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The Book of Lost and Found

Written by Lucy Foley

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The Portrait

She hangs in the National Portrait Gallery now. Her smile has not faltered through the years, and her hair still falls just above her jaw, as sleek as cat's fur. She sits awkwardly: the pose of a moment held for eternity. Her eyes squint slightly, shielded from an invisible sun by her hand.

Who is she? The drawing bears no clue, nor the little square of text beside it.

A friend of the artist's, circa 1929, pen and ink.

Friend is a difficult word – it can conceal so much. Who was she, really, to the young man who sat down and sketched her one afternoon, with the spoils of their picnic beside them? Even this most gifted of artists is restricted by his medium to work only in the realm of the visible. Some things must be lost to time.

PART ONE

The **Work of**
a Master

1

Hertfordshire, August 1928

Already the gardens are thrumming with life. The air is scented with expectation; people are here to do reckless things, stupid things that they might later regret, though the point of it all is in not regretting. For the idea of the party is youth. Not all of the guests are young, but that does not matter – youth can easily be faked with the right attitude. It is this attitude that counts. It is there in the pale knees that flash beneath hemlines, the clink and spill of champagne, the jungle beat of the drums. Most of all it is in the dancing – fast, too fast to identify each of the individual movements, so that all one can make out is a sort of hysterical blur, seething, sweat-sheened.

Tom is not a dancer. Or, at least, not until he has had three or more glasses of champagne, the first of which he is drinking thirstily. The spindly stem and the wide saucer with its fragile

glass lip were not designed for hasty gulping, and he manages to pour a good deal of it down the front of his shirt, where the material now sticks translucently to his skin.

Tom is somewhat out of his depth. He has never been to this kind of event before. It is the sort one reads about in the society columns: drunken, wealthy youths performing outrageous stunts; the Bright Young People. The press love and hate them – they celebrate them, they vilify them, and they know full well that they would not shift nearly so many papers without them. There are men with cameras stalking the shadowy perimeters of the grounds. Tom spotted a couple planted by the bushes as they came in, though no flashbulb flares were wasted on his entrance. He is here as a ‘plus one’ – the guest of his well-connected Oxford acquaintance, Roddy. They have both been up there for a year now, and Tom is not quite convinced that the friendship will see them through to Finals. Tom is a couple of years older – his university career having been delayed by his father’s ill health – and they seem to have practically nothing in common, but, nevertheless, here they are together. ‘You’re pretty,’ Roddy explained, ‘so you’ll attract the gals, and I’ll swoop in and snare them.’

The theme for the evening is Arabian Nights. Tom wears a fez and tabard, embellished with pieces of mirror and coloured beads. He found them both in an antique shop in Islington. They smelt of mothballs and insidious damp, but he was proud of his discovery, though concerned that they might be too much.

He needn’t have worried: the other guests are apparently competing to be too much. Roddy pointed out the hostess herself as they entered – Lady Middlesford, swathed in scarlet chiffon, bejewelled and bejewelled with the treasures of the Orient, veiled with a scarf of the same red from which a thousand

metal ornaments dangle and clink together with the chime of tiny bells. A woman smiles up at him, sooty rings of kohl around incongruously pale blue eyes. By the doors that open on to the garden stands an odalisque, her stomach bare save for the adornment of a winking ruby.

Roddy left Tom as soon as they stepped out into the garden, promising to go in search of drinks, but it has been nearly an hour now, and there hasn't been any sign of him since.

A woman approaches. 'Have you a light, darling?' Her accent is regally, glassily precise, the very apotheosis of Englishness, though her outfit of ballooning silk pantaloons and tight fuchsia jerkin is pure Scheherazade. An imp's face – not pretty, too pinched about the eyes, the front teeth too long – but interesting, all the same. An androgynous sparrow's body and hair, shingled below the ears, of an unfeasibly lurid apricot hue. Then suddenly he recognizes her. He doesn't read the *Mail* as a rule, but you'd have to be a hermit not to know of this particular Bright Young Person. Babe Makepeace: 'twenty-one and lives for fun'. Lives, if the rumours are true, on a pitiful allowance begrudgingly bestowed by her disapproving old pa. Subsists, apparently, on a diet of nuts and Prairie Oysters, to keep that boy's body so fashionably slender in a flapper's shift.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his lighter. She lifts the cigarette to her lips, pinching her funny little face together in a deep inhalation.

'You're a jewel.' She gives him a playful knock on the arm. 'What's your name?'

'It's Thomas. Thomas Stafford.'

'Well, Thomas . . . Tommie . . . will you join me for a dance?' She peers up at him expectantly through the jewelled loops of her headdress.

‘That would be lovely . . . but perhaps later? I’m not much of a dancer.’

