
Opening Extract from...

The Kashmir Shawl

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

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For my father

The mountain sheep are sweeter,
But the valley sheep are fatter;
We therefore deemed it meeter
To carry off the latter.

Chapter One

Mair made the discovery on the last day at home in the old house.

The three of them were upstairs in their father's bedroom. They had come together for the melancholy business of sorting and clearing their parents' furniture and possessions, before closing up the house for the last time and handing over the keys to the estate agent. It was the end of May and the lambs had just been taken away to market. Out on the hill the sheep were bleating wildly, loud, incessant and bewildered cries that were carried in with the scent of spring grass.

Mair had made a pot of tea and laid a tray to carry upstairs to her sister Eirlys. Their brother Dylan came behind her, ducking as he had had to do from the age of thirteen in order to avoid hitting his head on the low beam on the landing.

Eirlys's energy was prodigious, as always. The floor of the bedroom was squared with neat piles of blankets and pillows, towers of labelled boxes, crackling black bags. She stood at the foot of the bed, resting a clipboard on the bedpost and frowning as she scribbled amendments to one of her lists.

With the addition of a white coat and a retinue of underlings, she could easily have been on one of her ward rounds.

'Lovely,' she murmured, when she saw the tea. 'Don't put it down there,' she added.

Dylan took a cup and wedged himself on the windowsill. He was blocking the light and Eirlys flicked an eyebrow at him. 'Drink your tea,' he said mildly. 'Go mad, have a biscuit as well.'

Mair sat down on the bed. The ancient pink electric blanket was still stretched from corner to corner, and she thought of the weeks of her father's last illness when she had come home to the valley to nurse him, as best she could, and to keep him company. They had enjoyed long, rambling conversations about the past and the people her father had once known.

'Did I ever tell you about Billy Jones, the auctioneer?'

'I don't think so.'

'He had a stammer.'

'How did he manage?'

Over the top of his spectacles her father had glanced at her. 'We weren't in such a hurry, you know, in those days.'

In the low-ceilinged room the old man seemed very close at hand, and at the same time entirely absent.

Eirlys was pointing out which bundles were to be taken away to charity drop-offs and what exactly the house-clearance people could be left to deal with. There was a question about the linen bed-sheets that had been stored in the same cupboard for as long as they could all remember and were mysteriously kept for 'best', probably according to some long-ago edict of their mother's. But when the sisters had unfolded the top sheet they saw that it was worn so thin in the middle that the light shone straight through. Eirlys pursed her lips now and briskly consigned it with its partner to one of her graded series of bin-bags.

The sun was slanting through the window, painting Dylan's jumper with a rim of gilded fuzz.

Mair found that she couldn't sit still any longer and let the wave of memories engulf them all. She jumped up and went to the bow-fronted chest of drawers facing the end of the bed. Their mother had inherited it from her own mother – she remembered hearing that. Gwen Ellis's clothes had been stored in here after her death, until at last her widower and her elder daughter had recovered sufficiently to be able to give them away.

The pair of split drawers at the top was empty. Eirlys had even removed the lining paper. The middle one had recently held their father's vests and pants and folded shirts. As he had grown weaker, Mair had helped him dress in the mornings. In the vain hope of making his bones feel warmer, she would hold the underclothes in front of the electric fire before handing them to him. A heap of these things now lay on the floor.

'We'll have to put those bits and pieces of his in the bag for recycling.' Eirlys nodded. 'They're no good for anything else.'

Mair slid open the bottom drawer of the chest. She saw a few yellowing pillow-cases, and the tablecloth with the cut-work centre panel that was taken out once a year without fail to be smoothed over the Christmas dinner-table. The white fabric was stained in places with rust. Reaching beneath the cloth, her fingers came into contact with tissue paper. She lifted out the cloth to investigate what lay beneath it.

The tissue paper was very old and limp.

When she folded it back her first impression was of wonderful colours. Silvery blues and greens sprang at her, like a distillation of lake water and spring skies, with star-bursts of lavender and vermilion flowers caught in the depths. She looked more closely and saw the intricacy of the woven pattern; the sumptuous curved teardrop shapes with curled

tips, the ferny fronds and branched stems and tiny five-petalled flowers. The only sound in the room was the distress of the sheep as Mair shook out the layers of soft wool. It was so light that it seemed to float on the air.

The shawl was a lovely thing, and she had never seen it before.

An envelope had fallen out of the folds. It was an old brown one, ordinary, creased in half, with the glue long ago dried from the flap. Gently Mair eased it open. Inside there was a single lock of hair. The curl was very fine and silky, dark brown, with a few coppery threads shining in it. She pinched it between her fingers.

