

The background of the book cover features a dark, moody night sky. A full moon is positioned in the upper center, partially obscured by thick, billowing clouds that have a slight pinkish or reddish hue, suggesting either dawn or dusk. Below the clouds, the dark silhouettes of trees are visible against the lighter sky.

Whispers from the past

Collected short stories

Portland Jones

The Birds

At 5.06 pm, 5th September, Dee escaped from the office to walk to her bus on Colmore Row. Dusk was falling. The calling of birds deadened the sound of the traffic. She looked up to see birds vying for space to perch on the tall city buildings, swirling round in the air diving and swooping. People stopped to watch their antics, enthralled by this unexpected display of wildlife in the heart of the city.

The numbers increased. Carpets of birds swooped low, just above the heads of the pedestrians. Bird poop made the pavements slippy. People started holding their newspapers over their heads to avoid being splattered. Braver people, who cared less what other folk thought of them, raised umbrellas against the rain of bird shit.

The birds swooped lower, pulling up at the last second, skimming perilously close to the paving slabs before tearing back into the damp sky. There were some collisions, injuries as their tiny claws made contact with people's foreheads. Scratches and bruises became a daily anxiety.

Finally, the council acted. The birds were gone. Suddenly. Over the space of two days, not a single live bird remained in the centre. There were a few dead ones on the floor that council workers dealt with promptly and efficiently, although not always before the feral cats and the mainstream city rats took a chomp of the bodies.

The council claimed a great success. No one knew where the birds had gone. Animal activists raised their concerns. What exactly had the council done? An official response said that they had eradicated the birds' food source, using insecticide to kill off the little black flies that the birds had been chasing.

On 14th September, a dog walker in Bartley Green, a suburb at the far edge of the city, searched anxiously for his dog. Godfrey had been walking it off its lead – yes, he realised he shouldn't have, but there was no one else about. He was by the woodland near the reservoir. Usually they just walked along the quiet road that curved around the water. The peacefulness of the trees was very enticing, but it was so overgrown with brambles that it was nearly impossible to get inside without being scratched to ribbons. Lack of council care you see, all these cutbacks. A car had raced past on the narrow road; an engine backfire had startled his beloved pet Albert who had lurched wildly into the woods. No amount of calling had wheedled him out. Godfrey ran home, fetched Albert's favourite doggie snacks and rushed back. It was no use. As dark fell, Albert was still missing. Godfrey saw a few birds skimming across the reservoir. When he could no longer see them as dusk fell, he admitted defeat, and went home, grieving for his dog.

He put up posters, offered a reward. Four days later, three young boys came to tell him that they had found a dog's body. Godfrey went to look, thanking the boys. They went with him, to make sure they got their reward. Albert was nothing like his usual well-groomed self. His fur was ruffled, matted with god only knew what. Spots of blood congealed on his fur. Godfrey was appalled at the end that had befall his precious pet. The cuts must have been from the brambles, the dirt from his squirming to get free. After paying the reward to three delighted boys, he lumbered Albert into the boot of his car, took him home and buried him under the cherry tree at the end of his garden. Exhausted, Godfrey went to bed, and cried.

Two days later police knocked at his door. Godfrey asked politely if they would like to come in, and how could he help them. The three officers burst rather dramatically through his front door, one staying at Godfrey's side to make sure he went nowhere, the others searching through his house.

Shaken, Godfrey enquired what they were looking for.

'Where are they?' growled an officer. 'The three boys. Tell us where they are.'

Godfrey had been the last person to see them apparently. They had been in his car – forensics would confirm this although Godfrey had already agreed that the boys had been in his car. 'They came with me to show me where my dog was. I gave them a reward - £5 each.'

'So you took three boys that you didn't know in your car to find your dog. Gave them money. And now they are missing.'

Saying it like that, it didn't look good to Godfrey either, especially as he was a single man and a bit of a loner. Albert had been a good companion and that was all he needed really.

Godfrey was arrested and interrogated. The police said he was being uncooperative. Godfrey knew it wasn't going well, especially as he had decided he wasn't going to tell the police where he had taken the children. He felt sure that if he said he had taken them to the woods, he would never be allowed out, ever again. So he decided not to say that he had left them in the woods where they had found the dog. Instead he explained how he had taken them to a shopping centre on the way to town, as they had told him the dog was in the play area just outside the shops. He also said that he hadn't found the dog but had given them the money for being helpful which they wanted to spend there and then, so he left them there.

That he hadn't found his dog was of course disproved when the police searching his home found a disturbed patch of garden, which they eagerly dug up expecting to find bodies, and they did, well, one body, except it was the missing dog. The nature of the dog's death, with multiple lacerations, increased police suspicions. A psychiatrist was brought in to delve into Godfrey's innermost thoughts which revealed things about him that even Godfrey never knew.

On 3rd October, soon after dawn, Cynthia stretched out her legs, lengthening her stride to keep up with Max, her golden brown terrier. It had seen a cat – his archeft enemy – and chased it across the road. Usually Max was captivated by the ducks on the reservoir, but cats trumped anything else. It was unusual to see cats around here but today there it was before Cynthia had chance to call Max to heel.

The pair raced straight across the road and into the woodland.

'Max, come here. Now.' Of course the excited dog ignored her. Cynthia stopped at the edge of the woodland, regarding the brambles. Cynthia was made of sterner stuff than Godfrey. She tied the belt tighter around her coat, tucked the legs of her trousers inside her socks, laced her boots tighter, and braved the brambles.

Cynthia lived on her own and never spoke to her neighbours, considering herself to be above them as they were rather coarse. They drank cider from cans before the day had even reached evening and they used language totally unsuitable for polite company. She had retired early with a good pension and had no need for company, not even her children's. So it wasn't until her birthday two weeks and three days later, when the said children dutifully made their annual visit, that anyone realised she was missing.

Halloween was approaching. The local kids were excited, and so were the local witches. Of course, the witches called it Samhain, and it was an altogether different sort of celebration from the trick or treat tradition that had come over from America. They planned this celebration with great care. A ritual would take place in the woods by the reservoir.

October 31st, Samhain. The group of three men and nine females met in the layby by the short wooden fence marking the official opening to the woods. They waited patiently for their priestess who would lead the way to the circle that they had been using for several years – a patch of dry sandy soil surrounded by bushy alder trees and one towering oak tree. It was becoming increasingly difficult to walk the path each time they came - they usually celebrated at least four of the eight celebrations each year. This time the brambles almost covered the path. But witches are a hardy breed and when their priestess arrived decked in a trailing cloak in dark green they picked up their bags and staffs and fought their way through the brambles. It was dark, naturally. Samhain was always celebrated in the evening, the darkness appropriate for honouring the dead, and besides, the fire cast wonderful shadows. As they unloaded their bulky bags, setting out kindling and some larger logs, building the fire ready for lighting, they noticed the woods were unusually quiet. Normally they would hear small animals scurrying away amongst the leaves, the occasional hoot of an owl. Tonight there was nothing other than their own shuffling and muted voices. It took a lot to scare a witch, but tonight's silence was unnerving.

The priestess walked round the clearing, sunwise, chanting as she went, creating the circle, the space that would keep them safe for the duration of their ritual. She stumbled over something hidden by the dark, landing on top of it with the most unpriestess-like words. The flames from the fire finally caught, lighting the gloom beneath the trees, revealing the body that lay in her path. Cynthia did not look good, decomposition well under way. The priestess, realising that she was face to face with an eyeless head, let loose a scream that would awaken the dead. At least, it awoke the myriad birds that had been roosting comfortably in the treetops.

