Some Other Eden

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Extract

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Southern Spain, August 1995

Why? Why? Why?

There is no respite today from the children's questions. Today they waver on the line between exhaustion and exuberance, buoyed by a nervous energy which gives a febrile quality to everything they do. They have been like this ever since they boarded the plane at Gatwick, throughout the flight to Malaga and the taxi ride to the bus station, where they now wriggle fretfully in a bus which shows no sign of departing. Their fluty voices, sloughed of meaning by their mother's tiredness, merge in her mind with all the other external irritations of the day – the loud diesel thrum of the idling engine, the smells of strong tobacco and supermarket cologne, the limp cotton of her dress clinging to her sweat-slicked skin, above all the dull throbbing of the angry bruise which spreads over her cheekbone from her left eye.

Why isn't Dad with us?

Why isn't the bus moving?

Why are we here? When are we leaving? What time is it?

'Please,' snaps Isla. 'No more questions.'

And now there is a definite wobble to her seven-year-old son's chin, his tears held in abeyance only by the small brown paw of his younger sister in his hand. The beam of four reproachful eyes turns upon her, lighting the path for a fresh onslaught of guilt.

'I'm tired,' she says, excusing herself.

A commotion outside distracts their attention. The bus, it appears, is about to leave. On the station forecourt cigarettes are being crushed underfoot, final embraces are being distributed along with sandwiches, thermos flasks and last-minute advice. The revolutions of the engine change and the bus shudders as straggling passengers drop into their seats.

'How long till we get there?' asks the little girl, Beth.

'Shh,' says her brother, Marcus. 'You heard. No more questions.' He turns shyly to his mother for approval. She smiles and holds out an arm to draw him closer.

'Still a few hours,' says Isla. 'Try to sleep.'

She sits with Beth on her lap and Marcus pressed against her, leaning her forehead on the glass of the window. Her head hurts. She raises her hand to the contused skin around her eye.

'Mum?' Marcus is still awake, watching her.

'I'm OK.' She has been trying to make light of the pain for his sake. 'Please, pumpkin. Go to sleep.'

He closes his eyes obediently. A soft sigh escapes his lips a few minutes later as his small blond head flops sideways onto his sister's shoulder. A lump rises to Isla's throat. Outside, bare brown mountains melt into the rapidly advancing dusk but she does not see this. A different landscape unfurls before her mind's eye as the bus advances into the Andalusian interior, soft and green, an English idyll dotted with landmarks as familiar to her as the lithe hard bodies of her sleeping children. The encroaching shadows smooth away her bruises, the cut on her temple. Isla looks out at the darkening landscape and through the dusty glass of the bus windows a house appears. It stands above a garden flanked by rolling hills, redolent of summer roses and the sharp cries of soaring swifts. This is Marshwood. Marshwood, where it all began.

PART I

SPRING – SUMMER

England, March 1995

Marshwood. Isla's childhood home, a heavy L-shaped house built of honey-coloured stone in the middle of the nineteenth century. Six bedrooms, a large drawing-room, a breakfast room, a dining-room, two larders, three pantries, a cloakroom, a scullery and a complicated warren of semi-habitable attics and outbuildings. Two and a half acres of land clinging to a windy hillside in western Dorset beneath an ancient Roman fort, an orchard, a paddock, and kitchen and flower gardens. A place of infinite possibilities and asymmetrical rooms, sweeping views and curtained window-seats. A fine house, thought a little gloomy by some and romantic by others, perched on Pater Noster Hill a mile out of the historic village of Chapel St Mary and four miles from the nearest market town of Bambridge. Large, isolated, draughty and damp, it had an air of faded grandeur perfectly in keeping with

its sole inhabitant, Isla's eighty-year-old grandmother Bella. It had also become, in the early spring of 1995 and for the first time in living memory, the object of a bungled burglary, which 200 miles away in leafy west London had led to yet another argument between Isla and her husband Richard.

Richard had come home late, his briefcase bulging with papers to read for the following morning, his body stiff from a day of unrelenting meetings. Even the sight of his massive west London Edwardian villa, entirely mortgage free since his last bonus, did little to soothe his temper. As he let himself into the hall, all he could think was that it had been a bitch of a day, that his clients were bastards, and that he wished he had never decided to become a lawyer. What he needed was a drink, a hot meal and mindless television, preferably though not necessarily delivered without question by his wife. Instead of which he had found the house in darkness and Isla huddled in bed on the telephone to her grandmother.

'I'll be down tomorrow,' she was saying. 'I'll come with the children straight from school. Will you be all right till then?'

