THE BRIARMEN

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JOSEPH A. CHADWICK

Crescent Swan
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For Mum & Dad

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She knew where to scatter the ashes. Or, at least, where she must go to find out. That had perhaps been the only clear part of her father's letter. She'd never heard of Brombury and had never visited, as far as she knew. Or if she had, she could see – now that she found herself there – why she would have forgotten such a place. It was a quaint little village, tucked away nicely, free from the white noise of the city she had grown so used to. So quaint it was, in fact, that she took comfort in the rare instance a car would pass through its lonely roads, reassuring her that Brombury was indeed inhabited.

The instructions found in the letter were vague, giving her little more to go on other than an address. Eleven Thackery Lane. She now found herself staring at the front door of that very address. What was special about this house? It looked no

different from the other semi-detached houses that ran along the street, with its under attended, yet charming, front garden and the dated, worn out bricks that had built it. Presently the only unique thing about Eleven Thackery Lane was the woman stood on the doorstep, holding an urn.

Peering through the window, she deduced an elderly person must live there; the little dust covered ornaments arranged along the windowsill and the old-fashioned, heavy curtains alluding to such. There were other clues too, in the corner of the room she could just about make out a tiny television with an aerial, the type which would seem woefully dated had the surrounding decor not appeared even more antiquated than it did. This assured her that she had the right place; whoever lived at Eleven Thackery Lane was precisely one year older than her late father, another fact revealed to her in his cryptic letter. Of course, you'd be hard pressed to find a house in a village like this that wasn't inhabited by an old person, she thought.

She tried the doorbell three times before accepting that it didn't work and moving on to the knocker, a brass deer head – antlers and all – in need of a good polish. Moments later the door opened and she was facing a dark skinned woman who looked to be not far off her own age.

'Hello,' said the woman in a "can I help you?" sort of way.

'Hello,' she smiled. 'I was hoping to speak to the woman who lives here.' She was fairly certain that this wasn't the lady stood opposite her due to the uniform she wore; navy blue with white trim, the outline of a pin-on name badge underneath her cardigan. Unless her father had been wrong about the address, this was likely a carer.

'You're a friend of Mrs Mackintosh?' the carer inquired, intrigued by the urn.

'I don't actually know her,' she said, prompting a look of suspicion from the carer. 'But my father did. He mentioned her by name. In his will.'

'So, he was a friend of hers?'

'Well… he never actually said what his relationship to her was. Just that the woman who lived here would be exactly one year older than him, to the day. And that she'll know where I'm to scatter his ashes,' she looked at the urn. 'He passed recently. He was eighty-eight.'

'Mrs Mackintosh turned eighty-nine the other week.'

'4th of October?'

'Yes. I guess they did know each other.'

'So, can I speak with her?'

The carer looked over her shoulder before ever so slightly leaning in. 'I can't promise she'll be able to help you. Her mind, it's not all there anymore. Dementia. Quite bad lately, I'm afraid. That's why I'm here.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'She's not all gone. Not yet. Just don't get your hopes up.'

The living room was cosy, albeit a little quirky, garnished with mismatching furniture of clashing colours and peculiar patterns. The owner had clearly been a collector of artwork at some point, with a variety of curious portraits and landscapes hung sporadically on each of the room's four walls. And yet, with so much to look at in the room, Mrs Mackintosh was sat in her chair, looking out of the window at nothing much happening.

'You've got a visitor,' her carer said with a warm smile, as a woman that Mrs Mackintosh didn't know – or care, for that matter – if she had or hadn't seen before walked into her living room.

Mrs Mackintosh looked at the woman for a moment but then returned to the window where nothing much was happening, deciding, at the very least, it to be equally as interesting. Her carer raised a sympathetic eyebrow to the woman.

'This lady thinks you might have known her father,' she said, before turning to the visitor. 'What did you say his name was?'

'Hamish. Hamish Beasly.'

Mrs Mackintosh's face remained vacant as she continued to stare out of her window.

'I'm sorry,' said the carer after a long few seconds. 'Do you live near? Perhaps you could come back another time.'

'It's fine,' said the woman, who did not live near. 'I don't want to be any bother.'