It was a pity she had not completed the full circuit, as their safe space had not been created and thus afforded them no protection at all. Most people there stood transfixed by the appalling find, failing to notice the danger from the birds rapidly descending on them. Darryl and Saffron had the foresight to pull their cloaks over their heads and run, scattering sparks from the fire as they careered past. They did not stop to observe what was happening behind them. Cowardly it may have been, and very unwitchlike, to abandon their coven, but fear has the power to drive noble thoughts clear from one's head.

A police car on one of its infrequent routine patrols found the pair staggering along the side of the road; they were incoherent and unable to tell the police what was wrong. The police noticed the smell of smoke on their cloaks, spotted the orange glaze over the trees outlining dark waving branches, and put two and two together – making five. Darryl and Saffron were secured in the back seat of the patrol car where they sat shaking in each other's arms.

A fire engine arrived with sirens blaring. The trees were now well alight, night-time clouds lit up like sunset. Saffron nudged Darryl, pointed towards the light from the flames where she

had spotted small black dots silhouetted against the orange glow, heading at speed towards the uniforms. The onslaught was fast and merciless. Police and fire personnel alike dropped to the floor, hands covering their heads and faces. These actions were futile. Covered in pecking, striking birds, their clothes were ripped open, beaks gouging at the soft skin below. The police officers were the first to lose their fight, slipping into non-resistance. Their uniforms did not offer the same level of protection as those of the fire fighters, though this only made a short difference in time before the birds did their worst. The larger birds pulled out succulent eyes, pausing in their frenzy to enjoy these juicy treats. The emergency services failed that night; only the police car successfully restraining its suspects had a positive outcome. Darryl and Saffron remained safe from physical harm, though following an in depth conversation with the police psychiatrist they were not considered competent to give a reliable account of the night's events.

The birds, their anger depleted, turned towards the trees now fiercely ablaze. As if by common consent, they took to the air, dispersing across the sky in wide formation, no doubt to seek a roost elsewhere.

The council were forced to cut back the brambles and clear the undergrowth to allow a full investigation to take place. The bodies of three children were discovered underneath the fallen leaves, in a greater state of decomposition than the witches who fell on the night of the fire. None of the local inhabitants felt like enjoying the woods, even though they were now tidy and tamed, given the inexplicable events of that night. After several months of relentless police activity, the strange case of the happenings in the wood gently dropped from the hysteria of the press and edged into legend, stories to scare children with.

Conspiracy theories arose on the internet claiming that the poison used to eradicate the flies in the city centre created mutations in the birds' systems, leading to their sudden disappearance. And furthermore it was claimed that it was these very same birds that were responsible for the murders in the woods. Of course, these rumours were hotly denied by the council, and indeed the police force, who said it was fake news and warned it was irresponsible to share it. Facebook and Twitter agreed to take down any posts that made these claims. After all, people in rural areas were getting scared to go out when daylight faded, terrified of the birds singing their perfectly natural evening chorus at dusk.

The story of the birds fell into the realms of urban myth, dragged up on quiet news days, when politicians had failed to lie, and the morning news presenter had remained faithful to his wife. The story still lingered on the outskirts of memory when a dog walker in Worcester, named Trevor, took his dog Benji for a walk by some wooded land not far from his house.....

Abigail and Catherine

The air was heavy, a physical weight on my chest, making it difficult to draw in breath. Stray rays of daylight persisted in the darkening sky, flaring in defiance till the clouds put paid to their audacity. The house walls had absorbed the heat of the day, wrapped me in its intensity. I picked up my wrap, dark to match the evening, and fled the stifling humidity. The air was no lighter, no drier but at least I was no longer held captive. I stretched under the wide open skies, deciding which way to go. The slightest of breezes brushed my left cheek so I turned towards it, revelled in its tender strokes cooling the sweat that seeped from my skin.

The narrow lane smelled of honeysuckle, warm and dusty. Gentle rustles in the hedgerow either side let my imagination run wild. Was it small scuttling animals, catching their supper, pouncing on even smaller prey? Or stamping on grass to settle it down, comfy, ready for sleep? The breeze strengthened, bringing distant sounds - a dog barked at some imagined intruder, a church bell struck 9pm. That must have been St Wynstan's, grey stone older than most folk could remember. I continued my walk, my skin now drying, my breath becoming easier. In the darkness, I saw light ahead, along one side of the lane, indicating windows, cottages. A baby cried, quickly soothed back to sleep, the light extinguished.

Small sounds of night, windows closing, dogs called in, ended the day, bringing silence. My eyes adjusted to the darkness as all light left the scene. I thought it was time to turn back but I found I was near to St Wynstan's. A faint light showed the colours of the stained-glass window, red roses and white lilies surrounded a pale face, a simple blue scarf covered her hair, framed her forehead, her cheek bones, her jaw, glorious in its sheer beauty against the dark. I watched for a while then turned my feet towards home.

Then I heard it. Crying, a pitiful weeping. The sound seemed very faint but at the same time, nearby. I held my breath to listen without interference from my accelerating heartbeat. I paced in several directions, paused to see if I was nearer the sound, snatched a breath as I could. This heart-wrenching sobbing was coming from the direction of the church. Intrigued and anxious to help, to stem the sadness, I turned my feet towards the tall spire which loomed above me, impressive in its height, its body solid, so dark it was still clearly visible against the darkening sky.

I entered the courtyard around the church, closed the wooden gate softly behind me, followed the sound of misery in front of me. Suddenly, the crying stopped, and so did I! A few stifled sobs took me towards the stained-glass window, the beautiful woman forever captured for all to see. The image shimmered from the light inside, enough light for me to cast my eyes around, to find the woman – for in my mind I felt certain this was a woman in such distress. I could see no-one. Confused, I looked around again, then something turned my eyes upwards, towards the light. As I watched the woman held in the light, a tear oozed from her eye and rolled down her cheek. I took a step back, rubbed my eyes – that could not be.

I returned my gaze and watched as another moist drop trickled against her pale skin. My breathing came fast and shallow, my heart racing. I admit that I was scared. I could see no logical explanation for what I was seeing. There had been no rain. That was why I was out at

this late hour, seeking relief from the oppressive heat. The air was heavy, I expected to see lightening rip the sky at any time, but the clouds had refused to give up their precious cargo.

It was time to go. I had no inspiration as to the source of the sobbing, surely glass cannot cry to be heard but then again, glass can't issue forth tears which I had indeed seen with my own eyes. I looked at the lady. The crying had abated, both noise and watery issue. I'm sure the mouth had formed into a gentle smile.

'Stay safe, my lady,' I said aloud to her, feeling slightly ridiculous. 'I will find out more about you and I will be back.' I walked carefully through the courtyard, let myself out through the gate, turned back to catch one last glance of the lady. The light had faded and the church was in darkness. My fear took the better of me and I fled; my feet raced towards home with a speed I have not used since childhood.

Morning brought no relief from the heat. I dressed in my lightest cotton dress, white, dotted with forget-me-nots, and set out for the small squat library at the centre of our village. It did not boast a wide range of books, but I felt sure it would hold details of our local heritage. Sat in a corner avoiding the sun streaming through the windows, I turned page after page of the books the pinched librarian had brought to me. The History of St Dunstable's and St Wynstan's gave me information on the spire, when it was built. 1733. St Dunstable's I knew was a ruin, a place tourists visited in summer and where local children played amongst the fallen stones, despite warnings to stay away. The stained-glass window had been taken from St Dunstable's when the decaying church put it at risk, given refuge in St Wynstan's. The lady had a name – Catherine of Woodthorpe, mistress of a stately home that no longer existed, having sunk into disuse and into the surrounding ground, long since lost. Her devoted and grieving husband had commissioned the stained-glass image to honour her and hold her there for all to see on her death at a tragically early age.