'That's Grandma Watkins's shawl,' Eirlys said, in her authoritative way.

'It's so beautiful,' Mair whispered.

Eirlys was the only one of the three who had known their mother's mother, and even she had no recollection of her because she had died when Eirlys was still a baby. All any of them knew was that she had been out in India with her much older missionary husband. The couple finally came back to Wales and had had their only child when Nerys was already in her forties. That daughter, Gwen, had married a neighbour from the same valley, handsome Huw Ellis, when she was only nineteen. She had always said to her own three children that she didn't want them to grow up with elderly parents, the way she had done.

'Whose hair can this be, do you think?' Mair wondered.

'I've no idea,' Eirlys said.

Mair thought about it. Grandma Watkins wouldn't have kept her own hair, would she? Was it her husband's, then, or more probably her child's?

No. This wasn't the hair of an elderly missionary, and it wasn't Gwen's either, she was fairly sure of that – hers had naturally been a quite different, much lighter colour.

Whose, then?

The question intrigued her, but it seemed to have no answer.

She pressed the shawl to her cheek. The fabric was so fine that she could enclose it in her two fists. For the first time, she breathed in its faint scent of spice.

'We've still got a lot to do,' Eirlys said, as she finished her tea.

Thoughtfully Mair slipped the lock of hair back into its envelope.

Later, when most of the packing and boxing were done, the three of them gathered in the kitchen. The back door stood open and midges floated in on the breeze. The noise of the sheep grew louder and more plaintive as twilight crept up. Dylan had opened a bottle of wine, and Mair was putting together a picnic supper of cold ham, with baked potatoes from the microwave. Dylan had bought it for their father a couple of years back and Huw had used it regularly to heat up supermarket ready-meals for one, declaring that they were very tasty. Eirlys had disapproved, pointing out that ready-meals were high in fat and salt.

The machine pinged and Mair took out the potatoes. She could just see their father winking and silently going *heh-heh-heh-heh*.

Without warning, tears threatened to spill out of her eyes.

They all knew that this was the last evening they would ever spend together in the old kitchen. Mair was determined not to make it more sorrowful by indulging in any fit of weeping. She smiled instead, at Dylan who was sitting with his hands in the pockets of his jeans and then at Eirlys, with her hair hooked behind her ears and her eyes looking very shiny behind her glasses.

'Should we eat in the other room?' Mair asked.

The table in there was a better size for three than the drop-flap one wedged in the kitchen corner, where the memory

of their father sitting alone with his cup of tea and the newspaper was very clear.

The business of taking the food through and finding the last pieces of unpacked cutlery carried them through the moment. Dylan found some candle stubs and Eirlys put them in a saucer. The glow made the stripped-out room look inviting again, blotting out the dust squares on the walls where pictures used to hang.

'We should talk about the good things,' Eirlys said, when they were all sitting down.

For a second Mair thought she meant the happy times they had spent as a family, and the uncharacteristic sentiment startled her. Then she realised that her sister was talking about the two or three pieces of furniture and old silver that were all there had been of real value in the house. Since the reading of the will they had known that the proceeds from selling the house were to be divided equally between them. The smaller items they hadn't really talked about.

There was the grandfather clock, with a painted face showing the sun and moon, whose sonorous tick had measured out the long afternoons of her childhood. Huw had mentioned it once, in the last weeks, referring to it as 'Dylan's clock'. Mair had deliberately ignored him because she didn't want to acknowledge what he meant.

'You'll take the clock, Dylan,' Eirlys said. 'Mair?'

The other two were married, and they owned houses with hallways and alcoves and shelves. Mair was not, and she lived happily in a rented one-and-a-half-room flat. She didn't need, or even want, her mother's bow-fronted chest or silver teapot. They would find a better home with Eirlys. She laid down her knife and fork and cleared her throat.

'I would like to have Grandma's shawl,' she said. 'If that's all right?'

'Of course it is.' Eirlys nodded. 'If you agree, Dylan?'

He looked at Mair. There were quite deep lines at the corners of his eyes, these days. He and Eirlys were both short-sighted, and Dylan tended to screw up his eyes when he was concentrating.

Awareness of how much she loved her brother wrapped round her like a blanket. All her life he had been her ally, whereas as children she and Eirlys had constantly squabbled, mostly because they were each other's embodied opposites. Not that they had quarrelled recently, of course. The loss of their adored father had made them considerate of each other, even wary.

'Do you know where it might have come from?' Dylan asked her.

She said, 'No. But maybe I could try to find out.'

This idea only came to her as she gave voice to it. She was surprised by the curiosity that the mysterious shawl aroused in her.