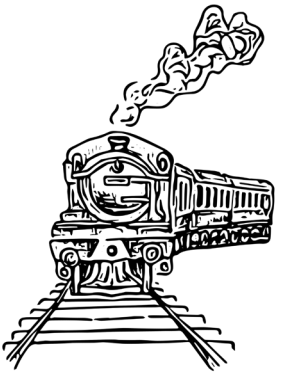
At that precise moment something happened outside the window. Or so you would think, if you had seen how Mrs Mackintosh's eyes widened and how the corners of her lips tenderly curled upwards, her gaze unflinching, fixed on the same singular spot. In actual fact, there was still nothing much happening.

'Hamish,' she said softly, a gentle nostalgia radiating from her croaky voice.

The woman leaned in. 'That's right? You knew him?'

Mrs Mackintosh peeled her eyes away from the same singular spot outside the window and looked at the woman. Only now she properly looked at her. 'Shall we put the kettle on,' she said.

PART I



Chapter 1
The Gap

November, 1939

Hamish Beasly grew increasingly anxious as the train neared its destination, robbing himself of the chance to take in a countryside he'd never before seen. Of course, there were a great many things which had contributed towards his anxiety during the journey, and for the most part these were the same things making every child on the train nervous. After all, this was the first time most of them were leaving their parents and their homes for longer than a weekend stay at Granny's. Whilst Hamish was no different from the other children in that regard, a more immediate concern caused him to fidget in his seat, a worry that he dare not reveal to a living soul. For when the train came to a stop, Hamish would have to face *it* alone for the first time in his life.

He would have to cross The Gap.

He knew it was pitiful. A completely irrational fear for a thirteen year old boy to have, more so now than ever, what with all the men going off to fight. Getting on, he had been fine. But getting off was different. It happened when he was very little, both in age and size. In fact, it may even have been his earliest memory. He'd been sat with his mother, his first and last train ride. He didn't remember where they were going, or why, but he would always remember what happened when the doors opened. As young children often were, he'd been restless the whole journey. He could still hear her – his mother – scolding him for fidgeting. And that screech, as the train slowed, he could still hear that too. He'd moved too quickly for his mother to grab hold of him. The last thing he heard before the floor disappeared was her calling out his name.

And then he was in The Gap.

He knew now, mind you, that he couldn't have been in The Gap for long, but at the time, alone in the darkness, it had felt like hours. He was dragged out, of course, pulled up by four or five different hands, maybe more, and received a firm telling off from his mother. As it turned out, she also hadn't forgotten this traumatic experience, taking it upon herself to remind him of the whole affair before he'd set off that day.

'You be careful of that gap, Hamish!' had been his mother's parting words, as she waved her handkerchief like all of the other mothers, readying to nurse their impending tears. As the train parted, however, it occurred to Hamish that his mother's tears were the only ones that were, well… impending. From what he could see, the other women were dabbing their faces with their

hankies, sobbing at the thought of their children going off to new mothers in new homes. But Hamish's mother – as she grew smaller and the train picked up speed – appeared to be using her own handkerchief as a fan. It came as no surprise to Hamish, though. He couldn't recall a single time he had seen his mother cry, and if ever he had expressed an interest in doing so himself she had swiftly reprimanded him, firmly explaining: 'I'll not have my son be known to make a fuss, Hamish. Hartigans are famous for not making a fuss!'

Hamish knew better in those instances than to point out to his mother that neither of them were actually Hartigans. Hartigan was the name she had given up when she'd married his father, a practising doctor named Roger Beasly, thus making her and her son Beaslys. The Beaslys – whilst not so famous for "never making a fuss" – had in fact enjoyed a small measure of fame thanks to Hamish's uncle, Leonard Beasly. Uncle Leonard was a self-described tea baron, and had been "The man behind British Tea in the United States of America, I'll have you know!" It was a moniker he had proudly donned after heading an advertising campaign in an effort to influence Americans to take up one of Britain's favourite pastimes. However, for a brief period there were some Yanks (as his father affectionately referred to them) who began to resent this sign of Britishness, which lead to Uncle Leonard denouncing his self-awarded accolade, especially after reading an article that demonized tea as being not quite manly enough, using terms such as "sissy" and even "queer". Despite Leonard Beasly not making his fortune in the tea trade, his brother would find great success in the medical practice, opening

his very own surgery in London, which afforded him a nice house in the city. It was a house which Hamish was already starting to miss.