I left the cool of the library, deciding to visit St Dunstable's. I wasn't ready to repeat my visit to St Wynstan's, even though the sun was bright. I still felt unsettled by the scene I had witnessed in yesterday's darkening night. St Dunstable's ruins, surrounded by grass sprinkled with daisies, were a pleasure to the eye. I walked round at a leisurely pace, enjoying the coolness in the shade of the jagged walls. One wall was still high enough to convey the size of the original building, with an opening where I felt the stained-glass image had originally lived.

A kissing gate led into the graveyard giving peace to old headstones with barely legible commendations for those gone by. I weaved my body back and forth to walk the regular rows, trying to read the inscriptions. As I walked further back, the headstones became more fanciful, but many were broken, damaged by time. A large angel, her face scabbed and made ugly by age and lichen, spread her wings wide over a patch of black earth. No grass grew on this grave. At the base, where the angel stood poised to take off, I could scarcely read the name Catherine of Woodthorpe, beloved wife. I spent time regarding this grave and its angel. Why was there no grass? What stopped it growing here when it grew freely everywhere else? To one side, was another patch without grass. This was small, rectangular, yet no stone marked its owner. They must be connected, if simply from the lack of grass. Was this a child's grave? At least I believed it to be so from its small size. No name for this child, no sentimental saying, no grass. Yet it was close to Catherine.

I went home, pondered on what this all meant. An afternoon passed with my brow furrowed, head aching at the thoughts whizzing round my brain. I decided to pay a visit to my Granny Harriet. She lived not far away in a thatched cottage, still pretty despite its age, where she had

lived since she married my grandfather at sweet sixteen. Perhaps she would be able to tell me more about my perplexing problem.

'Well Abby,' said Granny Harriet 'I remember my grandmother telling me tales that she had been told by her granny who had been in service as a maid at Woodthorpe manor. That makes it a very long time ago.' She paused, closed her eyes, as if struggling to recall the distant conversations. I excused myself to the kitchen to make a pot of tea but also to give her time to savour the memories of her grandmother, no doubt as precious to her as Granny Harriet is to me. We lifted dainty china cups to our lips and Granny began to talk.

'It was very sad, if it was true. It could only ever be rumour - no-one knew for certain. Woodthorpe Manor was a stately home. It had belonged to the Woodthorpe family for hundreds of years, old money and arrogance. Catherine was a local girl, daughter of a mill owner, making cotton goods for export I think Granny said. Lord William set his eye on her. He wanted her to grace his arm with her beauty. Of course, her father readily agreed. Poor Catherine had no choice. Back then women were goods that belonged to men, to dispose of as they saw fit.'

I listened to Catherine's woeful tale unfold, wondering where it would lead. Granny paused to regain her breath as I poured another tea from the prettily decorated pot.

'The problem was that Catherine was already in love with someone else. Granny didn't know his name – perhaps no one ever did. People noticed that Catherine was pregnant shortly after the wedding. Rumour was that it was too soon after the wedding for the child to be showing. Lord William was said to be a jealous man, who fiercely defended his property. Catherine was of course his property. When the baby was born early, not a full nine months after the wedding, the baby – a little girl – was born with a halo of blonde hair, whereas William's hair was as dark as the night. Servants whispered that Catherine's lover was fair like the baby, hair gold as ripened wheat. Lord William flew into a dark mood that stayed with him the rest of his days. Catherine and the baby never left their confinement, never made it to St Dunstable's for the churching, to give thanks, to be purified, following the birth. The family went into deep mourning. Lord William paid for the beautiful stained-glass window to be raised in the church as a sign of his love for Catherine, her beauty captured for ever in the glass. Catherine was buried in St Dunstable's, but the whereabouts of the baby was never known.'

'That is so sad, Granny.'

'Remember, it is just a tale from long ago. There may be no truth in it at all.'

I left Granny's with even more to ponder. That night, the air was still heavy, laden with the heat that had burdened the day. But a light breeze got up, stirring the air and I heard again the bells of St Wynstan's, marking the passing hours. So lovely, so lonely, the tolling of the bells.

I slept little that night. The heat weighed down, pressing me to the drenched cotton bed sheets, my mind in turmoil. This poor woman, poor Catherine, her smile captured forever in the glass image, yet her smile must have faltered at the death of baby. Had that innocent child died at Lord William's hand? Had this been the end that Catherine also met, killed by a jealous husband? Wrenched from her true love? What peace would she have? And then in my mind I walked again the church and its surrounds at St Dunstable's. Her grave and the small barely marked rectangle where surely her child must lie were close to the church under the opening where the stained-glass window would have been, where she would be close to her child, watching over her for eternity. Till they moved her to St Wynstan's, leaving that poor babe alone.

I formed a plan. I knew what to do. And sleep came to me for what was left of the night. With daylight breaking, streaking between low hanging clouds, I let myself into the coolness

of the garden. In Father's potting shed I found twine; in the hedge surrounding the garden, I searched until I found two branches which I fashioned into a cross, held together with tightly twisted twine. I would mark the baby's grave, but I did not know the baby's name. This seemed an important detail that needed to be there. Granny had not mentioned a name. Then it came to me - why had Catherine revealed herself to me? What was unique about me? Probably only my name – not Abby as I was fondly known I thought but my full name Abigail. I slowly painfully carved into the branch -Abigail, beloved daughter of Catherine.

As the sun rose higher in the noon time sky, I reached the churchyard at St Dunstable's, weaving through the kissing gate with an armful of wild flowers that I had gathered on the way – foxgloves, rosebay willow herb, hedge parsley. In my bag, I had the cross, a vase and a bottle of water. Checking that no one was watching, for I felt the need for secrecy, I drove the simple wooden cross into the earth at the head of the tiny grave, underneath the angel wings that spread over both Catherine and Abigail. I filled the vase with water and the mass of delicate wild blooms. I said a few words. I don't clearly remember what. What I remembered was the change in the air. It crackled and fizzed, shimmered around me. It felt alive. In the distance I heard the rumblings of thunder and seconds later I spotted the first over-sized drops of rain pattering on the floor. I had no coat so I gathered my bag and with a final farewell to Abigail, I headed home. The storm raged all day and by nightfall the skies were a joy to watch, streaks of lightning cutting through the darkness. The storm was right overhead, the roll of thunder continuous. Even I began to be scared. Was there to be no end to this storm? It was unnatural, as if beings greater than I were at work, shaping this world, reigning over it.

I watched from my window, flinching at the mighty claps of thunder that raged overhead. One last bolt of lightning headed straight to the ground and I heard noise that wasn't just thunder. It sounded like the earth had broken. The thunder drifted away, replaced by complete silence as the rain also ceased. I drifted into sleep.

Next morning, the news was of the lightning strike at St Wynstan's. The spire had received a direct hit and crumpled, falling to the ground. The beautiful stained -glass window lay in pieces on the rain sodden floor. I rushed to see this for myself, barely dressed, hair all awry. The church was scarce recognisable. My poor Catherine lay in pieces on the floor. I gazed distraught at the scattered remnants of glass. Then I realised. Catherine was no longer held captive here. She was free to go where she would. The fresh sun sparked on a piece of glass, red glinting, catching my eyes. I crept over to it, snatched it up so quickly that no one saw. Catherine's lips. Now shaped into a kiss. I secreted this small piece of precious glass in my pocket and left to walk in the now gentle sun and rain freshened air to St Dunstable's. To Abigail's little grave. I pushed the glass deep into the earth, a final kiss from mother to daughter that would last forever.

My eyes moistened. I left mother and child to their moment, stopping as I navigated the kissing gate to take one final look. Sun dried leaves danced in a sudden breeze that rose out of nowhere, dust twirling in the air. The breeze wrapped round my dress, caressed my cheek and I'm sure I heard, in its sighing, the words 'thank you.'

This Samhain Night

The Ford Fiesta pulled into the car park, its colour indefinable in the deepening twilight. The doors opened, spewing its contents onto the skittering gravel underfoot.