That night Mair and Eirlys went to bed for the last time in the room they had shared as children. Mair could tell that her sister wasn't asleep, although she didn't twist and turn between the damp sheets like Mair was doing. In the end she whispered, 'Eirlys, can't you sleep?'

'No.'

'What are you thinking about?'

'The same as you, probably. Once your parents are both dead, you really are it, aren't you? You're responsible, because there's no one standing in front of you. Do you know what I mean?'

Sympathy flooded through Mair. Her sister had been behaving responsibly for her entire life. She had been a prize-winning medical student and had just been appointed to a consultant's post at her Birmingham hospital, yet she had still found time to marry and have two boys. All her life she had been studying and looking after other people, and now

her vision of this latest phase of their lives was of yet more weight falling on her shoulders.

Mair thought, Ever since I could walk and talk, I've been skipping away from the path my sister and brother trod ahead of me. Instead of following them to a good university she had left home and Wales at seventeen, fulfilling a long-standing promise, halfway between a family joke and a rebellious threat, to run away and join a circus. And at Floyd's Family Circus she had met Harriet Hayes, or Hattie the Clown. Together they had worked up a simple trapeze act. Their nights at the circus were a long way behind them now, but they had been close friends ever since. In the intervening years Mair had also been a dress-shop manager, the singer in a band, a receptionist, a PR, a nursery assistant, a bookseller, and several other incarnations in the job market, with varying degrees of success, but usually some satisfaction.

No, even Hattie wouldn't call me responsible, she acknowledged. And Hattie was quite a lot more frivolous than Eirlys.

Mair's heart began to pound against her ribs and a white light blazed behind her eyes. Her body felt suddenly as light as a feather, and she realised that what she was feeling was *free*. She wanted to capture this blessing, and at the same time she longed to share some of it with her sister. Her fingers reached out and touched the fringes of the shawl, which lay on the chair beside her bed. 'Yes, I do know what you mean,' she said. 'Eirlys, I've been thinking. I might do some travelling. You know, now Dad's gone and, like you say, there's just us left behind. I was wondering about going to India – perhaps see what I can find out about Grandma and her shawl. I'd be unravelling some family history. Why don't you come with me? We could spend some time together. We haven't done much of that lately.'

There wasn't so much as a second's hesitation before Eirlys

replied, 'I couldn't possibly. There's the hospital. It's difficult for the whole team, with the latest cuts. And who'd look after Graeme and the boys? You should go, though, if that's what you really want to do. I saw the way you looked at the shawl.'

Mair knew there was no point in trying to change her sister's mind. Eirlys was decisive enough for two people. 'I do think it might be interesting,' she said.

She didn't try to articulate the feeling of rootlessness that had troubled her since their father's death. Eirlys and Dylan were settled, and she was far from being so herself. Perhaps uncovering some family history might help her to feel her place again.

'You might not find out anything at all. India's a big country. But you deserve a break and a new horizon. Grief can take all sorts of different forms, you know. And you took on most of the burden of looking after Dad. Dylan and I are really grateful for what you did, giving up that job and everything.'

Mair blinked hard in the darkness, but hot tears still escaped from the corners of her eyes. After the funeral Eirlys had remarked that the baby of the family was so busy being unconventional that it didn't leave much time for her to focus on anything else. That had stung Mair, but now she reflected that grief did indeed take many forms. Eirlys's caused her to be more tart than usual. The realisation made her sister's kindness now seem even more touching and valuable. She murmured, 'It was a privilege. I'm glad I was free to do it.'

'Take some time, have a trip to India. If you need a reason and the shawl gives you one, that's fine,' Eirlys concluded. 'Now, can we go to sleep?'

Outside, the bleating of the sheep had finally subsided. Mair knew why. Once night had fallen, the ewes understood that their lost lambs could never be called back. The

occasional despairing cry still rose to the stars, but the flock was settling into silence.

Mair woke up and lay in the narrow bed, trying to work out where she was. She had been dreaming of a dog barking and animals stirring in response, a rustle of alarm passing among them before the leaders broke away and scudded across the bitten ground. Then sunlight flooded a hillside with sudden colour and the moving animals flowed into grey-on-green paisley patterns against the grass. A sheepdog chivvied them towards a stone enclosure where a farmer was holding the gate open.

In the way that dreams unfold, a familiar and beloved place had become merged with another she hadn't yet visited. The room was cold and she shivered, pulling the blankets round her shoulders. As she did so the first call of the muezzin broke through the shutters.

The skin at the nape of her neck prickled, not just with the chill but with anticipation.

She remembered.

