the piano, staring at nothing really in the soapy water, when suddenly she saw it, in front of her eyes.

She, and David. They were walking down the lane together, like the first time. David was wearing the hat Violet had given him, all those years ago; light was falling between the trees. They went towards it, gladly: it seemed to be sunshine. But the light fell on her, like a cloak, and suddenly changed. She stared up at the sky, but saw only a grey, heavy nothing, and she realised she didn't know where the light was coming from and so she started to shout, to call for help. The lane, the trees, the hedgerow, David: they all disappeared, and she saw only grey around her, like a plane, plummeting through clouds. She could hear him calling her, she could hear her own screams, could feel herself desperately running towards something, but nothing seemed to work, to change, and she was racing into the mist, into nothing . . .

Martha had started running then, through the house, to the study. She'd flung the door open, and it was only then she realised she was soaking wet: washing up water all over her top, her hair, her cheeks. She was crying, shaking from head to toe.

'My love, what on earth's wrong?' said David, standing up.

'I . . .' Martha began, and then she felt stupid. *I have just seen how*

I'm going to die. I'm going to leave you. She couldn't stop shaking now, and there was a sharp metallic taste in her mouth. She put her hands on her cheeks. 'I saw something awful while I was washing up. It sounds crazy. How . . . You and me.'

The music floated in from the kitchen, but otherwise the house was still. David walked around the desk and took her in his arms. 'Darling. Washing up can be dangerous, can't it? Goose walk over your grave?' He held her tight, and she rested her head on his shoulder, like she always did. She loved him then, more than ever, if it were possible. He understood, he knew.

'Something like that. I can't explain it. It was terrifying.'

His hands, holding her close to him, patted her back, softly. 'Must have been.'

'I don't want to leave you. I don't want to be without you. Ever.'

'You won't,' he said, and there was laughter in his voice. 'Silly girl. I'm in the study drawing, and in twenty years' time I'll still be in the study, drawing.'

But Martha couldn't laugh. 'Promise?'

'Promise. You and me, remember? Just us.'

From the radio in the kitchen there came the clashing final bars, a drum roll, and then applause, and it broke the tension. They laughed.

'I feel silly,' Martha said, but the strength of that deadening terror was still with her, and she felt sick.

David pulled his battered old hat off its hook. 'I'm finished anyway. Let's go and sit outside and have a drink, darling,' he said. 'First outside of the year. No more ghosts tonight.'

Later that evening, he had suddenly said to her, as they sat on the steps by the French windows, 'I'd die if you left me, you know that, don't you?'

'David. Don't be dramatic.' She felt completely herself again, remote, amused, in control. How unlike her that earlier scene had been. How silly. He was the romantic one who cried at films, who had wept when the last of Cat's baby teeth came out and that was their final night of doing the Tooth Fairy, drawing chalk flowers and stars on the floor by the child's bed. He was the one who had brought them all here, who had brought Florence into the family, who had

fought tooth and nail for his own life. She was the pragmatist who said the dog had to be put down, who wrestled with wiring.

A life without each other was too far away to think about; they had conquered everything when they were young, and so they were careless about the future. It held no fear for them. She dismissed the premonition from her mind, for many years. Neither of them ever considered the possibility that their time together might end. They never thought about it: the truth was, Martha knew he would never leave her.

David

June 1968

Martha had stood in the hallway that morning, mouth pursed into a worried bud, watching David as he put on his hat and picked up his battered old portfolio, which contained what he hoped was his best work yet.

'If he says no,' she said, 'you'll – well, you have to at least ask him if there's anything else you can do for him. Cartoons, or some other kind of work. You have to come back with something, David. He's known you for years; he can't throw you off entirely.'

'For goodness' sake, someone like Horace Wilson doesn't deal in favours, Martha. And neither do I.' His voice was raised. 'This meeting, it's very important. Let me handle it, please, will you?'

'You're the one who wanted us to move here.' Her voice was sharp, the Cockney she'd left behind sneaking away with her consonants, as it always did when she was cross. David had a tighter grip on it. He never let his past show through.

'We both wanted to come back here, Martha.'