Richard threw himself into an armchair and assumed an air of long-suffering patience. The soft murmur of Beth talking in her sleep floated towards them from across the landing. Isla, still talking, raised an eyebrow towards the door. Richard got up to close it, then

resumed his post in the armchair, sighing loudly as he loosened his tie.

The argument began as soon as Isla hung up, although thinking about it later she realized that in fact it had started long before, and that what appeared to be an isolated dispute was just one more link in the chain of a single ongoing quarrel, a quarrel which had become her marriage, or which her marriage had become, she wasn't quite sure which.

'Granna's been burgled,' said Isla.

'Is that what it is.'

'You might at least try to look concerned.'

'I'm not in the mood, to be honest.'

Of the many faces of Richard and Isla's continuing disaccord, Marshwood's was the most familiar. She loved it. He did not. She went often. He did not.

'I'm going down tomorrow.'

'So I gathered.'

They sat facing each other, Isla and Richard, he crushing the fragile period armchair with his massive frame, she in her dressing-gown looking not much bigger than a child, sitting cross-legged in the middle of their king-size leather bed. They sat facing each other knowing that this was not how things should be nor even how they wanted them to be, that there were other gestures, other words which should be coming to them naturally at this moment, anodyne solicitous enquiries about his day at the office and the children's day at

school. At this moment he should be dropping a kiss on his wife's forehead or temple or lips, they should be going hand in hand together to the kitchen where his supper, set aside from earlier, sat waiting to be reheated, she should be pouring him a glass of wine and then he should be asking about the burglary at Marshwood, what was taken, what the police had said, how Bella was coping.

'I can't believe you're going down again,' said Richard.

'Richard, she's been *burgled*!'

'Well has she called the police?'

'Obviously.'

'And what do they say?'

'As it happens, they've caught him. The burglar.'

'Well then.' He closed his eyes. She knew it was to avoid looking at her. 'No harm done.'

'She's *upset*. And scared.'

'And what do the insurance company say?'

'They're coming tomorrow. Something about the windows, the burglar broke some windows, the leaded ones in the living-room. Apparently they were the original panes.'

'Oh great,' said Richard.

'What?'

'More expense.'

'Rich, it's not *about* the money!'

'No,' he sighed. 'No, it never is, to you.' He heaved himself to his feet and began to unbutton his shirt. 'I'm

tired,' he said. 'I'm going to eat. And then I'm going to bed.'

They lay side by side in the dark that night, unable to sleep and unwilling to talk. It was Richard who eventually broke the silence.

'You didn't even ask if I minded your going away this weekend.'

Isla felt a twinge of guilt. 'You could always come with us, you know. It's been ages since you did.'

'Would you stay if I asked you to?'

'Richard, what is this?'

'If I asked you to choose?'

'It's not about choosing. It's about doing what's right. Come with us, Rich. You might enjoy yourself.'

'I have to work on Saturday.'

'Well then . . .'

'What?'

'What difference does it make if we're here or not?'

'It just does. And I've got the golf tournament, remember? You were all meant to come and watch.'

Isla had not remembered. She withdrew the hand she had stretched out towards him. The covers rose and fell as Richard turned away, a cold draught wrapping itself around her shoulders.

He was still bad-tempered the following morning at breakfast.

'Please don't sulk.' Isla waited for the children to go upstairs to brush their teeth before confronting him. 'I promise this'll be the last visit for a while. You must see why I have to go down.'

'I'm not sulking. I've been thinking. This can't go on. Marshwood. The problems, the endless expense. The bills, the things going wrong, the burglaries . . .'

'Only *one* burglary.'

'It can't go on, Isla. You're going to have to talk to Bella. Tell her I can't keep footing her bills.'

'I mean it,' he told her later on the phone just before she set off. 'Talk to her. I'm not working myself to the bone for a pile of bricks that's not even mine. I'd rather have my own place. My own house in the country, with my own non-leaking roof and my own fully functioning burglar alarm. Don't think I'm not serious about this. I am. I bloody mean it.'

Marshwood was jointly owned by Bella, Isla and Isla's mother Callie, but its upkeep was unfeasible without his substantial lawyer's income. She knew he was serious. He was always serious. Isla, crawling through Friday afternoon traffic towards the M3 with her children spreading crisps and orange juice over the back seat of the family Volvo, tried to remember the last time Richard had *not* been serious. Once, she was sure of it, he used to tell jokes. Jokes which actually made her laugh. Now . . . well.