She opened her eyes wider, struck by anxiety in the grey dawn. The hotel room was cramped and liberally strewn with her belongings. Last night she had burrowed through her bags, searching in a power blackout for pyjamas and bed socks. But the shawl was safely there, neatly folded over the back of the room's single chair. The light wasn't strong enough yet to reveal the colours in their full glory, but they were vividly printed in her mind's eye.

Mair pushed back the covers and sat up. It was too early, but she knew she wasn't going to fall asleep again.

She had decided to give herself a full day to acclimatise. So, after a solitary breakfast in the hotel's chilly and deserted dining room, she made her slightly nervous preparations. Into her shoulder-bag went the sketch-map of the town that

the smiling Ladakhi receptionist had given her, a bottle of mineral water, some antibacterial gel and a well-rinsed apple. She was uncertain enough of what lay ahead to experience a breathless flutter beneath her diaphragm that had almost nothing to do with the effects of altitude.

Mair had never been to India before, not even to the beaches of Goa or the sights of Jaipur, let alone to a remote town in the Himalayas. Nor was she – in spite of her declared independence – at all used to travelling alone. Holidays, when she could afford them, had in the past usually involved the Greek islands or Spain, with a new boyfriend or one who was on the way out, or some looser combination of friends almost always including Hattie. As usual, Eirlys had been right when she had pointed out that Mair didn't often break off from her studied absence of routine.

Mair smiled again as she locked her hotel-room door. She was free now, wasn't she? Days and weeks of formally unallocated time stretched ahead of her. Thanks to the sale of the old house in Wales, she had some money, and time to spare for the strange project that had gnawed at her imagination for months in a way she didn't properly understand. She hadn't talked very much about the undertaking, even to Hattie, because it would have been too difficult to make her compulsion sound intelligible.

Just the same, the vaguest of vague plans had brought her all the way here to Leh, on an open ticket, with no fixed return date in mind to confine or comfort her.

She walked down the concrete path from the hotel, past beds of zinnias and cosmos and gaudy marigolds, and out into the street. Heading towards the centre of town, she gazed round her in fascination. It was the end of September, and she saw that Leh's short tourist season was practically over. Already many of the craft shops and travel agencies lining the road had rolled down and locked their permanent

metal shutters ready for winter, and the Internet cafés that catered to backpackers and trekkers were almost deserted. The high peaks ringing the town glittered with fresh snow, and the poplar trees in hotel gardens rustled with dry golden leaves.

In a month's time the real snows would come, and the high passes linking the Ladakhi capital with the Vale of Kashmir to the west and Himachal Pradesh to the south would be impassable until the spring thaw came. For six months the only way into Leh would be by air, as Mair had arrived yesterday, flying from Delhi into the little airport beside the Indus river. As she walked she was trying to picture what it would be like here in midwinter, when the narrow alleys of the town would be clogged with snow and the roof of each house piled high with sheaves of dried fodder for the family's animals. But she was distracted. The imminent disappearance of tourists meant that the town's salesmen were urgently trying to make a last few rupees. In the main street three of them cut off her progress with a practised pincer movement.

'Hello, madam, where you from? Look at my shop, please.'

'I have beautiful pashmina, I make you a very good price today.'

The third man pouted when she experimentally shook her head. 'But looking is free, madam. Just looking. What is the great hurry?'

She was in no hurry, that was true. Laughing, she followed the nearest merchant up the steps into his cluttered shop and let him show off his stock. From Tibet there were trays of silver, coral and turquoise jewellery, from China painted Thermos flasks and furry nylon blankets in electric hues. There were prickly hats and waistcoats, locally knitted from goat's hair, woven bags with tassels, and racks of T-shirts in every size and colour – mostly bearing a machine-embroidered

yak on the front and the slogan 'yak yak yak Ladakh'. Her eyes were acclimatising to the dim light of the shop's interior. Against the walls there were ramparts of samovars and copper dishes and crewel-work rugs.

'It's very nice. Thank you for showing me. I'm not shopping today, though.'

The man was Kashmiri, and therefore born to sell. 'You want pashmina.' It wasn't a question. At the back of the shop floor-to-ceiling shelves were stuffed with layers of folded fabric.

'Show me.'

Immediately he began to whirl shawls off the shelves. A drift of colour built up on the tiny counter, yellows and blues and fuchsia pinks. 'See? Feel, beautiful. Best quality. Pure pashmina.'

Mair knew a lot more about fine shawls than she had done four months ago, when the exquisite piece that was now locked in the hotel safe had first come into her possession. She understood the quality of the craftsmanship, and its likely value. 'Pure?' she said. 'Really?'

