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A Half Forgotten Song

Written by Katherine Webb

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A Half
Forgotten Song

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The wind was so strong that she felt herself pulled between two worlds; caught in a waking dream so vivid that the edges blurred, and then vanished. The gale tore around the corners of the cottage, humming down the chimney, crashing in the trees outside. But louder than any of that was the sea, beating against the stony shore, breaking over the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. A bass roar that she seemed to feel in her chest, thumping up through her bones from the ground beneath her feet.

She'd been dozing in her chair by the remnants of the fire. Too old and tired to rise, to take herself upstairs to bed. But now the wind had wrenched the kitchen window open and was flinging it wide against its hinges, hard enough that the next bang might be its last. The window frame was rotten; it had been years since it was held shut by anything more than a wedge of folded paper. The sound came into her dream, and woke her, and she hovered on the verge of sleep as the cold night air poured in, pooling at her feet like the rising tide. She had to get up and wedge the window shut before the pane smashed. She opened her eyes, and could see the grey outlines of the room well enough. Through the window the moon raced across the sky, clouds streaking past it.

Shivering, she made her way to the kitchen window where the storm was caking the glass with salt. The bones of her feet ached as they pushed through her skin. Sleeping in the chair made her hips and back stiffen up like swollen wood, and it was an effort to push the joints into movement. The wind coming in lifted her hair and made her shiver, but she shut her eyes to sniff at it because the smell of the sea was so dear, so familiar. It was the smell of everything

she knew; the smell of her home, and her prison; the smell of her own self. When she opened her eyes she gasped.

Celeste was there. Out there on the cliffs, standing with her back to the cottage, facing out to sea, cast in silver by the moonlight. The surface of the Channel heaved and churned, spindrift whipped from white crests and flung stinging against the shore. She felt tiny flecks of it land on her face, hard and corrosive. How could Celeste be there? After so many long years, after she vanished so completely? But it was her, for certain. That long, familiar back, a supple spine descending into the voluptuous curves of her hips; arms straight by her sides with her fingers spread. *I like the touch of the wind, running through my hands.* Her words seemed to whisper through the window, with that strange guttural accent of hers. Long hair and long, shapeless dress, rippling out behind her; the fabric pressed against the contours of her thighs and waist and shoulders. Then came a sudden clear image – of him, sketching Celeste, his eyes flicking up with that frightening intensity, that unbreakable concentration. She shut her eyes again, and held them tight. The memory was both beloved and unbearable.

When she opened her eyes she was still in her chair and the window was still banging, the wind still blowing in. Did she not get up at all, then? Did she not go to the window, and see Celeste? She couldn't tell if that was real and this now a dream, or if it were the other way around. Her heart pounded at the thought – that Celeste had come back; that Celeste had discovered what had happened, and who was to blame. The woman's fierce, angry glare flashed before her mind's eye, seeing everything, seeing right through her; and suddenly she knew. *A premonition*, she heard her mother's voice say, breathing sourly in her ear; so clearly that she looked around to see if Valentina was really there. Shadows lay in the corners of the room, and stared back at her. Her mother had sometimes claimed to have the gift, and had always searched for signs of it in her daughter. Fostered any inkling of inner sight. Perhaps, finally, this

was what Valentina had hoped for, because just then she *knew* that change was coming. As sure as the sea was deep. After all the many long years, change was coming. *Somebody* was coming. Fear wrapped its heavy arms around her.

Early morning sunshine poured in through the gallery's tall front windows, bouncing up from the floor, dazzling. Late summer sun that was still warm, and promised a fine day, but when Zach opened the front door there was a stony coolness to the air that hadn't been there even a week ago. A damp tang that spoke of autumn. Zach took a deep breath and turned his face to the sun for a moment. Autumn. The turning of the season, the end of the happy hiatus he'd been enjoying; of pretending that everything would stay the same. Today was the last day, and Elise was leaving.