They arrived in the early evening as the spring dusk

lingered, reluctant to take its leave of the lengthening day. The children shot out of the car and disappeared into the garden, heedless of their mother's cries to follow her into the house. She found her grandmother in the drawing-room, surrounded by the friends her grandfather Clement used to call her Coven: tall, formidable Esther, who had come to Bambridge as a nurse during the war and never left; shy Kitty, forever distracted mother of seven and grandmother of fifteen, always trailing baskets of knitting or needlework; flirtatious, fun-loving Nancy, whose tongue could be as sharp as her heart was kind.

'The children have gone feral already, I'm afraid.' Isla kissed her grandmother's papery smooth cheek before turning to the others. Her heart sank a little. The old ladies had a look about them she knew well. They were in the middle of an argument, and she had interrupted them.

'I hope you'll make her see the light,' grunted Esther.

'You have no heart,' snapped Nancy.

'Well, you have no sense,' retorted Esther. 'I don't hold that against you.'

'Please stop quarrelling,' begged Kitty. 'It doesn't help.'

Bella gave a forlorn sigh, and they all turned towards her. She sat at the centre of her little group, presiding over a drinks tray, elegant and somehow other-worldly

in a patterned Indian shawl and her regulation dark red Chanel lipstick. 'We were talking,' she said mournfully, 'about the man from the insurance company.'

Isla suppressed a sigh of her own. The man from the insurance company was the bête noire of Marshwood, almost its resident ghost. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Beth and Marcus tearing through the garden towards the old fig tree in the middle of the lawn. She had driven down with them straight from school. After three hours in the car, they were beyond hunger, and wild. She felt a stab of envy for their freedom.

'Tell me what he said this time.' She laid a gentle hand over her grandmother's.

Kitty looked up from her knitting and shook her head. 'He was most unsympathetic.'

'Positively brutal,' cried Nancy. 'Although,' she added thoughtfully, 'rather good-looking. In a very *middle-class* sort of way.'

'He was utterly unrealistic,' sniffed Bella.

'He won't recognize the claim,' explained Esther. 'And he's putting the premiums up again.'

'That's rather a problem,' said Isla.

'Well yes, dear,' agreed Esther. 'It is.'

'He was cross because we didn't do what he asked after the last time, and change all the downstairs windows.'

'Well how could you, darling?' protested Nancy. 'When it is so expensive.'

'It does seem so unfair, when you think of the premiums.' Bella pouted, querulous. '*And* what I had to pay for the roof last winter.'

'And there was that little fire too, when you left the gas on.' Kitty, squinting down at her matinée jacket, jumped as Nancy poked her sharply in the ribs.

'Must you bring that up now?' hissed Nancy.

'The whole thing's a bloody disaster,' said Esther. 'You're going to have to move. It's not *safe* here. Today a two-bit burglar, tomorrow an axe-murderer. Mark my words, Belle, it's a slippery slope.'

Later, once the protesting children had been put to bed and the Coven had left, Nancy and Esther still arguing, Isla sat at the foot of Bella's bed and took up Esther's point.

'You *are* going to have to think about it, you know,' she said.

'He hardly took a thing,' grumbled Bella. 'Honestly. All this fuss about a bit of Edwardian silver. He didn't even take the television.'

'No.' It was a matter of personal pride to Bella that she had not bought a new television set since watching Neil Armstrong land on the moon. 'Well, he wouldn't, would he? Realistically.'

Bella looked mutinous. 'It wasn't *me* who called the insurance company, it was Esther. *I* was all for letting it go. She's sorry now, of course. What with the premiums going up again.'

'Which brings us back to my point,' said Isla. She tried not to look at Bella as she launched into her little speech. *It's time to have a serious discussion about this, the burglary's just the tip of the iceberg, maintenance costs to think of and now the insurance going up too, what will happen when you can no longer drive, you can't stay up here on your own, not pleasant but we have to be sensible, we want what's best for you but if things go on as they are soon the property will be worthless* – the phrases drummed into her head by Richard rolled out, miserable, each one feeling like a betrayal, and she tried not to look at her grandmother, whose initial expression of incredulity had given way to one of injured pride.

'Basically, I don't think Richard's prepared to pay up much longer,' blurted Isla as she finished. 'And I don't think I can change his mind. Granna?' she asked, as Bella remained resolutely silent. 'I can sort of see his point,' she offered. 'We all love Marshwood, but . . .'

'Richard does not love Marshwood,' said Bella.

'Well, no,' conceded Isla. 'But he's very fond . . .'

'He has never understood what Marshwood means to me. To us. He has no imagination.'

'I'm not sure that's *entirely* fair . . .' Isla trailed off again, forced by her fundamental honesty to recognize that imagination was indeed not Richard's strongest point. An uncomfortable silence descended on them again. Bella glared out of the window. Isla looked around the room. Her gaze stopped on the far corner where the

wallpaper, giving up a decade's battle against encroaching rot, had emphatically parted company with the wall. 'What happened there?' she asked

'Damp. It's all this rain. It'll dry.'