'Yes, pure silk pashmina mix. Twelve hundred rupees. Look, this pink one and this lovely blue-turquoise. Christmas is coming, think of gifts for your friends. Three for three thousand.'

'Do you have any *kani* woven shawls? Or embroidered pieces?'

The man looked up. 'Ah, yes. You know the best, madam. I show you.'

He unlocked a cabinet and brought out another pile. Like a magician he shook out more coloured breadths of fabric, whisking and flourishing them in front of her. Mair picked up the nearest one and let the folds slide through her fingers. She bent her head briefly to examine the floral design in reds and violet, then wound the shawl over her shoulders.

‘So nice,’ the Kashmiri approved. ‘These colours just right for you.’

It was nothing like the other one. This fabric felt stiff, lumpy around the margins of the flowers, and it hung awkwardly, with none of the fluid drape of her shawl. When she took it off again she could almost hear the crackle of the fibres. She didn’t know for sure how the design had been woven, but from a glimpse of the reverse it looked like cheap machine work. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured.

‘Nine thousand. Good price.’ He knew she wasn’t going to buy. ‘And this one, see, embroidered. By hand, all of it.’

Royal blue, this time, with a band of white flowers sewn at either end. The flowers had certainly been done by hand, but the design was haphazardly stitched and threads trailed on the reverse. The outlines of the blocked pattern were visible beneath the stitching. It could not have been more different from the other, on which the double band of floral embroidery was worked over the woven design in the same shades and in stitches so tiny that they were invisible to the naked eye, all of it executed so perfectly that the right side and the reverse were indistinguishable. The effect of such minute and effacing work was to emboss a broad swathe of the woven pattern, giving the paisley shapes and entwined foliage an opulent three-dimensional effect.

‘It’s very nice,’ Mair repeated.

The man looked offended. She wanted to get out of the shop now, back into the sunshine. She picked out a pair of coral earrings from the display stand next to the door, paid for them quickly and made her escape.

‘Come back soon,’ the merchant called after her.

The other two salesmen reattached themselves to her side, but half-heartedly. She was able to sidestep them and make her way on down the sunny, dusty street past a row of women sitting at the kerbside with baskets of cauliflowers and apples

for sale. Shoeshine men with their brushes and tins of polish set out on squares of sacking tried to attract her attention, even though her scuffed Converse were clearly visible. Scooters and rickshaws jolted over the potholes in the road. The noise of traffic was deafening. Mair peered up the shadowed alleyways leading off the street and chose one at random to explore. A mangy dog loped by, its distended teats swinging.

It was cooler in the shade and she pressed deeper, past barbers' shops and butchers' stalls where goats' heads oozed on wooden slabs. A black, buzzing object nailed to a beam revealed itself as an animal's severed tongue, presumably fixed there to draw flies away from the rest of the meat. Mair glanced at it, swallowed, and groped in her bag for her bottle of water. She took a determined swig and pushed on. Canvas tarpaulins were laced overhead now, and the alley grew dimmer and narrower. Overripe vegetable remains and less identifiable waste squished underfoot. Women in saris brushed past, and others in *burqas* hurried in the opposite direction. Stallholders called out and children vaulted over the gutters. It was a busy, cheerful scene and every aspect of its unfamiliarity served to highlight her alien status.

The alley opened into a square and she squinted as the sunlight struck her face. To one side a small brown bullock grazed with apparent relish on a pile of smouldering refuse. To the other, a crimson and gold prayer wheel was mounted beneath a painted canopy. As she stood there an ancient monk in saffron and burgundy robes wandered out of the crowd and set it turning clockwise. He stepped with it as it rotated, murmuring and counting the beads on his rosary. Mair took a photograph of him, then wondered if she had been intrusive.

She moved off down an alley, which ran in yet another direction, into the heart of the bazaar. Down here the stalls were heaped with white trainers and brown plastic sandals.

Overhead, backpacks and holdalls swayed in their hundreds like misshapen fruit. Girls' dresses made of glitter and tinsel hung in electric tiers.

And it was here, framed against the blue smoke rising from a food stall, that she first caught sight of the Becker family. The trio would have presented a striking picture anywhere, but in the chaotic market they made a tableau so unearthly that it had an almost religious quality to it.

They were the only Westerners she had noticed since leaving the main street. The woman was tall, slender and ethereally pale-skinned. She had a mass of red-gold hair that sprang over her shoulders. She was wearing a loose white shirt over a tiered blue linen skirt and a pair of mud-encrusted boots. She was talking, pointing and laughing all at the same time. The man with her was looking in the other direction. He was even taller than his wife and suntanned, with coal-black hair and eyebrows and a half-grown beard. Between them was an angelic child, a little girl of about two. She had the same curling mass of hair as her mother, but the colour was white-blonde. Her head rotated as she looked from one parent to the other. Then she stuck her tiny arms into the air and yelled, 'Carry.'

