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# **The Things We Never Said**

Written by Susan Elliot Wright

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SUSAN  
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*The Things We  
Never Said*



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## PROLOGUE

*February 2009*

The curtains are drawn but she knows it's still raining because she can hear the cars on the coast road swishing as they pass. There was a flurry of snow last night, but the rain seems to have driven it away, thank heavens. She hates snow; shudders when she thinks about it. The overhead bulb seems dim so she switches on the standard lamp, her finger catching on the fringed trim that's coming away from the shade. She looks again at the letter, a single sheet of paper, two paragraphs of black print with a handwritten signature. Somehow, she manages to still her trembling hands enough to tuck it back into its envelope and stuff it into the pocket of her dressing gown, conscious at once of her senses tuning up. She mustn't allow herself to panic; she just needs to think. The moment crystallises and she becomes aware, all at the same time, of the faint chink of plates from the kitchen, the smell of almost-burnt toast, the clunk of the kitchen

clock labouring its way to the next minute, and the bitter-orange tang of marmalade on her tongue. She hurries out of the sitting room and along the hallway to the bedroom, where it seems she's left the radio on. She sits on her side of the bed, tempted briefly to crawl back under the covers, pull the duvet over her head and pretend it's still night.

Heavy snow in parts of the south is causing major disruption to London's transport network, John Humphrys is saying. After the news, he'll be asking the chief executive of the Local Government Association whether councils should have been better prepared. The pips go; eight o'clock. She tries to focus on the news headlines: snow; schools closed; credit crunch to worsen; Nick Clegg vows to slash class sizes; sharp increase in measles cases described as 'very worrying'. She hits the *off* button, then looks around as if not quite sure where she is. Fresh air, that's what she needs; fresh sea air. Her gardening skirt is draped over the back of the chair, and there's a jumper on the floor. And she'll need underwear, of course, and a couple of socks. But as she gathers the clothes, the thought of putting them on overwhelms her. She sits back on the bed, defeated, and allows the garments to slither to the floor. She needs to get outside. Now. If she can just feel the rain on her head and the salty air on her face, she'll be able to think more clearly.

Until she climbs the steep concrete steps up to the street, she doesn't realise how heavily it's raining. The pavements are awash; water is cascading noisily from gutters and flooding out from downpipes. There is a high

sea wind, and even from here, she can hear the chunky waves thudding against the sea wall. She pushes her greying hair back from her face and stands there, allowing the rain to soak her and the wind to whip around the hem of her dressing gown. The envelope crackles in her pocket; she can feel it against her hip.

It is cold, even for Hastings, even for February. Her ears begin to sting, and the rain is icy on her scalp. Whether it's the wind or the realisation that it's February, she doesn't know, but something causes the memory to fly in, sharp and cold, settling right at the front of her mind.

*It is 1962; the night is cold and dark, and the wind is biting chunks from her face. 'Watch out!' he shouts, and pulls her towards him as a roof slate crashes to the ground, just missing her. Then there is another, louder crash, and what looks like part of a chimney pot smashes onto the roof of a car behind them. 'Christ, we'll be killed at this rate.' He grabs her arm and pulls her into the gennel. 'Come on, down here, out of the wind.'*

Was it then that something struck her on the head? Or was that a bit later? The memory sparkles with clarity in some places, yet is vague in others. She sways slightly, puts her hand out to the metal railings to steady herself. Despite the noise of the wind and rain, she can hear the sound of her own breathing, just as she had on that night in 1962 as she'd run down the hill . . .

*. . . she hears the slap slap of her feet on the pavement as she runs. The gale is at her back and seems to be aiding her flight, so she lets herself go with it. There are bangs and crashes, glass breaking, a dog barking in the distance. The street is so littered*

*with debris that she has to keep leaping over things. It looks as though the town has been bombed, but the war ended years ago. She is in danger: this she knows for certain. A lump of wood lands in her path; she trips and hits the ground with a smack. The palms of her hands sting as they hit the cold pavement and she grazes both knees, although she doesn't realise this until much later.*

She shakes the memory away. For a moment, she struggles to think what she's doing standing out here in her dressing gown on such a filthy morning, then she remembers. She puts her hand into her pocket; the letter is still there. It's real; she didn't imagine it.

The eerie cry of a distant seagull, its familiar call mutated, shortened by the wind, causes a swell of sadness inside her so powerful it almost steals her breath. She takes the letter from the envelope, unfolds it, and holds it steady in the wind while she reads the words again. She has thought about this moment many times over the decades, and as she'd feared, it has flung open a trapdoor to her past. Now she must peer through the void, down, down into the darkness.

