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The Last Summer

Written by Judith Kinghorn

Published by Headline Review

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THE LAST SUMMER

Judith Kinghorn


headline

review

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First published in 2012
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 8597 3 (Hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7553 8598 0 (Trade paperback)
ISBN 978 0 7553 8599 7 (paperback)

Typeset in Perpetua by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon C20 4YY

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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

William Henry Davies

Oh woman, lock up thine heart three times; and when he who holds the key shall have opened it, say thou to him – 'Mine heart is locked up six times'; so shall thou have and retain power.

Indian Pilgrim's Song,

Part One

Chapter One

I was almost seventeen when the spell of my childhood was broken. There was no sudden jolt, no immediate awakening and no alteration, as far as I'm aware, in the earth's axis that day. But the vibration of change was upon us, and I sensed a shift: a realignment of my trajectory. It was the beginning of summer and, unbeknown to any of us then, the end of a *belle époque*.

If I close my eyes I can still smell the day: the roses beyond the open casement doors, the lavender in the parterre as I ran through; and grass, lambent green, newly mown. I can feel the rain on my face; hear my voice as it once was.

I can't recall exactly who was there, but there were others: my three brothers, some of their friends from Cambridge, a few local people, I think. Our adolescent conversation was still devoid of any faltering uncertainty, and we didn't stand on the brink, we ran along it, unperturbed by tremulous skies, sure of our footing and certain of sunshine, hungry for the next chapter in our own unwritten stories. For lifetimes – lifetimes we had only just begun to imagine – stretched out

before us criss-crossing and fading into a distant horizon. There was still time, you see. And the future, all of our futures, lay ahead, glistening with promise, eternal with possibility.

I can hear us now; hear us laughing.

That morning, as clouds gathered overhead, the earthbound colours of my world seemed to me more vibrant than ever. The gardens at Deyning were always at their best during June and early July. It was then, during those few precious weeks of midsummer that the place came into its own. And though Mama had often looked anxious, complaining about the incessant battering of her precious roses, every well-tended bloom and leafy branch appeared to me luminous and fresh. From the flagstone terrace the lawns spread out in an undulating soft carpet, and on the mossy steps that led down to the grass wild strawberries grew in abundance.

I can taste their sweetness, even now.

Mama had predicted a storm. She'd informed us that our croquet tournament may have to be postponed, but not before people had arrived. So we'd all stood in the ballroom, which my brothers and I simply referred to as 'the big-room', looking out upon the gardens through the open casement doors, debating whether to go ahead with our game or play cards instead. Henry, the eldest of my three older brothers, took charge as usual and voted that we go ahead in our already established teams. But no sooner had we arranged ourselves with mallets upon the lawn than the heavens opened with a reverberating boom, and we all ran back to the house, shrieking, soaking wet.

'Henry wishes tea to be served in the big-room, Mrs Cuthbert. We're all back inside now,' I said, standing by the green baize door, wringing out my hair.

Mrs Cuthbert had been our housekeeper for only a few weeks at that time. Years before she'd been employed by Earl Deyning

himself, not only at Deyning Park – now our home – but also at his estate in Northamptonshire. It had been lucky for us that Mrs Cuthbert had agreed to come back to Deyning after the old Earl died, and my mother was delighted to have a housekeeper who knew the place so well. ‘Such pedigree,’ Mama had said, and I’d immediately imagined a little dog in an apron and mobcap.

‘And how many of you are there, miss?’ Mrs Cuthbert asked, glancing over at me, smiling.

‘Oh . . . fourteen, I think. Shall I go and count again?’

‘No, that’s quite all right, dear. I’ll come through myself and see.’ She wiped her hands on her apron. ‘You’ve got my Tom with you today,’ she said.

‘Tom? *Your* Tom?’

‘Yes, he came home yesterday, and your mother kindly invited him to join today’s little game. Have you not been introduced?’