‘Come on Sarah, we need to get all this stuff out of the boot. The others are waiting.’

Two supermarket bags clinked heavily to the ground. Sarah pulled a swathe of material out of the boot, shaking it out and twirling it around her shoulders. Jade wrapped her matching cloak tight under her chin, to fend off the chill in the air. Taylor grabbed the plastic boxes and they set off into the shadows.

Beams of light lit the path for them.

‘Hi Kyle. Tom. You alright? And is that you Liam?’ Hugs all round, they walked into the tree line, branches obscuring the full moon, torches the only light.

‘We’ve been up to the circle already, set up the fire ready to go. You’ve remembered the candles and stuff haven’t you?’

‘Of course.’ Taylor shook her head in the dark.

‘And don’t worry,’ said Sarah. ‘I’ve got the cakes and ale.’

‘Lots of?’ Liam sounded hopeful.

Cloaks rustled the grass as they passed, snagged on twigs and brambles. The girls stumbled, giggling and cursing, the boys gallantly rescuing them.

‘What the?’ Kyle stopped.

‘What’s up?’ Tom stumbled against his back.

‘I can see fire.’

‘But we didn’t...’

‘Shush.’ They edged forward.

‘What’s the hold up?’

‘Quiet. There’s someone else here.’

Three women stood around the flames, their clothes seeming strange, even in the flickering light.

‘What are you doing here?’ Tom had found his assertiveness, as he realised that these were just young girls, no older than themselves.

‘We’re sorry, sir, if we have startled you. We are here to speak to our ancestors.’

‘Yeah, we’re here for our Samhain ritual as well.’

Taylor pushed to the front. ‘You’ve got a cheek, using our stuff, in our space.’

‘This clearing has been used for many years. The oak has long memories.’ The taller of the girls had her hands on the rough bark of the tree that marked the north of the clearing. Her head was pressed against its trunk. She beckoned to her companions. ‘Come, hark to the whispering of the old ones.’

‘Come on,’ said Jade. ‘I want to hear this.’ She moved to the tree, the light from the flames casting a sheen on her crushed velvet cloak. The girl moved aside, revealing a deep hollow in the tree. Pushing past the strange girl, Jade put her ear to the hole. She heard nothing. Neither did Taylor. Taylor made that circling motion against her temple. ‘Screw loose.’

‘Tell them to go, Tom.’

‘Well, it isn’t private property so I don’t think we can. And they’re only three girls. If they want to be here, what harm can it do?’

‘Yeah,’ said Liam. ‘The more the merrier. Merry meet and all that.’

‘What’re your names then?’

‘I’m Agnes. My sisters are Bridget and Sybil.’

‘I’m Tom. These are Kyle and Liam.’ Tom lifted his thumbs to point either side. He turned round towards where the girls had been, but they had moved away, into the shadows.

‘The girls are...’

‘It is of no matter.’

They both stood awkwardly, hearing the girls’ whispered words that carried in the laden air.

‘Did you hear those names? What were their parents thinking of?’ Taylor burst into laughter, loud, disturbing the night. Jade giggled, while Sarah turned away.

Tom added more wood to the fire, instructed Kyle to place the candles in the quarters. The old oak leaned its branches over as if seeking warmth to ease its aching bones, creaking as it swayed gently in the rising breeze. The flames flared high revealing clearly the people around the fire.

Taylor was now doubled over, scarcely able to contain her laughter. ‘Just look at their clothes. They look like something out of the middle ages. Probably smell like it as well. I reckon they’ve learned their witchcraft from watching old movies.’

‘Such wannabes.’ Jade giggled. Sarah stepped away.

‘Hey, come on you three, let’s get going. The wind is getting up and I’m sure I just heard thunder.’ Tom chivvied everyone into their places. Agnes took the besom from Tom’s hand.

‘Let me,’ she said. She swept the ground, muttering words under her breath that the others couldn’t hear, then laid the broom to one side.

Tom led everyone around the fire, walking at a steady pace, three times. Tom splashed water on the ground as he went. Sarah carried incense, using her hand to waft the rising scent further into the air. Kyle carried a candle, its small flame dwarfed by the fire, while Jade followed with salt, a fine sprinkle falling to the ground as she walked.

They called the quarters, arms raised to the sky, heads raised to the darkness above. The wind gusted, buffeting the oak’s resisting limbs, whipping the slender alder branches low to the ground.

‘Let’s raise a toast to the ancestors.’ Liam went to the outer edge of the circle, picked up a six pack of Carling, handing a can to each of his friends. Sarah took one, then passed it to the strange girls, to share. ‘What did you do that for?’ hissed Jade. ‘They should have brought their own, if they knew what they were doing.’

‘I don’t believe it.’ Liam and Kyle watched in amazement. ‘They don’t even know how to open it. What the hell’s wrong with them?’

Tom reached for the can, and opened it for them. ‘It’s alcohol, for the toast.’

Agnes stepped forward. ‘I will speak to the ancestors.’

‘You who have gone before, hear me.’

The wind abated, its roar simmering down to a hushed breath rustling the leaves.

‘Mother, you shared your wisdom, but we failed to heed your words. Father, you treated us as was our due. We felt wronged. We know that this world is no better than what we had before. We wish we could return to your bosom.’

Tears glistened in her eyes, reflecting flames.

Tom raised his can.

'To those who have gone before, to those have gone before them, we raise a toast in honour of your lives.'

The wind came crashing back, shaking the woodland. Thunder rolled across the sky.

'This is fantastic,' Tom shouted across the noise. 'Let's raise energy. This is powerful stuff tonight.'

They drew closer to the fire, starting a chant. The new girls didn't join in, but listened to the strange words. Together, they chanted words of their own, a rhythm that scarcely needed words. Tom and Sarah remembered from nowhere, joined in the chant. Taylor folded her arms, her head to one side. 'Damn cheek, coming here, taking over.' Jade nodded agreement. Liam and Kyle carried on drinking from their cans. Liam emptied his can and threw it on the ground.

Agnes glared at this disrespect, held her hands to her sisters. The three held hands, whispering words under their breath.

Lightning jagged across the sky; growling thunder became a continuous roll. The flames rose higher, higher, forcing them to step back from the scorching flames. New voices joined them. Sarah pointed to the oak tree – a light shimmered in the hollow in its side, where the voices dwelt.

An almighty crack. The clean crisp smell of a lightning strike. The old oak split down the centre, its aged branches crashing to the ground. Freed from its innards, misted moving lights surrounded the girls, hiding them from view.

Tom watched, stunned where he had been knocked to the ground by the force of the lightning strike. The lights faded back to darkness. The girls were gone.

'Is everyone OK? Did you see that?'

Sarah crawled to him, shaking, crying.

'Where are they Tom?'

'They just disappeared. The lights took them away.'

'Not the strange girls, Tom. Taylor, Jade, Liam, Kyle. They're gone.'

Tom sat up, checking for himself that they weren't there. Four large black crows sat on the warm dry earth around the fire, the flames now fading, almost extinguished.

'What's going on Sarah?'

Sarah stood, crept to the birds. They waited, still, as she approached. One bird cocked its head to one side, stared back at her.

'Taylor, is that you?'

The bird cawed, a raucous sound. The others joined in. The full moon shone brightly through the gap in the treetops left where the oak had crashed to the ground. Together the birds stretched their wings, silhouettes against the glowing moon as they flew to its light.

Retribution

It's 5.14am, that unearthly time of day when the world should still be sleeping but has one eye half open, wondering if it's time to wake. There is quiet in the stillness, quiet in the gentle breath of the breeze stirring the trees, whispering them awake. My room is still dark, but it's not the dark of night – something is stirring, movement, the slightest of sound, a buzz of wonderment.