‘Suit yourself, Tommie.’ Before either of them can say another word she is grasped about the waist by some hearty and hauled off into the throng on the dance floor. Tom doesn’t much mind. He’s perfectly happy, in fact, to stand back and take in the exotic strangeness of the scene before him. Down on the lake, a small boat has left the bank. In it are three figures, two men, sitting, and a woman who stands between them, laughing and dribbling champagne into their open mouths straight from the bottle. One of the men pulls her down into his lap. She shrieks and the small craft rocks crazily upon the dark water.

He turns his attention back to the seething group of dancers again. He’d like to see Babe Makepeace dance: apparently it’s quite something. Right in the middle of the crowd he spies a familiar gingery head: Roddy. So that’s where he got to. And then he sees her. The way she dances makes him think of the movement of a swan, the energy and activity beneath the surface, the smooth glide above. She rides the music, she moves within it, above it. The bare skin of her arms is pale and bright in the lantern light and her hair is dark, bobbed beneath her ears. Even from a distance he feels sure that where it meets her neck the shorn part would be as soft and dense as a cat’s fur. She is, quite simply, mesmerizing. There is something else, too – something more than the mere spectacle of her. She seems . . . what? *Familiar*. Yet the sense of recognition refuses to reveal itself fully to him.

He strives for a proper look at her face. His sightings of her are snatched and incomplete. Finally, the band tinkles and grinds to a halt, and a new, slower melody begins. Dancers pour away

towards the bar, slick with sweat, glassy-eyed and flushed with enjoyment. And she is leaving too, smiling at Roddy and politely shaking off the red hand he has landed on her upper arm. She is moving in Tom's direction, towards the house. Tom breathes out, unsteadily. Is he going to talk to her? He isn't talented at speaking to women. Having sisters should have been some sort of initiation, but being the youngest of the three, and therefore picked upon by the others, has merely given him the impression of women as intimidating, quixotic beings.

As she moves closer, he sees that her beauty is charmingly flawed. Her mouth is slightly too large for her delicate face with its small, narrow nose and sloe eyes. She is taller than most of the women around her, and on the thin side – 'scrawny', his sister Rosa might say.

She is a mere few feet away, and he knows he is staring – she will notice him any second and he will look like an idiot. Just in time, he drops his gaze. His heartbeat pounds in his ears. She is passing him, passing right by, and the silvery stuff of her dress brushes against his leg. It is the slightest of sensations, yet every nerve ending in his body sings.

'Tom?'

He is sure he's imagined it at first, and doesn't look up.

'But it *is* you, isn't it? Tom Stafford?'

When he raises his head, she is right there in front of him, her face level with his own. There is the faintest trail of freckles across her nose, and her eyes are the most unusual colour, not dark, after all, but a strange quicksilver grey.

He clears his throat. 'Yes . . . that's right.' His voice sounds odd to him, like an instrument playing in the wrong key. 'If you don't mind my asking, how . . .?'

'Oh, Tom, I can't believe it!' Her smile is wide, delighted.

Suddenly the feeling of recognition that has bothered him unfurls into understanding. Alice.

‘Alice?’

*

Tom last saw Alice Eversley in 1913. She was six years old, a scant couple of months younger than he. Her legs were too long for her body, stork-thin, scuff-kneed, and her hair was an urchin’s mop, black as onyx. Not what people expected to find in the daughter of the divine Lady Georgina Eversley, blonde goddess of society. Or of the polar explorer Lord Robert Eversley who was, in England, always close-shaven and sharply tailored – though he appeared in expedition photographs with a beard greased with whale fat.

That summer, Tom’s parents had decided that the family would holiday in Cornwall. Mrs Stafford had read an article about the importance of bracing sea air for children’s health, and her younger girl, Caro, was still recovering from a case of whooping cough.

Mrs Stafford and the children would stay for two months in Winnard Cove, not far from the fishing town of Fowey. Mr Stafford, a solicitor, would remain with them as long as his work would allow. Tom’s mother had found the advertisement in her magazine: *Eyrie House, available for family parties. A picturesque, secluded setting in an idyllic, sandy cove.* It was just the place for them. It faced out to sea: small, weather-aged and salt-sprayed but indomitable. As promised, below the cottage was the long stretch of beach, strewn with pieces of interesting jetsam and sheltered from the wind by the encircling cliffs.

The only detail in which they had been slightly misled was

in the promise of seclusion. The cove would have been their own were it not overlooked on the other side by a vast Elizabethan manor of dun-coloured stone, partially hidden by a dense thicket of wych elm. *This*, their elderly landlady informed them proudly, was Eversley Hall: owned by the same family for hundreds of years.

On the third day of the holiday, Mr Stafford returned from a sortie in the dinghy soaked through and pink-faced with cold and exhilaration. His wife and children, taking their tea in the garden, had looked up in curiosity at the spectacle.

‘You won’t believe who I met today. Lord Eversley: the man himself. Here in Cornwall. I can’t believe I didn’t make the connection before . . . it all makes sense. The Hall is his.’

Gradually, the story unfolded. It transpired that Mr Stafford had managed to capsize his dinghy as he had crossed the path of a beautiful day yacht, causing chaos in the process. To make matters worse, after plummeting into the water he’d got his life jacket hooked on to his trailing mainsheet, and could not seem to get free.

He had heard a shout and had suddenly become aware of another body in the water beside him. The helmsman of the dayboat had dived in, leaving his crew to manage the craft.

‘Just like that, didn’t even hesitate – jumped right in and yanked me free. It was him: Lord Robert Eversley. One of the nicest men I think I’ve ever met.’ He beamed at them all. ‘He’s invited us for supper – all of us, the children too.’

And so, that evening, the Staffords made their way across the sand and up a long flight of steps that had been bowed and worn by ancestral Eversley footprints, to be met at the front door by a liveried butler. Within, the Hall had the chilly elegance of a cathedral: dark wood, antique glass, ancient stone.

Their footsteps echoed, and they found themselves awed and intimidated by their surroundings. It was difficult to ignore the feeling that they did not belong in such a place.

Robert Eversley, however, was all affability, as was his golden-haired son, Archie. Even the strange, pale-faced daughter gave them a crooked smile. Each one, it seemed, was making their own effort to make the guests feel welcome to the house as equals.

All, that was, save Lord Robert's wife. As Mrs Stafford would later remark, the beautiful Lady Eversley treated them as if they were the servants, being given a Boxing Day treat, bound to return to their rightful posts in the morning. She had shown no sign of interest or fellow feeling towards them, and even the children had recognized the slight. There had been a cold smile as Mr Stafford described his profession, a raised eyebrow at Mrs Stafford's mention of the house in Parsons Green. 'She's a frightful snob,' Tom's mother complained at breakfast the next day. 'She thinks we're not worth her time, and she saw to it that we knew it. I gave up trying with her after the first half-hour: it was simply too exhausting. One gets rather tired of being made to feel so inferior.'

Lady Eversley's *froidueur* had been the sole blight on an evening that was otherwise enjoyed by all. Tom's parents had spent the evening enthralled by Eversley's tales of moving ice that could crush a ship, let alone a man, in its giant fist; of ice blue and hard as the sapphires in Lady Eversley's necklace; of ice that yawned, black and treacherous, swallowing men to their doom.

Rosa and Caro – fourteen and ten – had been perfectly happy to spend their evening mooning over Archie who, at seventeen, was tall and broad-shouldered as a man; the lucky inheritor of

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both his father's heroic good looks and his mother's flaxen hair.

And then there was the daughter, Alice. Tom's sisters quickly rejected the strange tomboyish girl with the terrible hair, who seemed almost a different species from her much older brother. But Tom – Tom had found a kindred spirit in Alice. She, too, was convinced that she had seen pirates from her bedroom window, and smugglers flashing their lights in communication with the shore. And she'd amassed an impressive collection of curios gleaned from hours perusing the tideline: a parasol; a pair of spectacles; a strange, slightly curved knife that Tom had to admit did look remarkably like a miniature cutlass.

While the adults continued with their dinner, Alice and Tom escaped outside and across the dew-wet grass under cover of darkness, to where they could watch the shore for any signs of activity upon the sea. Alice had a platform that her father had built her in a tree, which formed an excellent lookout post. There they had stayed until Sir Robert, under instructions from his wife, had made his way through the garden to them and, with a smile in his voice, summoned them back inside.

For those eight weeks in Winnard Cove, Tom and Alice were inseparable. They spied for pirates, hunted crabs, built shelters from driftwood and braved the crashing cold surf to swim in the calmer waters beyond, beneath the anxious watch of Tom's mother and Alice's nanny. Alice was small for her age, and almost unnaturally pale – but she was strong, and fearless, braver than anyone Tom had met before. She told him that she wanted to be an adventurer like her father, the first-ever female explorer – and Tom was in no doubt that she would accomplish it. Even now he could imagine that sharp face blackened with whale fat, those small feet shod in fur-lined boots.

As is always the case with the truest childhood friendships,

it seemed that they should never be parted. And Tom's parents promised – as eager themselves to return – that they would come back the following year to Winnard Cove.

But one October morning later that year, Mr Stafford's teacup fell from his hand.

EVERSLEY PERISHES IN THE FROZEN SOUTH

ran the headline. Lord Robert had plummeted to his death, falling into a crevasse hidden beneath a false surface of thin ice and snow. The body could not be recovered.

The Eversleys never returned to Winnard Cove. Neither did the Staffords. The war came. Mr Stafford, a proud patriot, signed himself up to fight in France and returned a very different man. But he was luckier than some. Archie Eversley was killed at Ypres, on one of the first days of fighting.