'Dear God, David!' It was the same old argument they'd been having for months. 'You're the one who said it'll be fine. And there's damp in the dining room, we've got rats everywhere, I hate this paint, nothing keeps in this heat and we can't afford a refrigerator, David. Daisy needs new shoes, for God's sake. She crams her toes into the only ones she's got, she's walking like a cripple! All because of you and your bloody rewriting history complex.' Martha was close to him now, her green eyes glowing with fury. She pushed her hair out of her face. 'I gave up doing my job for this, David.'

He knew she was as good as he was. They both knew it. Somehow, this made him angrier. 'Daisy's a damned liar and she'll say anything to get you on her side.'

‘Fine. Do whatever you want.’ Martha had turned and walked back into the kitchen, slamming the green baize door on her way.

He should have kept his mouth shut. Martha wouldn’t hear a word against Daisy. He stood there in the empty hall looking around him, wondering whether it was all worth it, but he told himself it had to be, he had to make it all right otherwise something else would have won. He wasn’t sure what. As he fiddled one final time with his tie, he felt a wet nose nudging the fold of his knee, and he turned and crouched on the ground.

‘You like it here, don’t you, old fellow?’ he said to Wilbur, who looked at him with dark solemn eyes, his lopsided pink tongue hanging crazily out of his mouth.

Wilbur gave a small, soft yelping bark. As if to say, ‘You’re all right with me.’ David fondled his soft, warm ears, touching his cheek to his muzzle.

A voice beside him said quietly, ‘Dad?’ David jumped. Daisy was standing next to him: he never seemed to hear her approach. ‘Dad, did you look at the drawings? Of Wilbur?’

‘Oh. Darling, I didn’t, I’m sorry.’ He stood, picking up the portfolio.

Her small face got its pinched, dead-eyed look. ‘Oh.’

‘I’ll look tonight.’ He wished she’d leave; he wanted to look in the mirror, talk himself up a little. Daisy threw him off balance. In abstract he wanted to draw her closer to him, and yet in practice he frequently found himself wishing he could keep her at arm’s length. ‘What did you draw him doing, then?’

She curled a twine of straggling hair round one thin finger. ‘Look, they’re here.’ She took a sheet of paper carefully out of a book of wild flowers on the sideboard. ‘Look at this one. He’s bouncing up and down so hard like he did the other day to catch the piece of meat that he hits his head on my hand and falls over. Then in the other one he’s waiting for me to come back from school and making that strange noise that he makes. And in the other one he’s chasing his own tail. And he’s saying, “It’s like a merry-go-round, but I’ll just catch this tail and then I’ll get off.”[~]’ Her eyes shone as David laughed, and glanced at the drawing she held tightly in her hand. She

was a funny little thing. He found himself dropping a kiss on her head. 'Do you like it?'

'Love it, darling. His nose looks very wet. I'll look at the rest of them later. Be nice to Florence.'

Her voice took on that wheedling, surprised tone. 'Daddy! Of course I will be, I always am nice to Florence, it's just—'

He patted her shoulder, and said goodbye. 'I'll miss my train.'

As he strode up the driveway he saw, as through fresh eyes, the gate hanging off its hinge, no post to attach it to. Wood pigeons cooed lazily in the trees above. David turned to look at the view of the valley sliding away from him and breathed in once again. He knew where he'd come from to get here. Anything was better than that.

'Come in, come in, old chap, sit down. Drink? June, get Mr Winter here a drink – what – G and T? Whisky?'

'Oh – whisky, please.'

'Wonderful, wonderful. Got that, dear? Right. David, jolly good to see you. How's that beautiful wife of yours?'

'She's very well. Says to say we must get you down to Winterfold some time.'

'I'd love that.' Horace Wilson slouched and slid his arms across the table, fingers touching. 'How is that house of yours? Pretty amazing place, I hear?'

'We're very happy with it.'

'You, in the deepest English countryside. It's really rather amusing. How long's it been now?' Horace pointed one long finger precisely in his ear, and wiggled it about in an explorative fashion.

'About a year now.' David put the portfolio on the table, fingers itching to open it. He didn't want to make small talk. He especially didn't want to discuss the house.

'Making the place your own, I hope.'