'Oh Granna . . .' She looked beseechingly at Bella, quelling her architect's instincts to examine the damage more closely. 'I don't know what to do. I love Marshwood as much as you do, but please say you'll at least think about what I've said?'

She paused, apprehensive. The mutinous glint in Bella's eye was a sure sign of a firebolt about to be delivered. Past experience had taught her that these could come from nowhere and bear little or no relevance to the subject at hand, but they usually hit home.

'You can remind your husband,' announced Bella, 'that under the terms of your grandfather's will, nobody can throw me out of this house for as long as I wish to live in it.'

'Granna, nobody wants to . . .'

'And you can tell him that he needn't worry about me being so isolated any more. I didn't want to tell you over the phone. Jack's back. He came to tea yesterday, and he wants to see you.'

Bella had wanted to trip her up, of course, to pay her back for her perceived betrayal, but Isla had been pleased with her response. It never ceased to surprise her how, after so many years, just the mention of Jack's

name could cause her heart to skip but she had learned to conceal it well. A measured pause, a dignified acknowledgement – *really? I wonder what he's doing here* – and she had moved on, claiming fatigue. Alone in her room though, she pulled a blanket off the bed and climbed with it onto the cushioned windowsill from which she could look out over the moonlit garden to Jack's house beyond.

In Isla's mind, her childhood was divided into two clear parts. Before she was five, in London. Afterwards, at Marshwood. Before was a small flat in a red-brick building with a white porch and cracked marble steps, walks in frosty parks and rides on steamed-up buses, and afternoon naps – she remembered these clearly – when her mother painted and which smelt of turpentine. She remembered also – though she was never sure whether this was just one isolated memory, or many instances of the same thing happening all rolled together by the passing years – Callie tearing round to tidy the flat at the end of the day, a spray of perfume, a dab of lipstick, the stolid daytime nursery atmosphere of their home transformed into something different, something electric and vibrant which included her at its centre, something exciting and full of laughter which meant that Isla's father was coming home. Memories of her father were vague, prompting her to wonder whether those she had of Callie did not in fact date from a later era. Laughter, loud and sudden and

clear. A smell of cigarettes and, curiously, eucalyptus. A pleasing sense of warmth and security, that everything was as it should be – though she wondered whether this too might not be a retrospective attribute.

That had been 'before'. Five unremarkable, happy years, unruffled in Isla's memory by the gradual dimming of her father's light. *Before* Daniel died, a period eventually followed by *after* the move to Marshwood, the two separated by a vague period of *in-between* which carried a sour hospital smell and the sound of muffled crying. And then her father and the flat were gone and Callie and Isla were at Marshwood along with most of their belongings – though not their furniture – and Callie was either locked in her room or stalking over hills on her own, and her eyes were always red.

'Your mother is Grieving,' explained Bella when after a fortnight of this Isla enquired timidly when she was to go home. 'Do you know what that means?'

Isla shook her head. Bella often used words she didn't understand. It was one of the things that made her so frightening and so exciting all at once.

'It means,' sighed Bella, 'that she is Depressed. We hoped it would not come to this, but we think that she should Let the Flat.'

'Let the flat what?' asked a baffled Isla.

'Come over here, Isla.' Clement's voice was quiet and kind. Isla went to him willingly. Her grandfather was a different proposition altogether from Bella, gentle and

somehow always more accessible. He patted his knee and she nestled into him, inhaling his smell of pipe smoke and sawn wood. 'What Granna is trying to say is, how would you like to come and live with us?'

Jack Kavanagh's parents had bought Marshwood's old coach house from her cash-strapped grandfather in the early sixties and converted it into a handsome four-bedroom home. She had known him all her life, but she dated the beginning of their friendship to then, to the beginning of 'after'. He was brought over for tea soon after Callie and Isla's arrival, and after ten minutes of wriggling at the table asked if she would like to see his den.

He had built it deep in the heart of the laurel hedge which separated Marshwood from his parents' property. The hedge appeared impenetrable from the outside but Jack dropped to the ground and crawled beneath it, followed by a silent Isla, to emerge in a small clearing concealed from prying eyes by a thick canopy of leaves overhead and latticed branches on either side. There were two grubby cushions on the ground as well as a metal box which when opened revealed a torch, a mangled packet of Toffoes and half a bottle of orange Fanta.

'My mum was really cross about the cushions,' said Jack, offering her a sweet. 'She says they're ruined for ever and she doesn't want them back. Is your dad dead then?'