## CHAPTER ONE

*November 2008*

It's a cold, damp afternoon, but at least this morning's fog has cleared. As Jonathan Robson walks across the playground, its concrete surface polka-dotted with chewing gum, his thoughts spool forward to this evening. He's planning to cook a special meal for their anniversary – confit of duck, spicy red cabbage and dauphinoise potatoes, and he's even managed to find a half-decent low-alcohol wine. He notices a new addition to the graffiti-covered wall of the science block as he heads for the parking area: *My arse smells of apples*. He smiles; at least it's original, and compared to the rest, it has a certain quaint charm. He rounds the corner and walks right into Jerome Wilson, Year 9, a bit of a pain sometimes but a nice enough kid. He'd caught the boy reading something under the desk once, and as he'd waited for him to hand it over, he'd braced himself; some of the stuff he'd confiscated in school would make a grown man blush. But it



turned out to be a book about dinosaurs. He's had a soft spot for Jerome ever since.

Jerome looks startled for a moment. 'All right, Sir?' he says.

'Hello, Jerome. Put that fag out, there's a good man.'

Jerome seems about to deny it, but Jonathan stares pointedly at the pale grey wisps that are rising into the chilly air from behind the boy's back. He tries not to enjoy the delicious whiff of second-hand smoke. Jerome grins sheepishly, glances around, takes another quick drag and then stubs the cigarette out on the wall. 'Sorry, Sir.'

'Go on, Jerome, get yourself off home and I'll pretend I didn't see that.'

'Thanks, Sir. See ya.'

He's just getting into the car when his phone beeps. Fiona. *Sorry about this morning. Didn't mean to go on at U like that, especially just b4 work. Preg hormones making me moody! C U later x.* He texts straight back. *I'm sorry too. Will be home soon. x.* Predictive text suggests '*will be good soon*', which makes him think. It's true that Fiona's been a bit snappy over the last few weeks, but he hasn't been sweetness and light himself. He yawns; tiredness is making him irritable. He really needs to sleep better tonight; he can't take many more nights of lying there watching the numbers on the clock roll through the hours while his mind jabbars away at him. When, over the last few years, he's allowed himself to imagine this time in their lives, he's always pictured the pregnancy as a time of intimacy and happy anticipation, but so far, it doesn't

seem to be going that way at all. If anything, it feels like the connection between them is becoming weaker rather than stronger.

The traffic on Shooter's Hill Road is a nightmare. It crawls across Blackheath and at one point comes to a standstill, so he stops worrying about it and just looks out at the trees silhouetted like black filigree against the darkening sky. Everything will be all right tonight, it has to be – he can't bear the thought of them being off with each other on their anniversary. This will be their last anniversary as a couple; next year they'll be a family. He feels the familiar creep of apprehension. They're having a baby, and he can't shake off the feeling that he should be doing more towards it but he doesn't know what. He's not even sure what he should be saying. Even though this is a first child for both of them, he feels as though it's very definitely Fiona who's the expert. He wishes he'd paid more attention when Malcolm and Cass were expecting Poppy. If he can be as good a dad as Malcolm is, he won't go far wrong.

\*

The evening goes well, so well that they skip pudding and take their wine up to bed, something they used to do quite frequently before trying for a baby became so fraught with anxiety, a 'task' to be managed with temperature charts and special diets and calendars.

'Happy anniversary,' she whispers, pushing him onto

his back and sliding on top of him. 'I didn't have time to get you a present. Will this do?'

He grins. It's the first time she's instigated sex in weeks. 'Oh, go on then. I suppose so.'

Their lovemaking is brief but joyous, more like the roll-around shags they used to have before they started trying to get pregnant. After, they hold hands as they lie side by side, hip to hip, thigh to thigh, each enjoying the heat from the other's skin, reluctant to break the connection by allowing air to move between them. For once, perhaps sated by food, wine and sex, Jonathan falls asleep quickly and sleeps peacefully for a good few hours before slipping into the recurring dream that has plagued him over the last few weeks. He is up to his knees, building a snowman. Dazzling sunlight glances off the whiteness and there are deep drifts all around. He can feel the snow under his fingers, but suddenly the cold is shockingly, unbearably intense. Then he is waist-high, trying to struggle free, and that's when he sees the child, not much more than a baby, sinking down in the snow next to him. He tries and tries to pull her out, but it's hopeless; the snow has claimed her.