David found he was sweating. It was a close, oppressive day, thick cloud hanging heavy over London, trapping in the heat. The board-room of the *Modern Man* magazine was dank, and reeked of stale cigarette smoke: a typical Soho office. 'Can't wait to see what you've

got for me, old chap,' Horace said, lighting another cigarette and pushing his drink out of the way. 'Truth is we're up against it for next week's issue. Could be your lucky day.'

Delicately, David slid the sheets of sugar paper out. He had laboured all day and night for months on this project and it sounded pompous if one said it aloud, but put simply, it was the climax of everything he wanted to achieve as an artist. He'd ignored Martha, swatted away the children, walked unseeing around this crumbling, malfunctioning white elephant he'd taken on while winter rain dripped through the old roof and rodents gambolled in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, deadlines for his existing commissions came and went. The weekly cartoon for the *News Chronicle*, the illustrations for *Punch*, the funny little details he was supposed to sketch for the theatre column in the *Daily News* – he'd let them all down, these past weeks, chasing some ghost. He had known for some time he had to exorcise whatever it was that hung over him, even more so now he'd moved into Winterfold, and it had seemed to him this was the only way he knew how.

'I'll show you . . . I'm rather excited about them myself.' He cleared his throat. 'Right, here we go.'

'Jolly good.' Horace rubbed his hands together.

But his thin smile grew rigid as David spread the sketches over the table. 'As you know, I began this series when I was . . .' he swallowed, his voice high and formal, '. . . younger. It came about through my experiences in the war. I have always wanted to return to this subject, to explore the impact of the last twenty years on the bomb sites of London, and the people who still live there. So I went back to the East End, talked to the residents, drew the new landscapes that are springing up there alongside the craters that still haven't been filled in.'

'Right.' Horace wasn't really listening. He was scanning the drawings, fingers drumming the table. 'Let me have a look . . . Oh, I see. Pretty grim, David.'

'Yes, it was.'

Images started flashing in front of David's mind: falling masonry like rocks raining down from the sky, houses ripped apart like they

were made of paper, bodies in the streets, rubble everywhere, and the sounds – screaming, whistling bombs, crying, agonised pleas for help, children hysterical with fear, the smell of shit, of piss, of terror and sand and fire.

Suddenly he was back there, curled up into the small shell shape his mother had told him to make, time and time again, crouching on the floor beside him in the kitchen. ‘Like this, little one. He doesn’t mean to hurt me. If you hide, though, he can’t see you and he can’t hurt you. So make yourself small. Like this.’

He couldn’t stop these memories. They came like a stabbing pain in the heart and he couldn’t stop them, he couldn’t acknowledge them, would simply have to go on like he had always done when this happened . . .

‘David?’ The laconic voice recalled him to the present. ‘I say, David!’

‘Sorry.’ David covered his mouth, trying to hide his panicky, laboured breathing. ‘Miles away.’

Horace was giving him a curious look. ‘Right. Listen, are you in town this evening? I’m rather keen on going to a club in Pimlico I think you’d like – it’s got a—’

‘No,’ said David, louder than he had meant. ‘I really just came up to show you these. I have to be back tonight. Work and . . . other business.’ He hoped he sounded vague. As though the real reason he had to be home wasn’t just because he hated being away from Martha, whether she was speaking to him or not. But that was the truth. He was only happy when he was with Martha, was only able to work when he could hear her low, clear voice singing around the house. She was his home.

‘Well, what a shame.’ Horace glanced again over the pen-and-ink drawings. He scratched his chin, jangling the glass of melting ice in his other hand and muttered something under his breath: David heard the word ‘domesticated’.

‘Listen,’ Horace said after a moment. ‘It’s certainly an impressive collection, old bean. I’ll give you that. You’re rather . . . brave. I’d have thought you’d have learned your lesson with the dying industries lot you shoved my way last year.’

David stared at the sheets of paper, spread out over the table. 'This isn't some Sunday Hyde Park artist's stuff, Horace – this is my life's work. What happened there, it's all been forgotten. We build new things and make new homes and it all gets bulldozed over and we mustn't forget, that's all.' He could hear himself and how desperate he sounded and he tried to modulate his voice. 'You know I'd rather hoped you could see your way to something rather like that prisoner of war series you did with Ronnie Searle.'