I am here, in my bed, no longer asleep, nor even in that post sleep-pre-awake stage, when dreams no longer hold you fast, yet they have not fully released you to get on with the busyness of day. No, I am fully awake, alert, even given the unheard-of time on the small brass clock ticking my life away.

For I know that I am no longer alone in my room. How do I know this? It is too dark to see. There is no light on in the room, no gentle glow of a bedside lamp; there is no light through the still dark windows. There is no noise, no slight tread on the carpet, no hint of breathing lungs fervently seeking sustenance, but the air beats faster; it shimmers with vibration that starts with the new entity that now inhabits my room and keeps its butterfly movements racing in my direction till I feel the presence of someone – or is it something – in my space, unbidden.

Should I scream, shout for help? Who would hear me, who would reach me in time? For if this is a human entity, a murderer with intent to kill, he would have done so by now, and if he still intended to, he could do this before help arrives. The same if he were a rapist, with designs on my body. My parents, upstairs, are too deaf to hear me, too elderly to rush to my aid. As always, I am on my own, fate's late little gift to the parents which they didn't want nor need.

I listen, feel for the stranger in my room. I don't fear the presence, so I do not think this is someone real, a flesh and blood person, vigorous and alive. Now there is a thought to catch the breath, set the heart racing. If this intruder is not alive, that would suggest they are dead – or not dead, if they are in my room. What does it mean to be not alive and yet not dead? This intrigues me. I wish I knew how to communicate with the not dead. Can they hear, speak, as they would have done when alive? Or do they now speak direct to my mind, in mystic meanderings through the quivering air to my rapidly expanding understanding.

I make a pretence of moving, to let them know I am awake. I don't want to startle my not dead companion. I sigh, turn over, resettle the blankets round my chin. The room shimmers, sparks of light flashing in the dark. The not dead knows I am here. I slowly, nervously, pull myself to sitting, blankets clutched to my chin, my only protection.

'Hello,' I whisper. Feeble I know but what else do you say? I have little experience of speaking in profound. 'Can I help you?' Best to be polite. The air ripples round the room, then firms into an image. I no longer need light to see, for at my dressing table, I can, just barely, make out the image of a woman, not the man I had feared might be there. More precisely, this is a young woman, a little older than me, perhaps nineteen or twenty. Colours are dark, sombre, not really colours at all, just changes in their depth, creating shadows. Her hair is long, waved all the way down, a natural curl. It must have been brushed, burnished to a shine, as the shadows run up and down it highlighting every lock. Her face is turned away from me, so I can't see her features, her expression, whether she is angry, friendly, sad. She is fixed on my jewellery box, her head bent over the open lid, displaying the contents that with the slightest of lights would glimmer and spark sun spots in rainbows around my room. Next to the wooden box is the sepia photo of my beloved grandmother, on the dressing table where I kept it close to my other precious things.

'Do you like the pretty things? I love the rings, especially the latest one, my Granny Lilian's engagement ring.' Oh heavens, her head is turning; she looks at me. Her eyes are so hard, so angry, for the first time in this strange encounter, I am scared. She points a long dark finger at me, then beckons, summoning me to her side. I hesitate; there is no real alternative but to do as she bids. I do not want her in my bed if she should choose to come to me, and the only exit, the bedroom door, is next to my dressing table. I slide out of bed and slowly approach her, trying to calm my galloping heart.

I don't go too close but stand just out of arms reach. She points to the rings, neatly lined up in the little velvet channels holding them steady. She looks me in the eye, then points at my granny's ring, the one left to me in her will. A large diamond, set in gold, little lion claws capturing it, keeping it in place. It is showy, far too large to be practical to wear every day, at least not nowadays. She points again, traces her finger over the ring. I realise she can't physically touch it, hold it, try it on. I edge closer, feeling a chill as I near her cold skin. My heart slows down, beats in my throat. I hold my breath, take the ring from the wooden box, hold it out for her inspection. She looks at it, then gestures for me to put it on. I slip it over my knuckle, to settle it in place on my ring finger, where Granny proudly wore this beautiful but ostentatious display. The not dead eyes stare at the ring.

The darkness disappears, replaced by shining, dazzling light. I was lifted from my humble room and dropped into this spectacular ballroom, candle lit chandeliers, gold framed mirrors making the room larger, music playing enticingly in the background. I whirl around, unable to take in what is about me. Where am I? Would these beautiful people see me? Notice me in my white cotton nightdress? I find refuge in a wall at the side, by a large potted plant, and hide behind its cool darkness, peering through its leaves. I watch the dancers. One couple notches into my thoughts, evoking memories. I grasp at these, hold on to them. Granny! As a young girl, beautiful as she remained until she died. Is that Grandpa? I think it is. They look so happy, just right for each other - he tall and straight backed, arms wrapped protectively around her, laughing gently, staring fondly into her eyes, she with long dark hair, waving down her back, burnished to radiance, every curl highlighted.

I turn away. This isn't, couldn't be, Granny's ghost. This is Granny when she was vital and alive. Then I see her, my not dead companion, standing not far from me, against the wall. Her dress is as beautiful as Granny's, her hair the same glorious curls that anyone would be envious of. I walk towards her, the bright light revealing terrible scarring that covers the side of her face and her neck. I think it was from a burn, the tight skin shiny and taut in ridges.

She is staring at the couple on the dance floor, sadness enveloping her entire being. The look of longing, of love - that I know wasn't to be - is writ large on her face, for anyone to see who took time to look. But who could bear to look at this ravished face at all, let alone long enough to read the pain? She notices me, walks over, takes my hand. She caresses the engagement ring, then grasps it, removing it from my hand. She places it on her finger gently, wistfully easing it into place.

'It should have been me,' she whispers. 'It should always have been me.'

With a jerk, I am back in my bed as if I had fallen. Was this one of those unexplained falls that wake you in the night, your legs flailing and the bed bouncing but you were asleep? Was this a dream? My eyes wide open, I stare around my room. The light of the new day well awake shows that there is just me here. No one else. I climb out of bed, tripping on the blankets, stumbling to my jewellery box. Granny's ring is gone. Lying close by is a photo of Granny and another young woman, so alike they could be twins; underneath in faded newspaper print the headline:

'Mysterious fire in stables kills Emily Winter, fiancée of Julian Marshall.'

'It is not clear what Emily was doing in the stable on her own that night. It is thought that the fire may have been an arson attack but it is not known by whom, their motive nor how they gained entry. Emily's twin sister Lilian was the first on the scene and called the fire brigade. Lilian said her sister will be sorely missed. Our thoughts go out to the family.'

I gasp. I didn't know that Granny had a twin sister. I gaze at the frame containing her photo, my memories. As I run my fingers gently over her face, a beam of morning light lets itself in through the curtain, throwing Granny's familiar face into clear relief. No longer beautiful, but hideously scarred. It looks like a burn.

I feel weak, faint. Somehow Granny Lilian and her twin Emily have switched places. I don't understand. Does this mean that Granny died in the fire? My bedroom darkens- why? It should be full daylight by now. The air trembles, shivers, shimmers. I try to pick up the grainy image to read it again, to check I've got it right. I can't quite grasp it, my shaking fingers unable to take hold of the flimsy paper. 'Granny, what's happening?' I cry, reaching for her photo in vain. I hear movement in my bed - a girl sighs, turns over, pulls the blankets up to her chin.

'Hello,' she whispers. 'Can I help you?' At least this intruder is polite.

Realisation hits my tired, nerve wracked brain. My Granny didn't marry Grandpa, did she? Not anymore. So if they never married, who am I? With realisation comes turmoil, frustration growing steadily at the unfairness of it all. What did I do to deserve this? How could Emily do this to me? My anger intensifies, out of my control; the air is now racing, pulsing. I beckon the girl to come to me, this child who has replaced me, taken my so recently living body. Trusting, she comes to me...