He cast a look along the street in either direction. It was only just eight o'clock and not a single person was walking along his particular street in Bath. The Gilchrist Gallery sat on a narrow side street, just a hundred yards or so from Great Pulteney Street, a main thoroughfare. Close enough to be easy to find, he'd thought. Close enough that people would see his sign when they were walking past and happened to glance up the street. And the sign was clearly visible – he'd checked to make sure. It was just that surprisingly few people happened to glance to either side as they walked along Great Pulteney Street. It was too early for shoppers yet anyway, he reassured himself. The steady streams of people criss-crossing the bottom of the road had the smart, hurried look of people going to work. The muffled sound of their footsteps carried through the still air, tunnelling towards him through stark black shadows and blinding patches of sunlight. The sound seemed to make the silence at Zach's door ring out sadly. A gallery shouldn't rely on footfall, or passing trade, he reminded himself. A gallery was something the right people should seek out. He sighed, and went inside.

Zach's gallery had been a jeweller's shop before he'd taken over the lease four years previously. When it was refitted, tiny metal links and clasps turned up underneath the counter and behind the skirting; scraps of gold and silver wire. He even found a jewel one day, tucked behind a shelf where there was a narrow crack between wood and wall. It fell onto his foot with a solid little tap when he took the shelf down. A small, sparkling, perfectly clear stone which might be a diamond. Zach kept it, and took it as a good sign. Perhaps it had cursed him instead, he mused. Perhaps he should have sought out the erstwhile jeweller and given it back to him. The shop's aspect was perfect, sitting on a slight slope with its huge windows turned south-eastwards, capturing all this morning sunshine but directing it to the floor of the shop, not onto the walls where the perishable artworks hung. Even on dark days, it seemed bright inside; and just big enough to step back to admire the larger pieces from a suitable distance.

Not that there were many large pieces up, at that moment. He'd finally sold the Waterman landscape the week before; a piece by one of his contemporary, local artists. It had hung in the window long enough for Nick Waterman to start fretting about the colours fading, and the sale had come just in time to stop the artist moving his whole collection elsewhere. *His whole collection*, Zach snorted softly. Three cityscapes of the Bath skyline from various vantage points on the surrounding hills, and a slightly mawkish beach scene of a girl walking a red setter. Only the colour of this dog had made him take the piece. A fabulous coppery red, a blaze of life in an otherwise stagnant scene. The price of the painting, split evenly between gallery and artist, had given Zach enough money to tax his car and get it back on the road. Just in time to take Elise further afield, on some proper daytrips. They'd been to the caves at Cheddar; to Longleat; for a picnic in Savernake Forest. He turned slowly on his heels and looked at the rest of the stock, eyes sliding over some small but nice pieces by various twentieth-century

artists, and a few recent watercolours by local artists, and then alighting on the stuttering heart of the collection: three drawings by Charles Aubrey.

He'd hung them together carefully, on the best-lit wall, at the perfect height. The first was a rough pencil sketch, called *Mitzy Picking*. The subject was squatting inelegantly, with her back to the artist and her knees wide apart, the fabric of a plain skirt draped over them. Her blouse was tucked carelessly into her waistband, and had come out at the back, riding up so that a fragment of skin was showing. It was a drawing of outlines and hasty shading, and yet this small section of her back, the indentation of her spine, was so beautifully rendered that Zach always wanted to put out his hand, brush his thumb along the groove and feel the smooth skin, the hard muscles underneath it. The slight dampness of sweat where the sun warmed her. The girl was apparently sorting some kind of foliage into a wicker basket on the ground between her knees; and as if she felt the viewer's scrutiny, as if she was half anticipating this uninvited touch on her back, she had inclined her face towards her shoulder so that her ear and the outline of her cheek were visible. Nothing could be seen of her eye except the smallest hint of the lashes beyond the curve of a cheekbone, and yet Zach could feel her awareness, feel how alert she was to whoever was behind her. The viewer, all these years later, or the artist, at the time? The drawing was signed and dated 1938.