‘No. Well, I’m not sure. I don’t think so . . .’

I followed Mrs Cuthbert along the back passageway, towards the big-room, and I remember looking down at the red and black quarry tiled floor, trying – as I’d done since childhood – not to step on the black ones. But now it was impossible. My feet were too big.

‘He’s not like your brothers, miss,’ she said, turning to look at me. ‘He’s a gentle soul.’

In the big-room, everyone had already seated themselves around the four card tables pushed up together. And suddenly I was aware of a new face, dark-eyed and solemn, staring directly at me. As Mrs Cuthbert introduced me to her son, I smiled, but he didn’t smile back, and I thought then how rude. ‘Hello,’ I said, and he stood up, still not smiling, and said, ‘Pleased to meet you,’ then looked away.

There was no thunderbolt, no quickening of the heart, but there was a sense of recognition. A familiarity about his face: the nose, the eyes, his stature.

I opted out of whist. All three of my brothers were playing and I knew I stood no chance. Instead, I wandered to the other end of the room and sat down on the Persian rug in front of the fireplace. As I played with Caesar, Mama's Pekinese dog, I caught Tom Cuthbert looking at me. I didn't smile, but he knew I'd seen him. And, when I rose to my feet and walked back across the room, I was aware of him watching me. I sat down in an armchair, closer to the card tables, picked up a magazine and began to flick through its pages. I glanced over at him, caught his eye once more, and this time he smiled. And I knew it to be a special gesture, meant only for me. I didn't realise what it was like for him then, of course; had no idea of his discomfort as his mother served us all tea.

My upbringing had prepared me for a certain life, a life where I'd never question my role or the cast of players sharing my stage. It was a thoroughly modern idea, then, to educate a daughter, and, in my father's opinion, a pointless expense. So I'd studied at home, with Mademoiselle: a tiny bird of a woman, whose dislike of fresh air and susceptibility to draughts had rendered her pale and brittle. Her lessons in life had depended as much upon the temperature of her heart as the weather outside. Men, she had often told me – usually during arithmetic, and with a rug over her knees – were brutes; they had simply not evolved from animals, she said. However, Keats and Wordsworth appeared to bring out an entirely different side of Mademoiselle's compact and complex character, for then she would sometimes throw back the rug, rise to her feet, and tell me that life was '*nuzzeen*' at all if one had never loved. But by that summer Mademoiselle had left my life for good, for by then it was assumed I knew enough to be able to converse in polite society without appearing completely vacuous.

Like my mother's orchids, I had been nurtured in a controlled environment, an atmosphere maintained at a consistent temperature, protected from cold snaps, clumsy fingers and bitter frosts.

The Last Summer

My three brothers, on the other hand, had been allowed – even encouraged – to develop unruly tendrils, to thrive beyond the confines of any hothouse, to spread their roots, unrestrained, through that English earth they belonged to. It was different for a girl.

Marriage and children, a tidy home and a manicured garden were a foregone conclusion. And a husband with money was always a prerequisite. For how else could that life be achieved? I was a Home Counties girl, happy to be part of a family who enjoyed a sensible, uninterrupted existence, no matter the weather, the visitors, or the events beyond the white gate: the boundary between my understanding and the rest of the universe. When I was young I'd sometimes nudged that boundary: I'd walked down the long avenue of beech trees to the gate, and perched myself there, on top of it. There was little traffic on the road that bordered our land then, but occasionally an omnibus or new motor car would pass by and I would raise my hand to the unknown faces staring back at me. They were gone in an instant, but I always remembered those fleeting connections: new friends, all at once there, then gone again. Where did they go? What happened to them? Did they remember that moment too? Did they ever wonder what had become of me, the girl on the gate?