The woman was still laughing and gesturing. She stooped and, with the other arm, swept the child off her feet. She settled the little girl astride her hip and strode across to the food vendor. The air shimmered above a vat of boiling oil. The child pulled out a coil of her mother's amazing hair and peered down through it, as if it were a veil, at the heads passing beneath her.

The man turned to see what his wife was pointing at. The vendor fished in the boiling vat with a ladle and brought up some shiny toffee-brown squiggles. He tipped them into a paper cone and handed this over in exchange for some rupees. The woman dipped in her fingers and extracted a deep-fried

squiggle. She blew casually on it, then handed it to the child. The little girl bit into whatever it was with relish.

The woman tilted her head back and dropped some of the food into her own mouth. She chewed eagerly and laughed, wiping the grease from her chin. Health and satisfaction seemed to shine out of her. Her free hand floated lightly to her husband's hip and rested there. It was a gesture of possession and affection, as intimate as it was casual. She steered him away from the vendor, and from Mair's scrutiny, even though none of the three had so much as glanced in her direction. They strolled deeper into the maze of stalls. She followed them with her eyes, the red-gold and black heads, with the child's pale one bouncing between them, until they turned a corner and passed out of her sight.

She stayed rooted where she was, despite her urge to run after the family. The food vendor shovelled another scoop of his mysterious wares into the cauldron; the oil sizzled and spat.

In the hubbub of the market Mair's loneliness intensified.

She had plenty of friends, and had had the usual series of relationships, but there had been no one she could imagine spending the rest of her life with, not the way her sister Eirlys had undertaken to do with her Graeme, or Dylan with his Jackie.

She made herself take a deep breath of bazaar smells, and noted the ambling cows, the hens scratching on a hill of rubbish, the Buddhist monk returning from his trip to the prayer wheel, and the steady surge of people going about their business. Colours and scents and fresh impressions flooded her head, and her spirits floated again. She turned and retraced her steps, deliberately heading in the opposite direction to the glorious strangers.

* * *

The drive out to Changthang, eastwards from Leh, almost to what had once been the border with Tibet – and was now China – took the best part of a day. The other members of the sightseeing tour in a small Toyota bus were two portly, middle-aged Dutch couples and three Israeli boys, who managed to be rowdy yet noticeably unfriendly. They sprawled in the back, guffawing over the separate accompaniments of their MP3s. Curled up in her seat and braced against the jolting, Mair had plenty of opportunity on the long drive to reflect, and remember.

Before leaving for India she had done as much research as she could into her grandparents' history. Three months ago, in the on-line edition of a book called *Hope and the Glory of God*, subtitled *With the Welsh Missionaries in India*, she had read the entry for *Parchedig Evan William Watkins (1899–1960)*.

Evan Watkins had been educated at the University College of North Wales, and the College of the Presbyterian Church of Wales. After his ordination he had heard the call to work in India, and in 1929 he had travelled out to Shillong in what was then Assam. Subsequently he served as district missionary to Shangpung.

Since reading his clerical biography, she had regularly tried to conjure images of Evan Watkins, in his black coat and dog collar, as he gamely preached Nonconformism to the people of remote Indian hill villages. Had he thundered from his makeshift chapel pulpit on a steaming day with the monsoon rains drumming on the tin roof?

Since her arrival in the Indian Himalaya she had tried harder still to picture him, but the clash of cultures was too brutal to generate any kind of image.

According to his entry in the book, Parchedig Watkins had returned to Wales in 1938, where he had met and married Nerys Evelyn Roberts, born in 1909. In 1939 the

couple had sailed from Liverpool, bound for Bombay, aboard SS *Prospect*.

That was easier to picture. Mair saw the sunset over the Suez Canal, and heard a band playing for the dancers in the second-class saloon. Probably the minister wouldn't have had much time for the foxtrot, but she wondered if the young Mrs Watkins had been of the same mind, or whether she had sipped her lemonade and watched the laughing couples with a touch of wistfulness.

The Reverend Evan and Mrs Watkins were subsequently called to give service to the new mission of Leh, far up in Ladakh, where the minister became responsible for the work of missionary outreach throughout the region. Many roads in his territory were impassable for seven months of the year, the biographer noted, and electricity was almost unknown.