The next piece was in black and white chalks on buff-coloured paper. It was a portrait of Celeste, Charles Aubrey's mistress. Celeste – there seemed to be no record of the woman's surname anywhere – was of French Moroccan descent, and had a honeyed complexion under masses of black hair. The drawing was just of her head and neck, halting at her collarbones, and in that small space it had encapsulated the woman's anger so intensely that Zach often saw people recoil slightly when they first saw it, as if they expected to be reprimanded for daring to look. Zach often wondered what

had put her in such a violent mood, but the fire in her eyes told him that the artist had been on thin ice when he'd chosen that precise moment to draw her. Celeste was beautiful. All of Aubrey's women had been beautiful, and even when they weren't conventionally so, he still captured the essence of their allure in his portraits. But there was no ambiguity about Celeste, with her perfectly oval face, huge almond eyes and swathes of inky hair. Her face, her expression, were bold, fearless, utterly captivating. Small wonder that she managed to captivate Charles Aubrey for as long as she did. Longer than any other mistress he had.

The third Aubrey picture was always the one he looked at last, so that he could look at it the longest. *Delphine*, 1938. The artist's daughter, aged thirteen at the time. He had drawn her from the knees upwards, in pencil again, and she stood with her hands clasped in front of her, wearing a blouse with a sailor collar and her curly hair caught back in a ponytail. She was standing three-quarters turned towards the artist with her shoulders stiff and set, as if she had just been told to stand up straight. It was like a school photograph, posed for uncomfortably; but the trace of a nervous smile played around the girl's mouth as if she was startled by the attention, and unexpectedly pleased by it. There was sunlight in her eyes and on her hair, and with a few tiny highlights Aubrey had managed to convey the girl's uncertainty so clearly that she looked ready to break her pose in the next instant, cover her smile with her hand and turn her face away shyly. She was diffident, unsure of herself, obedient; Zach loved her with a bewildering force that was partly paternal, protective, and partly something more. Her face was still that of a child, but her expression, her eyes, held traces of the woman she would grow into. She was the very embodiment of adolescence, of a promise newly made, spring waiting to blossom. Zach had spent hours staring at her portrait, wishing he could have known her.

It was a valuable drawing, and if he would only be willing to sell

it the wolves might have been held from the door for a while. He even knew to whom he could sell it, the very next day if he decided to. Philip Hart, a fellow Aubrey enthusiast. Zach had outbid him for the drawing at a London auction three years ago, and Philip had been to visit it two or three times a year since then, to see if Zach was ready to sell. But Zach never was. He thought he never would be. Hart had offered him seventeen thousand pounds on his last visit, and for the first time ever, Zach had wavered. Lovely as they were, he'd have taken half that amount for the drawings of Celeste or Mitzy, the other remnants of his ever-shrinking Aubrey stock. But he couldn't bring himself to part with *Delphine*. In other sketches of her – and there weren't many – she was a bony child, a background figure, overshadowed by the sparkling presence of her sister Élodie, or by bold Celeste. But in this one sketch she was her own self; alive, and on the cusp of everything that was to come. Whatever that may have been. This was the last surviving picture of her that Aubrey had drawn before his catastrophic decision to go and fight on the Continent during the Second World War.

Zach stood and stared at her now, her beautifully rendered hands with the short, blunt nails; the creases in the ribbon holding back her hair. He imagined her as a tomboy; imagined a brush dragged hastily, painfully through that unruly hair. *She had been out along the cliffs that morning, looking for feathers or flowers or anything else worth finding. Not a tomboy, but not a girl who particularly cared to be pretty, either. The wind had whipped her hair into knots that would take days to work free, and Celeste had berated her for not wearing a scarf over it. Élodie was sitting on a chair behind their father as he sketched, kicking her legs to and fro, sulking in a jealous rage. Delphine's heart was full to bursting with pride and love for her father; and as he sketched with a frown, she said prayer after silent prayer that she would not disappoint.* In the bright light of the gallery, Zach's reflection stared back from the glass, just as visible as the pencil lines behind

it. If he concentrated, he could see both at once – his expression overlaying hers, her eyes looking out of his face. He didn't like what he saw – suddenly his own absorbed, wistful expression made him look older than his thirty-five years; and just as suddenly, he felt it as well. He hadn't combed his hair yet and it stood up in tufts, and he badly needed a shave. The shadows under his eyes he could do less about. He'd been sleeping badly for weeks, since he'd found out about Elise.