'Ah, but he's – he's got the whole package. Wonderful chap. Anyway, it isn't what people want, these days, David.' Horace swilled the liquid in his glass around languorously. 'It's a hip, crazy world out there, everything's changing, old order gone, all of that and—'

'Exactly,' said David. 'I want to—'

A flash of anger lit up Horace Wilson's face. 'Do let me finish, old thing, will you? I'll be frank. We can offer you work, but it's got to be light entertainment, you savvy? We want to make people laugh. Give them a break from their dire little lives.'

David couldn't bear to look at the sketches, spread out in front of them. Instead, he saw the red electricity bill . . . Martha's face that morning . . . the gate that hung off the hinge. He saw his own ridiculous folly, how trying to pull himself out of the past had led them to this house, how stupid he was, wanting something he couldn't afford and didn't deserve. 'I got the wrong end of the stick, I'm afraid. Not clear what you were looking for in my mind and that's my fault.' He was talking, saying anything to hold Horace's attention, his nimble mind jumping over the conversational rubble to get to safety, away from the demons that pursued him.

He knew, without stopping to think, that this was the moment everything hinged on. 'How about dogs? They off the table too?'

'What do you mean?'

'We have a dog called Wilbur.' His mind was racing; he tried to sound calm, as though this was part of the plan. 'Wonderful chap. Mongrel. Very affectionate, bit stupid, but wise in his way. You see?' He raised his chin, meeting Horace's eyes, smiling gently, as though they were both in on a joke he hadn't even thought of yet. 'My elder daughter, Daisy, got him for Christmas a few years ago, but he's all

of ours, really. Now Daisy's very naughty and Wilbur gets her out of scrapes. But they're also rather sweet together. The other afternoon, for instance. I came into the kitchen. Hot day, I rather fancy a bottle of beer. I catch him chasing his tail, round and round . . . He twirled his finger in the air, and Horace nodded. David knew he had him then.

'Daisy was watching him, nodding solemnly and I thought he was talking to her, saying something like, "It's like a merry-go-round, old girl. I'll just catch this tail and then I'll get off." [~]' Horace laughed. 'And he appears at the other side of the table like a jumping bean at supper, bouncing in the air in case there's some spare food. He's jolly funny. Here,' David said, his heart beating hard, 'let me show you. Do you have any . . .' he looked around for paper, but there was none in the empty boardroom. 'Never mind.' He turned over one of the sketches, pulled his pen out of his pocket and swiftly drew the picture Daisy had shown him that morning, Wilbur, whirling round in a circle, and he added Daisy, brows drawn together, arms crossed, glowering at him in confusion.

'Something like this. A little girl and her dog. You call it "The Adventures of Daisy and Wilbur". Have a page every week. How Wilbur helps the family and hinders at the same time. Hmm?' He rapidly traced his pen across the page again. Now he knew what he had to do, he was in control. 'Wilbur's waiting at the end of the lane for Daisy to come back from school.' He laughed. 'He does it every day. It's sweet. But he doesn't recognise her, keeps running up to the wrong people and licking them and they often . . . let's say they don't welcome the overtures. The young mother with the pram, she screams and says, "Leave my Susan alone!" Then there's the vicar. Wilbur likes chewing his waistcoat. And the barmaid at the Oak Tree, well. You can imagine what Wilbur goes for there, I'm sorry to say.'

Horace gave a snickering giggle. 'It sounds idyllic. You're a clever chap, David. I like it. I think we've got something there. Will your daughter mind?'

'Daisy? She's six. Don't worry.' David wanted to clear the other drawings up now, to stow them away, safe and sound. 'She'll love it.'

So – should I get something off to you in the next couple of days? I have a deadline but I can easily work with you to—’

‘We want to get this rolling as soon as possible, you know,’ said Horace. ‘Come into the office with me and let’s discuss the terms and all of that.’

‘And these?’ David gestured to the sketches, as he swept them up into his portfolio folder. ‘Any interest in seeing these again?’

‘Oh, gosh no. This way, please. June, would you fetch me another drink? David – another for you? Marvellous. Yes, I think this could be the start of something rather special.’