Ashbury Manor

'A heart whose love is innocent'

Lord Byron

Ashbury Manor
Ashton
13th April 1887

Dearest sister

How I have wished to see you to tell of the sights I have seen, for I fear this will be a meagre missive – I have little time to call my own.

My journey to Ashbury manor was long and arduous, a full two days of travel. My head ached awfully from the sulphurous fumes emitted from the train, but which could well have been excreted from the pits of hell, although it was indeed exciting to leave the dreary bustle of the city and race through the increasing green of the countryside we seldom see. We disembarked the train at B..... where I took overnight accommodation in a clean, comfortable though barely respectable inn. The journey began again the next morning in bright sunshine which made even the small town we were leaving look quaint and cheerful.

Four horses, deep brown and sweating, stamping their feet and tossing their heads, pulled our carriage – though carriage is hardly the name for such an inglorious contraption. My bones shook and my teeth chattered for the interminable hours that slowly took me towards Ashbury Manor, my new home.

By mid-afternoon, the sun had withdrawn, hiding its face behind clouds. A chill permeated our carriage and my poor shawl did little to keep me warm. The clouds delivered their burden in a perfunctory manner, thoroughly wetting the brown earth, turning it to mud. At Ashton village, the carriage stopped. I alighted into dark, sodden air, clutching my valise with its scant contents. I tell you, my dear sister, I wished I was still at home, no matter how wretched our circumstances. As I sheltered by a wall, not knowing what to do next, a man approached me. In voice gruff, he asked if I were Miss Constance Noble, the new governess for Ashbury manor. I almost cried, I was so relieved, but I kept my dignity and replied with a steady voice that I was.

We continued our journey by small cart and single horse, a poor animal that looked fit for the knacker's yard. As darkness fell, there was a distant rumble of thunder. The horse startled but kept firm on its course. The storm intensified, shaking the earth with its growling rumbles, lightning scratching the sky. I caught glimpses of my surroundings in these flashes, sparse moorland, a stand of woodland.

With one almighty crack of thunder rippling the sky, the horse's fear outgrew his duty. He bolted, heading for safety. The sudden movement threw me from the cart, flying as if borne on the rolling sound till at last, I lay breathless, winded, on the ground. Another flash gave my first glimpse of Ashbury manor – a dark silhouette of a large building with many chimneys venting ridged rooves.

I believe I swooned.

Your loving sister Constance

'Miss Noble, Miss Noble, are you alright?'

Strong arms picked me up and I was swept indoors, to refuge from the rain, the cold, the fear. I was laid gently on a soft couch, a blanket placed over me.

'My dear Miss Noble, what a terrible welcome we have afforded you.'

A glass was proffered, my head gently raised so that I could drink. The liquid was golden and shone quietly in the light of the single candle. It smelled rich, a liquid unknown to me. I took a sip and my throat lurched at the assault, yet I welcomed the warmth that spread deep into my body.

'Forgive me Constance, if I may call you that. I am Henry, Lord Ashbury. If you are recovered from your fright, and largely unhurt as I believe to be the case, let me show you to your room, so that you may rest. My wife is unable to leave her bed to perform the role customarily expected from the mistress of the household, as I intimated in our correspondence regarding your employment.'

Lord Ashbury led me up a splendid, curved staircase to a room larger than any of the rooms at home but its condition little better. I thanked him for his concerns, closing the door, clumsily shedding my sodden dress. I crawled under the bedcovers and slept soundly till sunlight taunted my eyes, teasing me awake.

Ashbury Manor
Ashton
7th May 1887

Dearest sister

What demon provoked me to leave home, to render me weak and fearful with the strange and wayward occurrences of that first meeting with Lord Ashbury, Henry – a kinder and more gentle man than I have ever encountered, solicitous, tending to me himself, yet I acted as a slip of a girl, appearing churlish in my lack of polite speech to proffer thanks. Not an auspicious beginning.

The next day, feeling myself much better after sleep and breaking fast – an acceptable yet simple meal - Lord Ashbury sought me, enquiring if I had quite recovered and if I felt able to meet Lady Ashbury and the children who would be in my charge.

I will pause now and continue this missive after I have met with Lady Ashbury.

As Lord Ashbury opened the door, we were assailed by a gust of heat with rushed past to dissipate in the cold air of the corridors, making little impact on the habitual chill. The room was gloomy; heavy, once grand brocade curtains were drawn to exclude any chance of daylight, save a scattering of sunspots where the material was damaged - by age or moths it was difficult to tell. I could scarce see my way.

'Miss Noble.'

I turned to the voice, so feeble it could only be that of an invalid. A pale face with a halo of palest yellow hair faded into the white pillow case.

'Lady Ashbury.' I attempted a slight curtsey, not sure of the appropriate etiquette. She smiled, her face changing as her eyes opened wide to reveal deep blue pools of warmth.

'I must apologise for not rising from my bed to greet you. I have been unwell for some years, since the birth and demise of my last precious child. Day by day, I feel my lifeforce ebbing. I am no longer able to tend to the children in a way that befits them.' She paused, her breath laboured, as if the effort of speaking exhausted her.

'I have high hopes,' she continued. 'Your references are most assuring of your selfless and caring nature which will be beneficial to my poor darling children, to stand in place of a mother's care.' At this, tears slipped from her tender eyes, now receding behind lids that hid her pain.

'I will do my utmost, Lady Ashbury,' I almost whispered as Lord Ashbury took my elbow and ushered me from that sad room.

'As you see from the evidence presented by your very own eyes Miss Noble, Lady Ashbury is ailing. I fear that she has little time left on this earth before she departs to joyous life in our Maker's care. My children are as good as motherless. They are grown sad and a little wild, for as you can see this manor is sadly neglected – I am ashamed to confess for want of finance – and the servants that I have procured are but rough country girls. Your uncle spoke highly of you and I hope strongly that you will be exceptional in your role of governess and more so, that you will in some way provide the tenderness that their mother can no longer impart.'

Again, I did not know how to respond. What words, dear reader, can one say to assuage the grief that besets this kindly man?

'sir, I will do my best' had to suffice, for once more I was filled with tears in Lord Ashbury's presence.

7th May cont.

The children, dearest sister, how can I describe them? All different in temperament and looks, apart from the shade of yellow hair gifted to them by their mother. Cecily, the youngest, just four years of age is precocious, knowing beyond her years with sweet blue eyes and a mass of golden curls. She uses her angelic looks and charming smile to get her own way, not beyond resorting to piercing screams if sweetness alone fails.

Victoria is six. Quiet and reserved, a pretty child in her own way. She is distrustful and has a natural reticence. The two older children, John and Alexine, ten and eight, are altogether different. They are truculent, insolence showing on their faces and on occasion escaping through their words. I sense that I will have a challenging time from these two. I must remind myself that these poor children lack a mother's care even though she is still with us but barely.

There is a cook and one girl who appears to undertake all other tasks, including care of the children. I would hazard that she is unable to execute any of her allotted tasks to an appropriate standard. The girl – by the name of Mercy – showed me to the rooms occupied by the children. The bedroom held four single beds in a neat row against the wall. The counterpanes were thin, faded and I doubted they could provide much warmth. There is adjacent a small pantry where meals are served direct from the kitchen through an ingenious contraption, a concoction of pulleys and ropes. Next, a larger room with narrow windows let into the stonework, scattered with the detritus of childhood. I looked through a window at the path where the horse had toppled me from the cart. The gardens to the front of the house are well laid out but overgrown, uncared for, as is the house itself. It becomes obvious that Lord Ashbury did not lie when he confessed his lack of finance.