There was a thumping of footsteps and Elise came bustling down the stairs into the gallery from the flat above, swinging through the door on its handle, her face alight, long strands of brown hair flying out behind her.

'Hey! I've told you not to swing on the door like that! You're too big, Els. You'll pull it off its hinges,' said Zach, catching her up and lifting her away from the door.

'Yes, Dad,' said Elise, any hint of contrition ruined by a wide grin and the shadow of laughter, creeping up on the words. 'Can we have breakfast now? I'm just *so* hungry.'

'Just *so* hungry? Well, that is serious. OK. Give me one second.'

'One!' Elise shouted, and then clattered down the remaining steps to the main shop floor, where there was enough space to twirl, arms wide, feet threatening to tangle with one another. Zach watched her for a second, and felt his throat tighten. She had been with him for four weeks now, and he wasn't sure how he was going to cope without her. Elise was six years old, sturdy, healthy, vibrant. She had Zach's exact shade of brown eyes, but hers were bigger and brighter, the whites whiter, the shape of them in a constant state of flux from wide with amazement or outrage to narrow with laughter or sleep. On Elise, the brown eyes were beautiful. She was wearing purple jeans, torn through at the knees, with a lightweight green blouse open over a pink T-shirt on which a photograph of Gemini, her favourite pony from her riding school, was emblazoned. It was a photo Elise had taken herself, and it

wasn't very good. Gemini had raised his nose towards the camera and laid back his ears, and the flash had caused a lurid flare in one of his eyes, so that, to Zach, he looked bad-tempered, oddly elongated and possibly evil to boot. But Elise loved the T-shirt as much as she loved the pony. The outfit was finished with a bright yellow plastic handbag; mismatched clothes that made Elise look gaudy and delicious, like a multicoloured boiled sweet. Ali would not approve of the outfit, which Elise had assembled herself, but Zach was damned if he was going to have an argument and make her get changed on their last morning together.

'Snazzy outfit, Els,' he called down to her.

'Thanks!' she replied, breathlessly, still spinning.

Zach realised he was staring at her. Trying to notice everything about her. Knowing that the next time he saw her, myriad subtle changes would have taken place. She might even have outgrown the T-shirt with the ugly grey pony on it, or just gone off the creature, although that seemed unlikely. At the moment she seemed as upset about leaving the pony as she was about leaving her friends, her school. Her father. Time would tell, he supposed. He was about to find out if his daughter was an out of sight, out of mind kind of person, or one for whom absence made the heart grow fonder. He hoped to God she was the latter. Zach downed the last of his coffee, shut the front door and flipped the lock closed, then grabbed his daughter around her ribs to make her squeal with laughter.

Breakfast was eaten at a tatty pine table in the kitchen of the flat above the gallery, to the strains of Miley Cyrus on the CD player. Zach sighed slightly as his least favourite song by the saccharine pop star came around again, and realised to his horror that he had, gradually and against his will, learnt all the words. Elise bobbed her shoulders up and down as she ate her cereal, in a kind of seated dance, and Zach sang a line of the chorus in a high falsetto which made her choke, and spray milk onto her chin.

‘Are you excited about the trip?’ he asked, carefully, once Miley had faded into blessed silence. Elise nodded but said nothing, chasing the last few flakes of cereal around in her bowl, dipping them out of the milk like fishing for tadpoles. ‘This time tomorrow you’ll be on an aeroplane, high up in the sky. It’s going to be fun, isn’t it?’ he pressed, hating himself because he could see that Elise wasn’t sure how she should answer. He knew she was excited, scared, looking forward to it, sad to be leaving. A mixture of emotions she was too young to have to deal with, let alone express.

‘I think you should come too, Dad,’ she said at last, pushing her bowl away and leaning back, swinging her legs awkwardly.