That evening, over dinner, I wanted to ask my mother about Tom Cuthbert, but she appeared abstracted. She gazed about the room with an unreadable expression on her face, and I wondered if she was thinking about the servants, again. She'd returned from London the day before, festooned with packages, and with a new hairdo, but noticeably agitated. 'It's simply *impossible*,' she'd announced in the hallway, and in a voice much louder than usual, 'to find any decent domestic staff these days. And when one does, one inevitably finds oneself replacing those months later.' I couldn't blame her for her exasperation. She

had travelled to London only the previous week to interview a prospective parlourmaid, a butler, and a new chauffeur, and had stayed overnight – as she quite often did – in the comfort of her Piccadilly club. It was no wonder to me she knew the train timetable to the second and off by heart, but so much to-ing and fro-ing had, she said, left her feeling *quite frazzled*.

‘I met Mrs Cuthbert’s son today, Mama. He’s called Tom, and he’s been away . . . though I’m not sure where.’

‘He attends university, dear,’ she replied, without looking at me.

‘But where?’ I asked.

‘Ha! Don’t become too intrigued by Cuthbert, sis,’ Henry broke in. ‘Mama expects you to have your sights set *slightly* higher, I think,’ he added, and then laughed.

‘I wondered about him, that’s all. He’s seems rather shy and . . . well, he has only his mother.’

Henry looked across the table at me. ‘Shy, eh? I reckon Cuthbert’s probably quite a rogue – underneath that aloof exterior.’

‘A rogue?’ I repeated. ‘I don’t think so. I think he probably prefers his own company to . . . to the likes of us.’

‘Aha! And she leaps to his defence! First sign, sister dear, first sign,’ Henry said, and George and William both sniggered.

‘Enough teasing, thank you, Henry,’ said Mama, glancing to my father for reinforcement. My father cleared his throat, as though about to speak, but then said nothing.

‘You’re simply jealous,’ I said, looking back at Henry and forcing a smile. It was one of my stock replies to him when I didn’t quite know what else to say.

‘And why on earth would I be jealous? He’s a servant, for God’s sake.’

‘No, he’s not. Mama’s just informed us – he’s at university.’

‘Oh yes, learning to polish silver, no doubt,’ Henry replied.

‘You’re jealous because he’s so much more handsome than you and isn’t inclined to boastfulness,’ I said, staring down at my plate, and then added, ‘Mademoiselle says gentlemen who feel the need to boast almost always have unusually small *cerveaux*.’

‘Ha! Mademoiselle . . . hmm, well, she would know of course. And yes, that’s right, I’m jealous of our housekeeper’s son, for I shall never have what he has and I can never be the bastard son of—’

‘Henry! That’s enough,’ my father intervened. ‘I don’t expect language like that from you or anyone else at this table. And I think you should leave your tittle-tattle and gossip at Cambridge. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ my brother answered.

And that was that.

I had no doubt that my eldest brother, Henry, knew a great deal of *tittle-tattle*. And more than that: I imagined there’d be idle gossip and tittle-tattle about him, too, somewhere. For of late he seemed to have acquired new friends, and spent more time in London than at home or Cambridge. Everyone knew Henry, and he, it appeared, knew everything about everyone. But his coterie had never been confined to Cambridge. Two of his closest friends from school had gone up to Oxford, another few straight into the army. He was the most outgoing of my three brothers, confident, popular, and extremely well-connected. He liked to say he had his *ear to the ground* and I often imagined him lying prostrate upon some bustling city street.

Later that same evening I quizzed my brother, asked him what he’d meant by his remark, but he’d heeded my father’s warning. ‘I was being flippant, dear. It meant nothing,’ he said to me. But I knew there was more, and something specific: something my father did not wish to have repeated, particularly not in front

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of me. There was no point in my pursuing it with Henry; he'd never go against Papa, no matter how full of bravado he appeared, and I was very much aware that to him I was still a child. But as I lay in my bed that night I pondered on it all again. I wondered who paid for Tom Cuthbert's education; and then I wondered if I'd heard Henry correctly. Had he actually used the word *bastard*?