* * *

The train came to a halt rather late in the evening, at a station considerably smaller than the one it had left. There was only one platform, which barely reached past the first two carriages of the train, meaning that all the children had to pile into the front to get off. Before long pushing and shoving began, as carriages grew increasingly claustrophobic and the children increasingly restless.

This did not bode well for Hamish. He had envisioned his first solo crossing of The Gap to be on his own terms. A slow, cautious approach followed by a deep breath and one big step, culminating in a moment of personal triumph. It didn't happen like that. Instead, he had a sudden flashback, his younger self slipping into the nothing between the train and the platform, which caused him to hesitate. This was met with a helpful shove from the child behind him, and then he just kind of stepped out, and that was that. He had done it; he had crossed The Gap, which meant it wasn't really The Gap anymore. It was just the gap.

Soon the flock of children were off the train, haversacks and gas masks in hand, and it occurred to Hamish that considerably fewer than had got on now stood on the platform. The train had, of course, made numerous stops along the way, but Hamish had been too caught up in his own anxieties to notice just how many children had left. It was then he read the sign at the station.

BROMBURY

He wasn't meant to be here!

He was supposed to be at a place called Cumnor, at least that's what the label they'd tied to his bag said. He'd gotten off too early, that must be it, he'd just walk back over to the train and hop back on and that would be that.

'Where you going, lad?' said a man holding a clipboard. He was a robust fellow and wore a tweed jacket.

'I… I've got the wrong stop,' said Hamish. 'Mine must be the next one.'

'I don't think so, lad,' the man chuckled. 'This is the end of the line.' This would explain why the train was now completely empty.

'But I'm meant to be in Cumnor.'

'Cumnor, hey. Well, you're only sixty miles out.'

Hamish looked off into the distance. Behind him, as far as the eye could see, there was field and past that was more field, and so on and so forth. In front of him he could see the tops of the houses that made up Brombury and then to one side, past the railway line, was a great stretch of woodland, a vast assortment of high-reaching trees spanning further back and spreading wider than Hamish could make out.

'Is that…' he felt stupid for wanting to ask what he was about to ask, but was rather at a loss for what to do. '…Far?'

'It's too far to walk, that's for sure, even with your long legs,' the man sounded a little bit like how Hamish imagined a farmer to sound. Maybe he was a farmer.

'I guess I'll just get back on the train then. Thank you,' Hamish said, sheepishly. He may not have known how far sixty miles was, but he was fairly certain trains ran both ways.

'You could do, lad, though I imagine everyone will be in bed by the time you get there.'

'Oh, right,' Hamish said. Perhaps there would be a bench at the station to sleep on, he thought. And he could use his coat as a blanket. His bag probably wouldn't make for the most comfortable pillow, but he'd only have to make do until the morning.

'Come on lad,' the large man smiled, nodding towards the other children, who were now huddled together. 'I'm sure we'll find you someone here. I'll send word to the folks in Cumnor that you're here and in one piece. Now what was your name?'

'Hamish Beasly.'

'Nice to meet you, Mr Beasly,' he said, scribbling the name down on the list. 'I'm Mr Duncan.'

The village hall was a short walk away, and inside stood a group of serious looking adults who also held clipboards. Behind them stood more adults, presumably the "new parents" (some with children of their own by their side). They pointed at the fresh batch of children as they were funnelled into the hall and then lined up to face their soon to be hosts. Comments such as 'I'll have that one,' and 'she looks polite,' or 'he looks a bit messy,' were shared amongst the spectating crowd, each person eager to select a child with the most desirable qualities, much like bidders on the lookout for the best cow at a cattle market.