Mair looked out of the bus window at the stark landscape, and the purple-grey mountains rearing into the empty blue sky. The unmade road ahead zigzagged towards a distant pass in a series of pale hairpins scratched out of the rock and dust. Along this road giant trucks with painted fronts like fairground rides hooted and skidded. The small figures of the Welsh preacher and his wife still refused to take shape in her imagination, here or anywhere else in the Himalaya.

The rest of the entry was brief. After the war, the clergyman's poor health had forced him to return to Wales. Evan Watkins retained a strong interest in the work of the missionary services, but his health never recovered from the rigours of the Indian climate and he had died in 1960, leaving his widow and one daughter, born in 1950.

That daughter had been Mair's mother, Gwen Ellis, née Watkins.

Gwen had died suddenly from a cerebral haemorrhage when her youngest child was barely into her teens. It was one of Mair's greatest regrets now that, as an averagely

self-absorbed and dismissive thirteen-year-old, she had never asked her mother to tell her a single thing about Evan and Nerys's exotic years as missionaries in India.

The bus pulled in at a roadside stall selling tea and snacks. The Israeli youths leapt up at once and barged their way past Mair and the Dutch couples. Before climbing out to ease her cramped legs, Mair picked up the rucksack from the seat beside her and slipped the strap of it over one shoulder. She kept it pinned to her side with the pressure of her elbow.

'Where are you from?' one of the Dutch wives asked her, as they sipped heavily sweetened tea from the vendor's Thermos. A column of Indian Army trucks ground slowly past, part of the border defence forces. Young soldiers with guns at the ready peered at them over the tailgates.

Instead of saying 'England,' and naming the pleasant south-coast market town where she lived within easy reach of Hattie and several other friends, and where her most recent job had been located, Mair surprised herself by answering, 'North Wales.' Her childhood home was now occupied by a businessman from Manchester and his young family, so there were no ties left, except her brother and sister and their memories. But even so, or perhaps because of this, the valley and the years of her childhood lived within its limits were much in her mind. She missed home, now it had been sold and she could never go back. She clung to the thought of her grandparents and their lives in this strange place.

'And you?' Mair returned quickly.

'Utrecht. Are you on holiday?'

'Ye-es. Just travelling.'

The rucksack lay against her hip. The shawl was folded in a pouch inside it.

The woman sighed. 'We are not finding it so easy on these roads. My husband is unwell.'

From behind the bus came the unmistakable sound of someone throwing up. Between themselves, the Israeli youths found this uproariously funny.

The bus ground over one more high pass and a huge vista opened ahead. Their destination was a high, flat, remote place north of the mountains. Geographically, it was part of the Tibetan plateau although still within India.

Changthang was where the nomad peoples of eastern Ladakh traditionally herded and grazed their flocks of goats. Up here, the climate was so cold and harsh that the animals produced the densest, lightest fleece to insulate themselves. The nomads moved the flocks throughout the year in search of the sparse grazing. The goats' fodder and the water they drank were unpolluted, and their wool was the purest it could have been.

From her reading, Mair knew that this was where the finest *pashm* came from, the raw material for Kashmir shawls, so it was from here that her precious, mysterious shawl had almost certainly begun its journey as the wool of a pashmina goat.

When she was finally alone in her tent at the tourist camp, she took the pouch out of her rucksack and examined the shawl once more by the light of her head-torch. The faint spicy scent caught in the soft folds, she now knew, was the scent of India itself. The central motif of the shawl's woven design was a peacock's tail fan. A deep double border enclosed the centre panel, with lush paisley shapes filling the angles, and there were broad bands of exuberant foliage at either end. The bands, which were partly embroidered, gave an almost brocaded effect. For all its beauty, though, the shawl was battered and worn. There were lines of fading that showed where it had lain for decades in the same folds; the intricate embroidery was unravelling in places, and in others it was

rubbed away altogether. There were blotches of ink in one corner, an irregular yellow stain in another. Mair drew it over her knees, absently tracing the arabesques of embroidery and smoothing the knotted fringes, trying to read the shawl's history as if it were a map.

Early in the morning their guide rounded up Mair, the Dutch and the Israelis while it was still barely light, and drove them up a track that was no more than a slightly less rocky channel between the grey boulders littering the plain. They reached the shores of a vast lake, where the water was filmed with ice and the ground was powdered with snow. At the lake's edge stood a handful of single-storey houses, little more than huts, set between a line of bare poplars. Yaks, with their long hair almost brushing the snow, moved ponderously between the rocks. In preparation for winter the Changpa nomad families were bringing down their herds from the more remote pastures. There were circles of low stone walls close to the lake, and the early arrivals had flung goat-hair tarpaulins over these to make shelters for themselves and their animals. Smoke rose in thin columns from the ventilation holes at the apex. A woman with a bent back trudged up from the water's edge carrying a full bucket.