Your loving sister Constance

As I gazed on the wooded path to the house, wondering how far from the village I was and whether I could walk there for a change of vista, a smart carriage fronted by a beautiful black horse pulled up on the weed-scattered gravel drive. Both driver and coachman were wearing smart, dark livery. I wondered who could be calling on Lord Ashbury. My question was answered when the coachman opened the carriage door and a tall, impressive woman stepped confidently from the coach, stopping momentarily to ensure that the material of her voluminous skirt lay smooth and unruffled. Her black hair fell in ringlets about her heart shaped face, sun light showing its gloss, sparking off a magnificent jewel that lay on her bosom. Lord Ashbury himself came to greet her, taking her arm and leading her to the house. My curiosity was piqued – this bright smiling woman seemed out of place in this sad, tired house. I sought a mission which would justify my leaving the nursery, deciding to go to the kitchen to discuss the children's luncheon requirements. Ensuring my charges were occupied, I quietly made my way down the curving staircase, lingering to watch Lord Ashbury shepherd his handsome guest into the seldom used drawing room. Her tinkling laugh rippled through the gloomy air that lay draped across Ashbury manor like heavy autumn fog.

My discussion with cook soon over, I commenced my return journey, pausing by the drawing room's open door to peruse a painting of Ashbury manor that conveniently hung there. The house in this painting bore little resemblance to the house I knew, well cared for, no signs of neglect. My listening ears caught words softly spoken, of marriage, of a magnificent wedding. I could scarcely believe mine own ears. I felt a flush on my face, a burning starting in my heart and spreading throughout. I abandoned the picture and fled for the stairs, not caring for discretion, nor who knew I was there.

'Constance, is that you?'

I pretended not to hear Lord Ashbury's query, for fear he would call me back, demand to know why I was at this door and not in the nursery with my charges. I doubted that I could utter the simple explanation that I had planned in case of just such an exigency. I was aware of his eyes on my fleeing figure, but he did not speak again. As I reached the top of the staircase, I heard the drawing room door firmly close.

Ashbury Manor
Ashton
9th August 19887

My dearest sister

I wish I could speak to you, that you could put your arm around me, help me bear the disquiet that I am feeling at my discovery. I believe that Lord Ashbury is planning to marry Miss Denning. That may not be a terrible choice but to be planning that marriage while his poor wife is still alive, slowly inching towards death. How can he be so ill-feeling? I thought he loved her dearly. In all his dealings with her, I have detected no irritation or a wish her death would hasten, only love and fondness. How can he be capable of such deception? How could I be so deceived? Alas, I have little experience of life and the ways of gentlemen. How can you be sure of anyone? How do you know whom you can trust?

Your loving sister Constance

Rain fell gently from the skies as tears fell from the eyes of mourners gathered in the small churchyard. Lady Ashbury's coffin was lowered into the damp ground as the vicar intoned the service in his deep sepulchral tones, familiar words reminding us of our own mortality, the end that as good Christians we should be prepared and joyfully waiting for. Miss Denning stood shamelessly at Lord Ashbury's side, her head held high, her back straight, standing upright and above the sunken heads of other mourners, who bowed their heads in grief. I was glad that the decision had been made to leave the children in the nursery with Mercy. This would have been too much sadness for those of such tender age to bear.

A disturbance broke the peace of the ceremony, cries getting closer, becoming louder until I recognised with horror the children's voices, calling for their mother. Behind them, Mercy's panicked tones had no effect in stopping their race to the gate.

No one moved to stop them, so shocked were we all by the spectacle before us. The girls ran to the grave, threw themselves on the earth banked around the open pit. Pitiful wails 'Mother, Mother, don't leave us' tore through my heart. John stopped in front of his father, raised his solemn, angry eyes.

'How could you do this to us Father? Keep us away, denying us the chance to say goodbye?' His voice was firm as was his posture, a glimpse of the man he would become.

'Constance,' came Miss Denning's stern voice. 'Your charges.'

I recollect my senses, lifted the girls from the grave, their pretty dresses now bespoiled with mud, wrapped my arms round all three as best I could and led them from the churchyard, sobbing myself as were they. John followed our sad parade of the motherless back to the nursery. Henry's eyes briefly sought mine, reflecting my sadness.

Ashbury Manor
Ashton
3rd January 1888

My dearest sister

I hate to tell you that Miss Denning was furious. She made it clear that she held me responsible for what she considered the humiliation at the funeral. Far from being concerned for the children, she felt they were an embarrassment, out of control and in need of strict discipline to curb their excesses. They had shown desired respect to neither their father nor herself.

As immediate punishment, they are confined to the nursery and no longer allowed to join their father in the dining room on an evening, as was his wont before dinner, to spend an hour in their company before they returned to their separate meal in the nursery. My heart feels for the children. Not only have they lost their mother, they have also lost their father, even though this is temporary, till they have 'learned their lesson.'

The two little girls cling to me, in need of continual reassurance that at least one person loves them. The older two are difficult to manage; they refuse to comply with the simplest request. Alexine throws things around the nursery in terrible fits of rage. John holds his own counsel; he will not engage in study or any worthy activity. My life is currently difficult, made more so by my certainty that I am unfit to claim the title governess. How can I, when I am not able to comfort nor control my charges? I feel at a low ebb; my days often end in tears of my own.

Your loving sister Constance

The wedding took place not four weeks after the funeral. As we waited outside the country church with its steeple and arched windows, fading flowers were still visible on Lady Ashbury's mound. Miss Denning had decreed that the children were not to be allowed to the ceremony, to prevent disruption, and, to ensure they could not escape as last time, the nursery was locked, the key in her pocket.

The ceremony was deceptively simple. Miss Denning's dress although maidenly in form was exquisitely decorated with myriad crystals, reflecting everchanging colours as light shone through the stained-glass window. Flowers decorated every pew, white roses and lilies with green ivy falling to the floor. It was the first time I had seen Lord Ashbury clearly since his wife's demise. He looked drawn, bleak, quite unlike a new husband should be. No pleasure lifted his face as he watched his intended walk proudly down the aisle. Although I was still cross with him for his treatment of his poor beloved wife, I felt sorrow for him. Something had persuaded him to this marriage which carried greater import than his lonely heart.

The people in attendance to celebrate this wedding numbered far more than those at the earlier funeral. I observed as well as I could without appearing to be too inquisitive, above my station. I listened for names as I circled discreetly through the gathered throng. Mr Denning – not a lord but a business man of standing – was broad and portly, his weight accentuated by a fine coat trimmed with fur. Mrs Denning was clad in an elegant dress topped with an extensive hat which framed her carefully coiffured hair. The conversation was of cotton and coal, of trade, of railways and steam ships. These were people who brought money, work and life to the region, whose fortunes were on the rise, not slipping away like Lord Ashbury's. A thought wormed its way into my brain, wriggled backwards and forwards. I let it lie there, collecting what scraps of information I could to feed it.

Ashbury Manor

Ashton

17th January 1888

Dearest sister

The situation grows worse by the day, by the hour, by the minute. Lord Ashbury had stipulated that the children could attend the celebrations back at the house if they promised to behave accordingly, to be a credit to their upbringing and station. Additional servants had been brought in from the local village. The rooms of Ashbury Manor had been cleaned till they sparkled, detracting attention from the forlorn shabbiness. Warm aromas of delicious foods cooking had spread round the empty rooms for days, making our stomachs rumble and mouths water in anticipation. The day arrived and the girls were dressed in little frocks newly made for the occasion. Their hair was brushed to spun gold. John looked grown up in his new suit. Their behaviour had improved of late and I was optimistic that the evening would pass well enough. They would only be with the guests for a short while, to meet their new Grandpapa and Grandmamma.

I had been terribly wrong in my assumptions, forgetting the children had scarcely seen their father since the funeral. I ushered them into the ballroom, glittering with candles, and presented them to their father and their new step mamma.