Although he wakes drenched in sweat, his teeth are chattering and he feels like he did in the dream, like his bones are chilled and there's iced water in his stomach. The luminous green digits on the clock say 5.58. He won't get back to sleep now. A strip of orange light from the streetlamp falls through the gap in the curtains, making Fiona's dark-blond hair look golden. He watches her for

a moment; she's lying on her back with her arms stretched above her head; her face looks smooth and almost child-like in sleep; her lashes are flickering, and when he looks closely, he can see her eyes moving back and forth rapidly beneath the fine-veined lids. He lifts the covers and slides out of bed gently so as not to disturb her. The carpet feels warm under his feet; they must have left the heating on. But despite the warmth, he shivers as the sweat cools on his skin. The dream varies sometimes, but there's always snow, and there's always a child. Sometimes, he knows the child is himself, but not always. He assumes it's due to some sort of anxiety about the baby, especially as Fiona's been having frightening baby dreams as well. The other night she dreamt she gave birth to a dead crow. She'd woken with a cry, breathing hard, her face wet with tears; he'd held her while she told him about it, her voice wavering at the horrible details. Then she'd made a joke as if to try to banish it entirely. But long after she'd gone back to sleep he could hear the slight judder in her breathing, as though some part of her was still crying. He ached to comfort her, but she was locked in, beyond his reach. He shivers again. He hadn't been aware of temperature in dreams before now, although he often dreams in colour, and he knows you can dream a smell, because in the nightmares where his father is pushing his head into the lavatory pan to stop him swearing, the smell of old urine and Harpic makes him wake up gagging.

Downstairs, the kitchen hums and buzzes, its noises oddly reassuring. The burnt-down candles from their

anniversary meal are still on the table, surrounded by an interesting formation of wax. Without switching on the light, he walks across the tiled floor and looks out of the window. The sky is no longer black but a smudged, slate colour, blurred by an early mist. He's had about five hours' sleep; it could be worse. And it's Saturday. He has some marking to do, but at least he hasn't got to stand in front of a class and try to look wide awake. He fills the kettle and reaches for a teabag, then changes his mind. A good, strong coffee is what he needs, something to jolt him properly awake and pull him away from the icy dream, which is still lurking just behind his eyes.

He is enjoying the rich, smoky flavour of the coffee and thinking how much a cigarette would enhance it, when he senses her behind him.

'Hey.' A warm hand on his shoulder, a kiss on the back of his head. Fiona yawns and pulls out the chair opposite. One side of her face is creased with red marks and her eyes are still half-closed. 'What's up?' she says. 'Can't sleep again? Or is it another bad dream?'

He nods. 'Can't get it out of my head.'

'What was it about?'

'I don't want to put it in your head as well.' He's told her about some of the snowy dreams, the ones where he thought the child in the dream was himself, but he doesn't think telling her about babies sinking in the snow is a great idea. 'I'm not sure which is worse,' he says, 'this or the insomnia.'

Fiona doesn't say anything for a minute, then she picks

up his mug and slowly takes a mouthful of coffee. He notices that she's started biting her nails again.

'Jonno,' she says slowly. 'This insomnia, the bad dreams and so on – is it . . .' She hesitates. 'Is it because of the baby?'

'Because of the baby? How do you mean?'

'Well, this is what I was trying to say yesterday morning – I know it was a stupid time to bring it up, but there isn't a good time and . . .' She looks down at her hands. 'I've got to say it. I know we had a lovely time last night, but apart from that, you don't seem very happy, to be honest. You're stressed, you're not sleeping. And it's all since we got pregnant.'

'I'm tired, that's all; it's nothing to do with the baby.' He looks at her. Her hair has fallen across her face so he can't see her eyes. 'Listen.' He reaches for her hand. 'We both wanted this.'

'But it's taken so long to get pregnant; you could have changed your mind.' She brushes her hair out of her face, but she still won't meet his eye. 'You told me yourself that you broke up with whatserface because she wanted kids—'

'That was totally different.'

'And you're so reluctant to . . . I mean, you haven't even told your parents yet.' Now she's looking at him again. 'What am I supposed to think?' Her eyes begin to glisten.

'Fi, I'm not unhappy,' he says gently. 'And of course I want this baby. I suppose I'm a bit scared as well, but that's normal, isn't it? Scared I'll make a balls-up of it;

scared I'll turn into my father; scared Larkin had a point – that we're destined to ruin our kids' lives even if we don't mean to.' He pauses. 'Aren't you scared too? Just a bit?'

She thinks for a moment. 'I suppose so. But I still don't see why you haven't told your parents.'

'I'll tell them soon. I just need to—'

'Jonathan, why not just tell them?'

He sighs. Even thinking about his father brings on a sort of cold dread. 'I suppose . . . it's him, really. You know what he's like.' He knows with bitter certainty that his father will be unimpressed, unmoved, convinced that being a father is something Jonathan cannot possibly succeed at. And what if he's right? What if, despite all Jonathan's pronouncements about how he'll always support his child, praise every achievement, never shout unnecessarily, what if, despite his best intentions, he simply fails?

Fiona's face softens. 'Oh, Jonno. I know he's a difficult man, but surely he'll . . .' But then she appears to lose confidence in what she's about to say. She gets up, walks around the table and stands behind him, sliding her hands down his chest and nuzzling his neck. She smells of bed and his dick twitches, but then he remembers the dream, and shrugs her off without meaning to. 'No, please don't go.' He catches her arm and turns his face into the warmth of her stomach.