‘Well, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. But I’ll see you in the holidays, and I’ll come and visit lots,’ he said, automatically, and then cursed himself in case he couldn’t. Transatlantic flights didn’t come cheap.

‘Promise?’ Elise looked up at him and held his gaze, as if hearing the hollowness of the words. Zach’s stomach twisted, and when he spoke he found it hard to make his voice sound normal.

‘I promise.’

They had to go before the end of the summer holidays, Ali had argued, so that Elise would have a chance to settle in for a couple of weeks before starting her new school. Her new school in Hingham, near Boston. Zach had never been to New England, but he pictured colonial architecture, wide open beaches and rows of pristine white yachts moored along bleached wooden jetties. It was these beaches and boats that Elise was most excited about. Lowell had a sailing boat. Lowell was going to teach Ali and Elise to sail. They were going to sail up the coast, and have picnics. Let him see one picture of Elise near a boat without a life jacket on, thought Zach, and he would be over there in a flash to knock Lowell’s smug head off his shoulders. He sighed inwardly at the petty thought. Lowell was a nice guy. Lowell would never let a child near a boat without a life jacket, least of all somebody else’s child. Lowell wasn’t trying to be

Elise's father – he appreciated that she already had a father. Lowell was so damn friendly and reasonable, when Zach wanted so badly to be able to hate him.

He packed Elise's things into her *Happy Feet* rolling cabin case, making a sweep of the flat and the gallery for glittery hairclips, Ahlberg books and the numerous small plastic objects that seemed to pay out behind his daughter wherever she went. A breadcrumb trail, for if ever he lost her. He took Miley Cyrus out of the stereo then picked up her other CDs – readings of fairy tales and rhyming songs, more cheesy pop music and an obscure set of German folktales sent by one of Ali's aunts. He picked up Elise's favourite – the *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, and considered keeping it. They had listened to it in the car on all their day trips during the past week, and the sound of Elise speaking along with the narrator, trying to mimic the voices, and then parroting lines for the rest of the day, had become the soundtrack to the last days of summer. *Give me some fish, Hunca Munca! Quack said Jemima Puddle-Duck!* He thought for a moment that he might play it to himself, and imagine her rendition once she was gone, but the idea of a grown man listening to children's stories, all alone, was too tragic for words. He packed the CD away with the rest.

At eleven o'clock sharp, Ali arrived and leaned on the bell for just a couple of seconds too long, so that it sounded impatient, insistent. Through the glass in the door Zach saw her blond hair. It was cut into a short bob these days; the sun glancing off it so that it glowed. She had sunglasses hiding her eyes and wore a striped blue and white cotton jumper that skimmed her willowy frame. When he opened the door he managed to smile a little, and noticed that the familiar spike of emotion she usually brought with her was blunter than before, shrinking all the time. What had been helpless love and pain and anger and desperation was now more like nostalgia; a faint ache like old grief. A feeling more softly empty, and quieter than before. Did that mean he was no longer in love with her? He

supposed so. But how could that be – how could that love go and not leave a gaping hole inside him, like a tumour carved out? Ali smiled tightly, and Zach leaned down to kiss her cheek. She proffered it to him, but did not kiss him back.

‘Zach. How’s everything?’ she asked, still with that tight-lipped smile. She’d taken a deep breath before speaking, and kept most of it in, pent up, swelling her chest. She thought there was going to be another row, Zach realised. She was braced for it.

‘Everything is great, thanks. How are you? All packed? Come in.’ He stepped back and held the door for her. Once inside, Ali took off her glasses and surveyed the virtually empty walls of the gallery. Her eyes were a little bloodshot, a sign of fatigue. She turned to Zach, examined him swiftly with a look of pity and exasperation, but bit back whatever she had been about to say.

‘You look . . . well,’ she said. She was being polite, Zach realised. They had regressed from being able to say anything to each other to being polite. There was a short pause, slightly awkward as this final transition in their relationship settled. Six years of marriage, two years of divorce, back to being strangers. ‘Still hanging on to *Delphine*, I see,’ Ali said.

‘You know I’d never sell that picture.’

‘But isn’t that what a gallery does? Buys and sells . . .’

‘And exhibits. She’s my permanent exhibit.’ Zach smiled slightly.

‘She’d buy a lot of flights to visit Elise.’

‘She shouldn’t have to,’ Zach snapped, his voice hard. Ali looked away, folding her arms.

‘Zach, don’t . . .’ she said.

‘No, let’s not. No last-minute change of heart then?’

‘Where is Elise?’ Ali asked, ignoring the question.

‘Upstairs, watching something loud and tacky on TV,’ he said. Ali shot him an impatient look.

‘Well, I hope you’ve been doing more with her all these weeks than just plonking her down in front of—’

‘Oh, give it a rest, Ali. I really don’t need parenting lessons from you.’ He said it calmly, half amusedly. Ali took another deep breath and held it. ‘I’m sure Elise will tell you what we’ve been up to. Els! Mummy’s here!’ He put his head through the door to the stairs and shouted this up to her. He had been dreading her departure for so many weeks, since Ali had told him about the move and all the rowing and discussing and rowing again had changed nothing at all. Now the dread of it had grown almost unbearable, and since the time had come, he wanted it over with. Do it quickly, make it hurt less.

Ali put her hand on his arm.

‘Hang on, before you call her. Don’t you want to talk about . . .’ she trailed off, shrugged and splayed her fingers, searching for words.

‘Exactly,’ said Zach. ‘We’ve talked and talked, and you’ve told me what you want, and I’ve told you what I want, and the upshot is you’re going to do what you want, and I can go hang. So just do it, Ali,’ he said, suddenly bone weary. His eyes were aching, and he rubbed them with his thumbs.

‘This is a chance for a completely new start for Elise and me. A new life . . . we’ll be happier. She can forget all about . . .’

‘All about me?’

‘All about all the . . . upheaval. The stress of the divorce.’

‘I’m never going to think it’s a good idea that you take her away from me, so there’s no point you trying to convince me. I’m always going to think it’s unfair. I never contested custody because . . . because I didn’t want to make things worse. Make them harder, for her and for us. And this is how you thank me for that. You move her three thousand miles away, and turn me into some guy who sees her two or three times a year and sends her presents she doesn’t like because he’s so far out of touch with what she *does* like . . .’

‘It wasn’t about that. It wasn’t about you . . .’ Ali’s eyes flashed

angrily, and Zach saw the guilt there too; saw that she'd struggled with the decision. Oddly, it made him feel no better that she had.

'How would you feel, Ali? How would you feel in my place?' he asked, intently. For a horrifying second, he thought he might cry. But he didn't. He held Ali's gaze and made her see; and some emotion caused her cheeks to flush, her eyes to grow bright and desperate. What that emotion was, Zach could no longer read, and just at that moment Elise came rushing downstairs and flew into her mother's arms.

When they left, Zach hugged Elise and tried to keep smiling, tried to reassure her that she didn't need to feel guilty. But when Elise started to cry he couldn't keep it up – his smile became a grimace and tears blurred his last view of her, so in the end he stopped trying to pretend it was all right. Elise gulped and sobbed and scrubbed at her eyes with her knuckles, and Zach held her at arm's length, and wiped her face for her.

'I love you very much, Els. And I'll see you very soon,' he said, giving the statements no ambiguity, no hint of a maybe. She nodded, taking huge, hitching breaths. 'Come on. One last smile for your dad, before you go.' She gave it a good try, her small, round mouth curling up at the corners even as sobs shook her chest. Zach kissed her and stood up.

'Go on,' he said to Ali, brutally. 'Go on now.' Ali reached down for Elise's hand and towed her away along the pavement to where her car was parked. Elise turned and waved from the back seat. Waved until the car was out of sight down the hill and around the corner. And when it was, Zach felt something switch off inside him. He couldn't tell what it was, but he knew it was vital. Numb, he sank down onto the front step of the gallery, and sat there for a long time.

For the next few days Zach went through the motions of his everyday life, opening the gallery, trying to fill his time with odd