'Dear children,' said Lord Ashbury. 'I am pleased to see you looking so angelic and well behaved, and you John, quite grown up. I think it would be a good time for you to embrace your new mamma, welcome her to our family, as becomes good obedient children.'

I watched their little faces struggle, horror clear in their eyes as they realised that their beautiful, adored mother was not only gone but to be replaced by this woman who meant nothing to them, who treated them harshly, taking their father for herself. The little girls in chorus started to cry, their squeals increasing in volume.

'We do not want a new mamma,' stated Alexine. 'We wish for our real mother.'

'Really, Father?' asked John. 'Our mother scarcely gone, and you have already replaced her.'

'Miss Noble,' said the new Lady Ashbury. 'Remove these ungracious children immediately. They are to remain in the nursery. I will deal with them later.'

I saw the restrained rage in her eyes, the controlled anger in her breathing. I feared for the children so removed them immediately. I coached them to be apologetic when their step mamma came to see them, told them to accept whatever punishment she meted with humility. We waited as if under a storm cloud, the flash of lightning expected at any moment.

Your loving sister, fearful Constance

Miss Denning – I cannot get used to calling her Lady Ashbury, that title belongs to the kindly woman who bore these children – did not come to the nursery that night, nor indeed for several days. I began to think that she accepted the children's behaviour as a natural response to the strange situation and, forgiving them, had decided to let the moment pass unmarked. I was wrong. Dear reader, the most unexpected horrific spectacle was to take place. I took the children for their daily walk in the grounds, to take fresh air and exercise. The wind was brisk, and we walked quickly to keep heated, the little girls' pale cheeks reddening in the cold.

When we returned to the manor, a carriage was waiting as coachmen loaded trunks and baggage aboard. I dared to ask the coachman what was occurring.

'The Master and Lady Ashbury are preparing to leave on their honeymoon, a four-week tour of Europe,' was the response. At least I thought, the children could rest easy without fear of their stepmother's reprisal.

We returned to the nursery. The door was open, Miss Denning's tall imposing figure blocking light from the window. I walked apprehensively through the door, holding the little girls' hands. We approached Miss Denning and waited for her to speak.

'I am disappointed in you,' she said to the children. 'I came here expecting to be able to provide a mother's love to you and look how you have treated me. You are ungrateful and uncontrollable. You are to be taught a lesson you will never forget. You will remain in the nursery until I return. The door will be kept locked.'

The children's eyes widened as they heard their punishment. This would be constricting but bearable, I believed.

'You, Constance, will remain with them. The children cannot be held entirely at fault. If you were competent at your task as governess, the children would not behave in such an appalling fashion. Perhaps you too will benefit from the experience.'

I gasped. I was to be held prisoner. I ran for the door, not realising that she had already locked it. It rattled at my frantic attempts to open it. She laughed at my impotence.

'And children,' she said, her voice now icy cold, her eyes glittering with vengeance, 'as you miss your mother so much, I have a gift for you.'

At that she pulled back a coverlet that had shielded from view whatever was on the chaise longue. I screamed as the image burned into my brain, a picture I will never be able to erase from my mind. I still see it now in my dreams for, dear reader, resting on that familiar piece of furniture was Lady Ashbury.

I turned my face, wiped my eyes with my shaking hand, hoping that I had misinterpreted the scene before me in my agitation. I looked again. The face was scarce recognisable, pitted and misshapen with degradation from the weeks that she had been in her casket safely interred in the ground. Her eyes were thankfully closed – I suspect at the hands of the funeral attendants. Skin shrank away from the mouth to reveal teeth unnaturally large. It would have been difficult to tell this poor form before us as lady Ashbury apart from the pale blonde hair confirming her identity. A counterpane was pulled up to her chin so that only her halo of hair and face were visible. The smell of death, of putrefaction, emanated from her decomposing body, causing me to cover my nose.

Miss Denning had gone, fled the scene she had created, securing the door behind her. As I struggled to regain my senses, I looked at the children. There was no fear but fascination; they stared at the face before them. Alexine approached and gently stroked the hair which was still long and smooth. The little ones began a song, a lullaby they had learned from their mother which they now returned to her, to soothe her.

Aghast and perturbed myself, I did not know which was more disturbing – the dead woman in the nursery or the children's calm acceptance of her. With no chance of escape through the strong door, I chose to learn from the children and calmed my quivering heart.

I knew that there would be no way out till Miss Denning and Lord Ashbury returned from their tour of Europe. Cook and Mercy would be under strict instructions not to contact us. I doubted that they were aware of the full circumstances and so would follow their orders under whatever threat they had received.

I knew that I had no alternative but to continue with our normal routine, learning English and mathematics, sewing for the girls, drawing, a little geography. For leisure, I told them stories, fairy tales – I confess to favouring those that told of wicked step-mothers who met their comeuppance. And each day the children sang to mother, told her of the things they had learned, watching the changes in her features with interest rather than fear. Not familiar with the decomposition of bodies, I failed to understand the significance of the growth of her hair. It grew quickly, gloriously, and curled around her face, masking the decaying skin, holding back the stench of decay. I assumed this must be a natural occurrence.

At last, we heard the wheels of a carriage approaching. From the window, I saw Lord Ashbury jump out and storm into the house. I heard raised voices; he was angry. I recognised the voices of cook and Mercy responding, but I couldn't make out the words. Heavy footsteps sounded on the curved stairs, followed by lighter steps. I heard Lord Ashbury's furious shouting, Miss Denning's lost confidence revealed in her wavering voice. The key turned in the lock. Lord Ashbury rushed in, grasped his children to him, hugged them as if his heart would break.

I watched his eyes rise up to catch sight of his wife's shrinking form, surrounded by golden tresses. He released his hold on the children; I gathered them in my arms.

'My love, my love,' he said tenderly to his deceased wife. I could see him torn between horror and pure love. Now on his knees before her, he smoothed her hair, ran his fingers through the locks that were longer and thicker than they had ever been in life. I saw his body convulse as grief took him. I rushed to him, placed my hands on his shaking shoulders to offer comfort. 'Henry,' I began but did not know what to say. He turned to me, wrapped his arms round my waist and sobbed as I ran my fingers through his hair, held him tight to me.

Ashbury Manor
Ashton
7th March 1888

Dearest sister

I don't know how I can tell you the last of this story. It grieves me sorely to share what many people would believe could only be a figment of my imagination. There was a rush of air, the covers around Lady Ashbury moved as if alive, or as if moved by someone living beneath them. I felt this shimmering gust of air rush past us, through the door, to the landing at the top of the stairs, the great curved stairs that swept down to the ground floor.

'No,' said Miss Denning. 'No, please, leave me alone.' Surprise, then terror, was evident in her voice, no doubt as she realised that the strength of a mother's love could survive the grave.

I heard Miss Denning scream as she fell at great speed from the top to the bottom of the staircase. The scream terminated in horrifying silence as her head cracked on the marble floor. I swooned; the incident too bizarre, too overwhelming to comprehend.

Henry caught me; I found myself once again in his arms.

'I'm so sorry Constance. This should never have happened. I should not have let myself be entrapped by the lure of money to maintain this old house, to return it to its former glory.'

Which Miss Denning's father would provide in return for a title for his daughter. My suspicions were correct; this had not been a marriage of affection but an arrangement, a transaction, not a love match.

His arms remained around me, my dear sister, making my heart beat faster than I thought possible. The children joined us, little hands holding mine, John's hand on my shoulder.

I believe in my heart that this strange event was a 'putting-right' by a force greater than I can comprehend, a blessing from a loving wife and mother to a future wife and mother. I hope fervently that time will prove me right.

Your loving sister, joyful Constance

We can make our lives sublime
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time'
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow