
Opening Extract from...

The Memory of Lost Senses

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'Rome, before 1870, was seductive beyond resistance . . . shadows breathed and glowed, full of soft forms felt by lost senses.'

Henry James

'If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control! We are, to be sure, a miracle every way; but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out.'

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

Sometimes it's easy to be blind, to run into the blackness and know you are heading in the right direction. Know that beyond the dark is light, and that behind you all is dark. Know that your destination – wherever it may be – will be infinitely better than your point of departure. This is how it was that night.

And though the girl already knew about the need to take flight, she had not anticipated her own escape, had never been out in the dead of night, the witching hour, grazing dripping brick and corrugated iron, the backsides of tenements and factories and warehouses; clamouring over ramshackle fences, sidestepping rat-infested ditches and sewers.

But fear of the night – its other-worldliness – was nothing compared to what had just taken place at home.

At the end of the alleyway the woman finally stopped, released the girl's hand and dropped the bag to the ground. The girl was still whimpering, and shaking; shaking so violently she thought her legs might give way, thought she might fall to the sodden ground and be swallowed up by Hell and Damnation. Her feet were numb, her shoes and the hem of her dress caked in wet mud from cutting through the market gardens. She could smell the river, its stench permeating the fog, and knew they

were close. But she must not make a sound. No, no sound. She had been told that, and slapped.

And so she tried to hold in her sobs, her breath, and kept her hand – its congealing stickiness – clasped over her mouth, her eyes fixed on the blurred shape of the woman beside her, now pulling a shawl back over her head. Ahead of them, a solitary hansom cab creaked westwards, wheels spraying, lamp swaying.

'Was he . . . is he . . . dead?' the girl whispered.

The woman made no reply. She watched the yellow light fade, picked up the bag, and led the girl on across the highway, into the blackness, into the night.

Prologue

London 1923

The photograph had been torn in two and later repaired. Now, a crinkled line of severance ran through the background pine trees, the top of the tented gazebo and the statue by the gate to the sunken garden, decapitating the marble lady. But the image continued to exude the effulgence of that day, and Sylvia squinted as she brought it closer, glancing along the line-up and then at herself: eyes closed, hand raised, as though about to sneeze, or laugh, or speak; the only one to have moved. I was nervous, she thought, remembering, not used to having my photograph taken . . . not used to posing.

She lifted the magnifying glass, levelling it over the figure seated at the centre: a broad hat shading the eyes, the memory of a smile about the mouth, the dated costume, out of time – even then. Accustomed to scrutiny, impervious to the occasion, she thought. But she could hardly bear to think the name. She was still in shock.

She sat back in her chair, closing her eyes, already moving

through shadows towards brightness and warmth, and the sound of a band and the hullabaloo of children drifting up from a village green, and that day, that day, that day.

But something else tugged at the edge of her senses. Another memory, faded almost to white and worn thin as gossamer with time. And emerging from it, into it, a familiar dark-haired young man, standing by a fountain in the sun-drenched piazza of a foreign city. As he moves towards her she feels the incandescence of the stone surrounding her, the weight of it upon her, and one name, on their lips, about to be spoken, about to be broken.

'My dear,' he says, reaching out to take her hand, 'your note has me quite bamboozled . . .'

He holds her gloved hand in his. His dark eyes are serious, searching; his brow is furrowed. He is indeed perplexed. But there is no turning back, she must tell him, she must tell him everything. And so she releases the appalling words in whispers, and as he leans towards her she can smell turpentine and stale sweat. When he steps away from her he raises a paint-smudged hand to his forehead, and she can feel his pain. But it had to be done. She had no choice.

'I had no choice,' she said, opening her eyes, coming back to now. 'He needed to know . . . needed to know the . . .'

She had been going to say *truth*. But it would have been a lie.

Book One

England 1911

Chapter One

Within weeks letters would be burned, pages torn, photographs ripped in two. Names would be banished, memories abandoned and history rewritten, again. Within weeks promises would be broken and hearts made fit to bleed.

But for now there was little movement or sound.

The countryside languished, golden and fading and imbued with the lassitude of weeks of unwavering heat. High above, the cerulean sky remained unmoved. It had been there early. Stretching itself from treetop to treetop, resolute, unbroken, never touching parched earth. Only the ratter-tat-tat of a woodpecker interrupted the wood pigeon's lullaby coo.

It was shortly before noon.

Sylvia would remember this – the time of her arrival – ever after, because she would later write it down, along with the words and events of that day, and the rest. She would for years to come ponder upon whether she could have, should have, done things differently. But when she stepped down from the vehicle her heart knew only love.

As the wagonette disappeared back down the curving

driveway she gazed up at the house, smiling. It was typical of Cora to have played it down. Now, I shall be able to imagine her *here*, she thought, lingering beyond the shadow of the building. Ahead of her, the front door and glazed inner door stood open. It was fine weather and they were expecting her. But still, it seemed a tad foolhardy, reckless even, to her. Anyone at all could walk in.

The hallway was dark and cool, the place silent, and as she put down her bag she called out, 'Hello-o! It is I, Sylvia . . . anyone home?' She immediately recognised the long ornately carved table next to her and, placing her fingertips upon it, reassured by familiarity, she moved along its length. A red leather frame – next to a large earthenware bowl containing an assortment of calling cards – read, 'OUT'. A folded newspaper and yet to be opened letters lay on a silver tray beneath an oversized and, to her mind, rather haphazard arrangement of flora. She glanced through the letters – brown envelopes, all bills – then lifted her hand and tugged at a large open bloom, pulling it free from the tangle of waterlogged bark and stems, plunging it back into the centre of the vase. Raising her eyes to the wall, she gasped. It was not a painting she recollected having seen before, and was surely inappropriate to have hanging in an entrance hall, or anywhere else, she thought, turning away.

Opposite her, a settee of gilt and pink velvet she remembered from Rome made her smile. And above it, the zebra's head, mounted high upon the wall. But hadn't Cora said she loathed the thing? Would never have it in any of her homes?

She walked on, glancing through open doorways into tall sunlit rooms, revealing more familiar polished mahogany – magnificent antiques, glinting crystal and objets d'art. She smiled at Gio and Louis – Cora's two beloved pugs, stuffed by a renowned Parisian taxidermist and now sitting either side of an ottoman, staring glassy-eyed at the empty hearth – half expecting

the little things to scramble to their feet and clip-clap across the ebonised floorboards to greet her once more. Oh, but it was marvellous to be in a place where one could immediately connect with so much of it. Almost like coming home, she thought. And yet it was queer to see it all again, together, here, in this place. Cora's world could never have fitted into any cottage. 'A cottage indeed!' she said, shaking her head. Cora was a collector, a traveller, and her new home was testament to this. Each of her homes – her apartments in Paris and Rome, her chateau in the Loire – had surely been testament to this. And though Cora had never planned to return, had vowed she would die in Rome, circumstances – tragic as they were – had dictated otherwise, and Sylvia had secretly been pleased. For Cora was finally back in England, and back for good.

A young male voice broke through the silence and she turned.

'You must be Sylvia,' he said. 'I'm Jack.'

Jack. So this was he. Ah yes, she could see the resemblance.

He smiled, stretched out his hand to her, and as she took hold of it she said, 'What a pleasure to meet you at last.'

He told her that they had been expecting her a little earlier. And she explained that she had taken the later train in order to avoid the day trippers. She did not tell him that this plan had failed, that the train had been chock-a-block with families bound for the coast.

Unused to children, their eyes and their noise, she had sat in a tight huddle on board the train, her notebook and pencil in her lap. She had pretended to be busy, keeping her mouth shut, restricting her breathing to her nose. In her notebook she wrote the word *miasma*, then doodled around it in small squares and boxes, interlinking and overlapping. Until the word itself was covered. When the child dropped the ice cream at her feet, splattering her shoes and the hem of her skirt, she simply smiled.

And when a nursing mother unbuttoned her blouse and exposed her breast to feed a screaming infant, she smiled again, and then looked away.

'All tickety-boo? Cotton was still there, I presume.'

'Yes, Mr Cotton was there, waiting on the platform as arranged.'

When she stepped off the train, with her small leather satchel and portmanteau, she had stood for a while with her eyes closed. She had seen the man at the end of the platform, knew from Cora's description that it was Cotton, but she needed a moment – just a moment – to herself. She had allowed him to take her bag but not the satchel. She had hung on to that.

'And the train? Not too busy, I hope.'

'No, not too busy at all,' she replied.

'I imagine Linford was quite deathly . . . by comparison to London,' he added.

The market town had been quiet, very quiet. Sylvia had noticed this. Sun-bleached awnings sagged over the darkened shop windows and empty teashops, and the wilting flags and bunting and banners proclaiming 'God Save the King' still draping buildings and criss-crossing the street looked sad and incongruous; like Christmas in summer, she thought. But the coronation and its celebrations had been quickly forgotten in the stifling heat, the effort of remembrance too much.

Sylvia shook her head. 'It's the same up in town. *Everything's* shut down, ground to a halt . . . the streets are quite deserted.'

This was something of an exaggeration. Though many city businesses had been closing early, the main thoroughfares quieter, the pulse of the capital continued to throb. People had adapted, altering their habits. The city's parks were busier than ever and any pond, stream or canal, not yet dried up, filled with bathers. And though Mrs Pankhurst and her suffragettes had called a

truce to their window smashing for the coronation, and for summer, they were still out and about with their banners and placards: 'Votes For Women'.

'Ah well, perhaps you won't find it quite so quiet here after all,' he said and smiled.

Yes, she could see the resemblance, in the line of the jaw, the nose and, most particularly, the eyes. She said, 'You remind me very much of your grandfather.'

He looked back at her, quizzical for a moment, then said, 'Of course, I forgot . . . forgot that you knew him, that you lived in Rome as well.'

'A long, long time ago,' she replied, glancing away, removing her gloves.

'My namesake,' he said, wistfully.

She kept her eyes fixed on the ivory lace in her hands. They were talking at cross-purposes. He knows nothing, she thought.

'Come,' he said suddenly, and with an assurance that surprised her. He walked on ahead of her down the passageway, saying, 'I was outside . . . it's not too hot for you, is it? We can sit in the shade . . . I'll organise some coffee, if you'd like . . . wait here.' He turned, walked back along the passageway, put his head round a door, and Sylvia heard him laugh and say, 'Yes, please, if you don't mind . . . on the lawn, please.'

She followed him out through a broad sunlit veranda, across a south-facing terrace to stone steps leading down to an expanse of yellowing grass. He pointed out a gate to a sunken garden and spoke of a woodland path. It was perfect, she said, all quite perfect. And she wouldn't have expected anything less of his grandmother. They sat on cushioned wicker chairs and made polite conversation. A young maid appeared and covered the table between them in a white linen cloth. When he said he was enjoying 'getting to know' his grandmother, Sylvia was reminded how little the two had seen of each other, of Cora's absence.