Restless

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Extract

I

Into the Heart of England

WHEN I WAS A child and was being fractious and contrary and generally behaving badly, my mother used to rebuke me by saying: 'One day someone will come and kill me and then you'll be sorry'; or, 'They'll appear out of the blue and whisk me away – how would you like that?'; or, 'You'll wake up one morning and I'll be gone. Disappeared. You wait and see.'

It's curious, but you don't think seriously about these remarks when you're young. But now – as I look back on the events of that interminable hot summer of 1976, that summer when England reeled, gasping for breath, pole-axed by the unending heat – now I know what my mother was talking about: I understand that bitter dark current of fear that flowed beneath the placid surface of her ordinary life – how it had never left her even after years of peaceful, unexceptionable living. I now realise she was always frightened that someone was going to come and kill her. And she had good reason.

It all started, I remember, in early June. I can't recall the exact day – a Saturday, most likely, because Jochen wasn't at his nursery school – and we both drove over to Middle Ashton as usual. We took the main road out of Oxford to Stratford and then turned off it at Chipping Norton, heading for Evesham, and then we turned off again and again, as if we were following a descending scale of road types; trunk road, road, B-road, minor

road, until we found ourselves on the metalled cart track that led through the dense and venerable beech wood down to the narrow valley that contained the tiny village of Middle Ashton. It was a journey I made at least twice a week and each time I did so I felt I was being led into the lost heart of England – a green, forgotten, inverse Shangri-La where everything became older, mouldier and more decrepit.

Middle Ashton had grown up, centuries ago, around the Jacobean manor house – Ashton House – at its centre, still occupied by a distant relative of the original owner-builder-proprietor, one Trefor Parry, a seventeenth-century Welsh wool-merchant-made-good who, flaunting his great wealth, had built his grand demesne here in the middle of England itself. Now, after generation upon generation of reckless, spendthrift Parrys and their steadfast, complacent neglect, the manor house was falling down, on its last woodwormed legs, giving up its parched ghost to entropy. Sagging tarpaulins covered the roof of the east wing, rusting scaffolding spoke of previous vain gestures at restoration and the soft yellow Cotswold stone of its walls came away in your hand like wet toast. There was a small damp dark church near by, overwhelmed by massive black-green yews that seemed to drink the light of day; a cheerless pub – the Peace and Plenty, where the hair on your head brushed the greasy, nicotine varnish of the ceiling in the bar – a post office with a shop and an off-licence, and a scatter of cottages, some thatched, green with moss, and interesting old houses in big gardens. The lanes in the village were sunk six feet beneath high banks with rampant hedges growing on either side, as if the traffic of ages past, like a river, had eroded the road into its own mini-valley, deeper and deeper, a foot each decade. The oaks, the beeches, the chestnuts were towering, hoary old ancients, casting the village in a kind of permanent gloaming during the day and in the night providing an atonal symphony of creaks and groans,

whispers and sighs as the night breezes shifted the massive branches and the old wood moaned and complained.

I was looking forward to Middle Ashton's generous shade as it was another blearily hot day – every day seemed hot, that summer – but we weren't yet bored to oblivion by the heat. Jochen was in the back, looking out of the car's rear window – he liked to see the road 'unwinding', he said. I was listening to music on the radio when I heard him ask me a question.

'If you speak to a window I can't hear you,' I said.

'Sorry, Mummy.'

He turned himself and rested his elbows on my shoulders and I heard his quiet voice in my ear.

'Is Granny your real mummy?'

'Of course she is, why?'

'I don't know . . . She's so strange.'

'Everybody's strange when you come to think of it,' I said. 'I'm strange . . . You're strange . . .'

'That's true,' he said, 'I know.' He set his chin on my shoulder and dug it down, working the muscle above my right collar-bone with his little pointed chin, and I felt tears smart in my eyes. He did this to me from time to time, did Jochen, my strange son – and made me want to cry for annoying reasons I couldn't really explain.

At the entrance to the village, opposite the grim pub, the Peace and Plenty, a brewer's lorry was parked, delivering beer. There was the narrowest of gaps for the car to squeeze through.

'You'll scrape Hippo's side,' Jochen warned. My car was a seventh-hand Renault 5, sky blue with a (replaced) crimson bonnet. Jochen had wanted to christen it and I had said that because it was a French car we should give it a French name and so I suggested Hippolyte (I had been reading Taine, for some forgotten scholarly reason) and so 'Hippo' it became – at least to Jochen. I personally can't stand people who give their cars names.

'No, I won't,' I said. 'I'll be careful.'

I had just about negotiated my way through, inching by, when the driver of the lorry, I supposed, appeared from the pub, strode into the gap and histrionically waved me on. He was a youngish man with a big gut straining his sweatshirt and distorting its Morrell's logo and his bright beery face boasted mutton-chop whiskers a Victorian dragoon would have been proud of.

'Come on, come on, yeah, yeah, you're all right, darling,' he wheedled tiredly at me, his voice heavy with a weary exasperation. 'It's not a bloody Sherman tank.'

As I came level with him I wound down the window and smiled.

I said: 'If you'd get your fat gut out of the way it'd be a whole lot easier, you fucking arsehole.'

I accelerated off before he could collect himself and wound up the window again, feeling my anger evaporate – deliciously, tinglingly – as quickly as it had surged up. I was not in the best of moods, true, because, as I was attempting to hang a poster in my study that morning, I had, with cartoonish inevitability and ineptitude, hit my thumbnail – which was steadying the picture hook – square on with the hammer instead of the nail of the picture hook. Charlie Chaplin would have been proud of me as I squealed and hopped and flapped my hand as if I wanted to shake it off my wrist. My thumbnail, beneath its skin-coloured plaster, was now a damson purple, and a little socket of pain located in my thumb throbbed with my pulse like some kind of organic timepiece, counting down the seconds of my mortality. But as we accelerated away I could sense the adrenalin-charged heart-thud, the head-reel of pleasure at my audacity: at moments like this I felt I knew all the latent anger buried in me – in me and in our species.

'Mummy, you used the F-word,' Jochen said, his voice softened with stern reproach.

'I'm sorry, but that man really annoyed me.'

'He was only trying to help.'

'No, he wasn't. He was trying to patronise me.'

Jochen sat and considered this new word for a while, then gave up.

'Here we are at last,' he said.

My mother's cottage sat amidst dense, thronging vegetation surrounded by an unclipped, undulating box hedge that was thick with rambling roses and clematis. Its tufty hand-shorn lawn was an indecent moist green, an affront to the implacable sun. From the air, I thought, the cottage and its garden must look like a verdant oasis, its shaggy profusion in this hot summer almost challenging the authorities to impose an immediate hosepipe ban. My mother was an enthusiastic and idiosyncratic gardener: she planted close and pruned hard. If a plant or bush flourished she let it go, not worrying if it stifled others or cast inappropriate shade. Her garden, she claimed, was designed to be a controlled wilderness – she did not own a mower; she cut her lawn with shears – and she knew it annoyed others in the village where neatness and order were the pointed and visible virtues. But none could argue or complain that her garden was abandoned or unkempt: no one in the village spent more time in her garden than Mrs Sally Gilmartin and the fact that her industry was designed to create lushness and wildness was something that could be criticised, perhaps, but not condemned.

We called it a cottage but in fact it was a small two-storey ashlar house in sandy Cotswold stone with a flint tiled roof, rebuilt in the eighteenth century. The upper floor had kept its older mullioned windows, the bedrooms were dark and low, whereas the ground floor had sash windows and a handsome carved doorway with fluted half-columns and a scrolled pediment. She had somehow managed to buy it from Huw Parry-Jones, the dipsomaniac owner of Ashton House, when he was more than particularly hard up, and its rear backed on to the

modest remnants of Ashton House park – now an uncut and uncropped meadow – all that was left of the thousands of rolling acres that the Parry family had originally owned in this part of Oxfordshire. To one side was a wooden shed-cum-garage almost completely overwhelmed by ivy and Virginia creeper. I saw her car was parked there – a white Austin Allegro – so I knew she was at home.

Jochen and I opened the gate and looked around for her, Jochen calling, 'Granny, we're here,' and being answered by a loud 'Hip-hip hooray!' coming from the rear of the house. And then she appeared, wheeling herself along the brick path in a wheelchair. She stopped and held out her arms as if to scoop us into her embrace, but we both stood there, immobile, astonished.

'Why on earth are you in a wheelchair?' I said. 'What's happened?'

'Push me inside, dear,' she said. 'All shall be revealed.'

As Jochen and I wheeled her inside, I noticed there was a little wooden ramp up to the front step.

'How long have you been like this, Sal?' I asked. 'You should have called me.'

'Oh, two, three days,' she said, 'nothing to worry about.'

I wasn't feeling the concern that perhaps I should have experienced because my mother looked so patently well: her face lightly tanned, her thick grey-blond hair lustrous and recently cut. And, as if to confirm this impromptu diagnosis, once we had bumped her inside she stepped out of her wheelchair and stooped easily to give Jochen a kiss.

'I fell,' she said, gesturing at the staircase. 'The last two or three steps – tripped, fell to the ground and hurt my back. Doctor Thorne suggested I got a wheelchair to cut down on my walking. Walking makes it worse, you see.'

'Who's Doctor Thorne? What happened to Doctor Brotherton?'

'On holiday. Thorne's the locum. Was the locum.' She paused. 'Nice young man. He's gone now.'

She led us through to the kitchen. I looked for evidence of a bad back in her gait and posture but could see nothing.

'It does help, really,' she said, as if she could sense my growing bafflement, my scepticism. 'The wheelchair, you know, for pottering about. It's amazing how much time one spends on one's feet in a day.'

Jochen opened the fridge. 'What's for lunch, Granny?' he asked.

'Salad,' she said. 'Too hot to cook. Help yourself to a drink, darling.'

'I love salad,' Jochen said, reaching for a can of Coca-Cola. 'I like cold food best.'

'Good boy.' My mother drew me aside. 'I'm afraid he can't stay this afternoon. I can't manage with the wheelchair and whatnot.'

I concealed my disappointment and my selfish irritation – Saturday afternoons on my own, while Jochen spent half the day at Middle Ashton, had become precious to me. My mother walked to the window and shaded her eyes to peer out. Her kitchen/dining-room looked over her garden and her garden backed on to the meadow that was cut very haphazardly, sometimes with a gap of two or three years, and as a result was full of wild flowers and myriad types of grass and weed. And beyond the meadow was the wood, called Witch Wood for some forgotten reason – ancient woodland of oak, beech and chestnut, all the elms gone, or going, of course. There was something very odd happening here, I said to myself: something beyond my mother's usual whims and cultivated eccentricities. I went up to her and placed my hand reassuringly on her shoulder.

'Is everything all right, old thing?'

'Mmm. It was just a fall. A shock to the system, as they say. I should be fine again in a week or two.'

'There's nothing else, is there? You would tell me . . .'

She turned her handsome face on me and gave me her famous candid stare, the pale blue eyes wide – I knew it well. But I could face it out, now, these days, after everything I'd been through myself: I wasn't so cowed by it anymore.

'What else could it be, my darling? Senile dementia?'