The goats stank – there was no other word for it. The nomad camp was also redolent of kerosene and animal dung and woodsmoke, but the dominant, throat-clogging smell was of unadulterated goat.

A display was laid on for the tourists. Three men in rough tunics and yak-skin boots drove a handful of their animals into a stone-walled enclosure. Mair pulled the flaps of her fleece hat over her ears and shivered in the keen wind. She could almost feel the layer of ice thickening on the lake. The goats were shaggy creatures, white and brown and black, with curved horns and disturbing long-pupilled eyes. They

allowed themselves to be hobbled and tipped on to their sides where they lay, stiff-legged and reeking. From the recesses of their garments, the men produced wooden implements like hairbrushes, set with fierce, incurved stiff metal prongs. With synchronised vigour, they each set to work on a goat, rasping and tugging at the wool of the throat and chest. Matted clods of hair began to yield to this treatment, coming away in chunks with the embedded dirt, dung and grease. The goats protested and the men countered with a throaty, ululating song.

'They are singing to the goats, telling them to give some good *pashm* in return for the sweet grass they have eaten and the good water they have drunk,' explained the guide.

A woman gathered up the tufts of hair as the men disentangled them from the combs, taking care to retrieve every last wisp, and stuffed them into a frost-stiffened polythene sack.

'Each family has between eighty and two hundred goats. The animals are combed in May and September. Each animal's combing yields approximately two hundred grams of raw wool,' the guide intoned, in his chipped English. At least she didn't have to translate all this again, Mair reflected, unlike her companions.

'How much money do they get?' asked the Dutchman who hadn't been travel-sick.

'Sixteen hundred rupees for a kilo,' the guide told him. 'Maybe more, maybe less, depends on quality. After cleaning and processing, that kilo of raw wool will yield only three hundred grams of pure fibre ready for spinning.'

Mair stared at the sack. It would take a lot of combings to add up to one kilo and probably a whole herd of goats' combings to fill that one bag. And it was very hard to conceive how those filthy, greasy bundles could ever be transformed into the feathery elegance of her shawl.

'So what happens next?' asked one of the Israeli boys, although he didn't sound all that interested.

'The wool traders come out by truck from Leh. They buy the *pashm*, and take it back to town for processing,'

Another of the boys had retrieved a rusty can from the detritus scattered across the Changpa camp. He set it on a rock and aimed pebbles at it.

'Is that all?' his friend wanted to know. A fusillade of stones clattered against the can until it bounced off the rock.

The guide looked offended. 'This is the traditional way for the people. It has happened like this for hundreds of years.'

'But is this all there is to *see*?'

'This afternoon we will visit the monastery. There are some fine paintings.'

'Yeah.'

The demonstration over, the men freed their goats and chased them out of the pen. Their leader waited for a cash hand-out and the others hastened towards the nearest tent enclosure. Mair hoped they were going to spend the rest of the day sitting by a log fire, singing goat-herding ballads and drinking *chang*. She unbuckled her rucksack, checking yet again that the shawl was wrapped inside, and took a five-hundred-rupee note out of her wallet. The man's blackened fist rapidly closed on it, but not so quickly that the guide didn't see how much. He would think she was a careless Western pushover because the tip was far too generous, but she didn't care.

'*Julley*,' she murmured. It was the all-purpose Ladakhi word for 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'thank you'.

'*Julley*,' said the man. He was already on his way over to the Dutch.

Mair had planned to unwrap her shawl and spread it on some sun-baked rocks, with the goats browsing in the

background, to take an artistic photograph of its beginnings to show Eirlys and Dylan – but she would have had to weight it with small rocks to stop it blowing away and there were pellets of windborne ice pinging against her cheeks. The whole scene was just too bleak for anything more than a mental acknowledgement that this was where the fine, light wool had originated perhaps seventy years ago. Nothing would have changed since then. And she was glad she had made the visit. She contented herself with taking a picture of the lake and the trees, with a white-wool long-haired goat glaring in front of them.

There was no way to capture the smell, but that wasn't a matter for regret.

As for her grandparents: now that she had been here herself it seemed implausible that even an emissary from the Welsh Presbyterian Mission to Leh would have penetrated this far. Surely Evan Watkins would have found enough preaching to do in the villages along the Indus and Zanskar rivers without pursuing the Changpa people out here. He couldn't have reached this spot in winter, because the snows would have cut it off.

Her companions were trudging back across the plateau towards the white speck of the Toyota. Mair took one last look at the goats and their backdrop and headed after them.

'Back in the bus, guys,' the leader of the Israeli boys shouted. The other two tramped eagerly after him.