As Hamish stood in the line, a room full of strangers staring

at him, he thought of all the anxiety inducing tales he'd heard about children who'd been sent off to the country before him. At his school in London, many a tall tale had been shared; tales of children locked in basements, fed only once a week and stories of others being forced to work on farms from sunrise to sundown. And then there was the tragedy of Digby Dingus and the deadly nightshade berries. Digby Dingus, a year younger than Hamish, was the first in his school to have been sent away. It took little more than a day before the rumours began. 'Have you heard about Digby Dingus?' his friends would ask. 'Apparently he went out picking blackberries with his new family, but he'd never seen a blackberry bush, so he picked deadly nightshade berries by accident!' The next part of the story is where the facts began to differ, although most were in agreement that Digby ate anywhere between six and twenty six of said berries, which of course lived up to their name. And such was the tragedy of Digby Dingus.

One by one Mr Duncan called out names and one by one the grown-ups would pick a child they liked the look of, until eventually all of the politest and cleanest and the not-too-scruffy looking ones had been taken away. Only three remained: Hamish and two other boys, one who looked to be the same age as him and the other no older than six or seven.

'Bridget Platts,' Mr Duncan called.

A woman stepped forward. She examined the three children. Hamish thought that she looked kind, certainly not the sort to lock him in a basement. He compared her to his own mother; they both wore their brown hair in similar styles and might even be the same age. Although there was something about her face

which made her seem older. It was hard to say what it was, she didn't have wrinkles, in fact her skin looked smooth and soft. Perhaps it was her eyes, Hamish thought as he looked into them. Beneath the dark brown of her pupils, there was a sadness. He could tell, somehow, that unlike his own mother, famous for never having shed a tear, this woman had done her fair share of crying.

'Penny, dear, why don't you choose?' the woman said, and a young girl appeared at her side. She looked strikingly like the woman – obviously her mother – with the same brown eyes, only her hair was slightly fairer and her cheeks had more freckles and her face didn't seem as kind as it did… bitter.

The girl, Penny, marched along what remained of the line, as if she were a school teacher ready to discipline three misbehaving children. Hamish glanced at his competition, noting that the younger boy's shirt was untucked and that the older one had more than a few visible spots on his face. Both these things would work in his favour; he'd made a subtle effort during the selection process to neaten himself up. He stood up tall, shoulders back, and brushed his fingers through his dark brown hair, ready for inspection. The girl, having finished her scrutiny of the other two, glared at Hamish and took a step towards him. This made him feel slightly awkward, so – in an effort to put the both of them at ease – he smiled. She raised her eyebrow.

'What's that in your teeth?' she did not sound impressed.

'Huh?' at first he was confused. Then he remembered the ham and cucumber sandwich, the one his mother had packed for him to eat on the train. His finger shot to his mouth and he tried

to scrape away the green peel that was stuck between his teeth. Had he got it? He couldn't tell. Now the girl looked even more unimpressed. It wasn't even his idea to have cucumber, he didn't really like it if he was honest, if it had been up to him he would have had just ham, not that he was ever one to turn down food, especially when it had been made by his mother, but—

Penny walked back over to her mother and pointed to the boy who looked the same age as Hamish.

'He'll do,' she said.

Of course he would, he hadn't had cucumber for lunch. He'd probably had a nice cheese and pickle sandwich. Perhaps even corned beef.

'Very well,' said Mr Duncan, taking a step towards the boy, checking his clipboard. 'Jack Trafford, correct?' The boy nodded. 'If you'd like to go with Mrs Platts and her daughter here.'

Jack Trafford turned to face the younger boy. His eyes were welling up and his bottom lip had started to tremble.

'There's a good lad, Jack,' said Mr Duncan encouragingly.

The younger boy burst into tears and flung his arms around Jack.

'Please,' Jack pleaded, not knowing whether to look at Mrs Platts or Mr Duncan. 'Can my brother come with me?'

Mr Duncan turned to the woman and her daughter.

'Don't suppose you'd have two, Mrs Platts?'

'Oh, umm,' she said, visibly sympathetic. 'I'm not really… well, it's just, I've already got Penny, you see, and I wasn't really planning on—' the young boy let out an almighty cry, his nose spewing leakage all over his brother, which put Hamish back in first place as the neatest. 'Penny, why don't we take this nice boy instead?'

The young lad stopped crying but remained attached to his older brother, fearful that he still might be ripped away from him. Penny glared at Hamish, and all three boys awaited her verdict.

'Fine,' she huffed, much to the relief of a snot covered Jack Trafford. 'But he'd better brush his teeth.'