All the same, she asked me to wheel her in her wheelchair through the village to the post office to buy a needless pint of milk and pick up a newspaper. She talked at some length about her bad back to Mrs Cumber, the postmistress, and made me stop on the return journey to converse over a drystone wall with Percy Fleet, the young local builder, and his long-term girlfriend (Melinda? Melissa?) as they waited for their barbecue to heat up – a brick edifice with a chimney set proudly on the paving in front of their new conservatory. They commiserated: a fall was the worst thing. Melinda recalled an old stroke-ridden uncle who'd been shaken up for weeks after he'd slipped in the bathroom.

'I want one of those, Percy,' my mother said, pointing at the conservatory, 'very fine.'

'Free estimates, Mrs Gilmartin.'

'How was your aunt? Did she enjoy herself?'

'My mother-in-law,' Percy corrected.

'Ah yes, of course. It was your mother-in-law.'

We said our goodbyes and I pushed her wearily on over the uneven surface of the lane, feeling a growing itch of anger at being asked to take part in this pantomime. She was always commenting on comings and goings too, as if she were checking on people, clocking them on and clocking them off like some obsessive foreman checking on his work-force – she'd done this as long as I could remember. I told myself to be calm: we would have lunch, I would take Jochen back to the flat, he could play in the garden, we could go for a walk in the University Parks . . .

'You mustn't be angry with me, Ruth,' she said, glancing back at me over her shoulder.

I stopped pushing and took out and lit a cigarette. 'I'm not angry.'

'Oh, yes you are. Just let me see how I cope. Perhaps next Saturday I'll be fine.'

When we came in Jochen said darkly, after a minute, 'You can get cancer from cigarettes, you know.' I snapped at him and we ate our lunch in a rather tense mood of long silences broken by bright banal observations about the village on my mother's part. She persuaded me to have a glass of wine and I began to relax. I helped her wash up and stood drying the dishes beside her as she rinsed the glasses in hot water. Water-daughter, daughter-water, sought her daughter in the water, I rhymed to myself, suddenly glad it was the weekend, with no teaching, no tutees and thinking it was maybe not such a bad thing to be spending some time alone with my son. Then my mother said something.

She was shading her eyes again, looking out at the wood.

'What?'

'Can you see someone? Is there someone in the wood?'

I peered. 'Not that I can spot. Why?'

'I thought I saw someone.'

'Ramblers, picnickers – it's Saturday, the sun is shining.'

'Oh, yes, that's right: the sun is shining and all is well with the world.'

She went to the dresser and picked up a pair of binoculars she kept there and turned to focus them on the wood.

I ignored her sarcasm and went to find Jochen and we prepared to leave. My mother took her seat in her wheelchair and pointedly wheeled it to the front door. Jochen told the story of the encounter with the driver of the brewer's lorry and my unashamed use of the F-word. My mother cupped his face with her hands and smiled at him, adoringly.

'Your mother can get very angry when she wants to and no doubt that man was very stupid,' she said. 'Your mother is a very angry young woman.'

'Thank you for that, Sal,' I said and bent to kiss her forehead. 'I'll call this evening.'

'Would you do me a little favour?' she said and then asked me if, when I telephoned in future, I would let the phone ring twice, then hang up and ring again. 'That way I'll know it's you,' she explained. 'I'm not so fast about the house in the chair.'

Now, for the first time I felt a real small pang of worry: this request did seem to be the sign of some initial form of derangement or delusion – but she caught the look in my eye.

'I know what you're thinking, Ruth,' she said. 'But you're quite wrong, quite wrong.' She stood up out of her chair, tall and rigid. 'Wait a second,' she said and went upstairs.

'Have you made Granny cross again?' Jochen said, in a low voice, accusingly.

'No.'

My mother came down the stairs – effortlessly, it seemed to me – carrying a thick buff folder under her arm. She held it out for me.

'I'd like you to read this,' she said.

I took it from her. There seemed to be some dozens of pages – different types, different sizes of paper. I opened it. There was a title page: *The Story of Eva Delectorskaya.*

'Eva Delectorskaya,' I said, mystified. 'Who's that?'

'Me,' she said. 'I am Eva Delectorskaya.'