

1 - SIR JAMES'S STORY

Beginnings

I grew up motherless. That isn't to say my mother was dead. 'Conspicuous by her absence' was the phrase I heard my father use as I listened at keyholes in hope of answers. Theirs was a lengthy marriage. The fact that she chose to take no part in it didn't detract from his sense that she was his wife. Yes, he had frequent lady friends, perfumed, interchangeable. None replaced her. My mother remained the love of his life - except, that is, for racing cars, an open stretch of road and, of course, the lure of speed.

I couldn't help but feel I must have done something terrible to cause her to go, but my father frequently assured, "You were hardly capable of anything more ghastly than crying too loudly. Or too often. No, it was me your mother left." But he failed to provide an adequate explanation of his crime, claiming to have bought her the best money could buy, even allowing her to pursue her career - against his better judgement. What *was* I to think?

"Think of the boy!" I shrank into my seat at the sound of my grandfather's bullish proclamation over the cut-glass and cruets. "I can't understand why you don't divorce her."

My father slowly applied a napkin to one corner of his mouth. His response was measured, dry: "I wouldn't expect you to."

"Frankly, I never understood why you had to marry her in the first place!" Never one to waste time listening to the other side of an argument, the older man forked food into his mouth as if his was the last word.

"I know you'd have preferred me to throw in the towel with some obedient little debutante, but," and here my father turned his focus to me, exaggerating the width of his cow-brown eyes, "your mother *was* exciting. And very beautiful."

My grandfather inhaled his Claret, spluttering, "*Excitement!* That's not what one looks for in a wife!"

"*Til death us do part* was the promise I made. And I haven't managed to kill myself yet."

"Despite your confounded tomfoolery! Look here, in my day a man would have taken a woman like her -"

My father coughed a loud protest.

"Do you dare censor me? One can only hope," my grandfather's eyes singled me out, flashing terror into my soul, "young James here will learn from your mistakes!"

"Son." I found my hair being ruffled, my father's voice assuring, "Don't listen to anyone who tells you it's a mistake to marry for love."

"Oh, come *on!* What utter rot!" The table shook as my grandfather's glass crash-landed, the stem snapping under the weight of his forearm, adamant that it was my father, and not he, who was responsible for the wreckage Mrs Strachan fussed over.

Is it possible to miss someone of whom one has no memory? No, I missed the *idea* of her. Like the Rome I learned of in Ancient History lessons, a mother was an idea in the minds of men. Sometimes differing substantially from the reality.

From the age of eight, I boarded. Once I overcame the anxiety of separation, this masked the situation. Increasingly, as I grew older, it was an annoyance that school was interrupted by holidays rather than the other way round. It was then that a mother's absence became most apparent. My father - who, in many ways, remained a boy himself - cut a dashing figure as he picked me up at the end of term in whatever incarnation of a prototype he'd been working on, all leather-coated, moustache and goggles, revved up for the next event on the calendar. Never a moment to lose, we rushed from the *London to Gloucester Trial* to Brooklands for the *Round the Mountain Race Meeting*. While he denied himself pause for thought, I pondered that perhaps a woman as exciting as my mother might have enjoyed our escapades.

I met her once when I was about ten. Only the once.

My father and I were visiting Brighton for the annual speed trials that took place along a mile of arrow-straight road when he caught sight of an advertisement for a photography exhibition.

“Well now!” The name on the awnings wasn’t one I recognised. Grabbing hold of my upper arm, he raised his free hand to halt the traffic. “This looks like fun, James. What do you say?”

“But you said we were going to have -” I was not expected to say anything, that much was apparent. The harshness of his glare retracted the promise of ice cream.

We shuffled as part of a compacted crowd from one black and white memory to another. And there she was: another exhibit to be admired from a carefully roped-off distance. Weightless coral chiffon, skin like cream, bobbed hair the colour of autumn.

“Why, Kingdom!” She appeared animated, but I was bored by the affectations women made for my father’s benefit. They talked their various ways into his drawing room to see for themselves the lie of the land - the habitat of this almost-available and most amusing of men - only to find the errant son lingering in the doorway, seen but not heard; forever eavesdropping. “You should have warned me...”

“*Why, Kingdom!*” I was exaggerating her voice inside my head. “*You should have -*”

Pushed in front, my father’s hands clamped tightly on my shoulders, I shrank as every vertebra in my back was compressed. “Son.” He cleared his throat: three noisy syllables. “This is your mother.”

There had been no warning. I had prayed for this moment, but now it had arrived my jaw dropped, my throat constricted.

She exhaled my name - “James?” - as though it were part of her she couldn’t bear to be parted with.

I swallowed hard, looking from this woman, a tableau not unlike one of her own photographs, to my father’s face, uncertain how he expected me to react. “I - I don’t recognise her.”

“No.” His grip relaxed, knuckles cracking in my ears. “Not your fault. No reason you should.”

The shudder of the woman’s breath was audible. Her pale blue eyes pooled. I watched her lips tremble, before she covered them with a slender-fingered hand. Everything else was utterly still, the moment suspended.

“Move along!” As an attendant’s shout broke the spell the shuffling recommenced, carrying us in its wake. I wasn’t ready, still trying to absorb that *this woman was my mother*.

Desperate for another glimpse, I rotated my neck like an owl. She was on tiptoes, straining to make herself seen above heads and hats, between shoulders.

“James!” I heard her call above the steady murmur, slightly louder now. “James!” Not the voice of someone who would abandon me, but increasingly desperate.

Holding on to a brass post for support, I leant out across the thick twist of rope. “Mother? *Mother!*”

Seeing me, her expression of panic softened. She smiled, pressed two fingers to her lips and then turned the fingers towards me, rippling. I blinked hard, capturing the gesture: her fingers, lips, the wave.

Two shrill blasts of a whistle cut through the echoing space. “Back, please! Stand well back!” But it was my father’s hand that grabbed my collar. Reluctantly releasing my grip on the brass post, I was air-lifted back among the crush, watching my damp fingerprints evaporate.

“I’m sorry, Sir.” Shame-faced, I bowed my head, anticipating punishment. “I only wanted -”

“Son! I thought I’d lost you.”

My head swivelled back in the direction we had come from. “Can we - ?”

“Perhaps next time.” His hands were already steering me into the flow. So there was to be a *next time*. “She hasn’t been taking proper care of herself. Very drawn, don’t you think?”

The room was overbearing; the high ceilings gave the sensation that the walls were closing in; the general murmur became an elevated din.

“I don’t know.”

Shuffling people, jostling for position, crushed in from all angles.

“What’s that you say? Speak up!”

My toes treading on the heels of the shoes in front, my nose pressed flat against the coarse tweed of a jacket, the terrible weight of my father's hands, and to see what? Pictures of boring old things. There is no place for nostalgia in a boy's vocabulary.

"Can we go now, Sir?"

"Yes, let's. It's stifling in here. Coming through!" My father began to hack his way through the jungle of legs, setting free a blizzard of excuses, issuing me with instructions that were impossible to follow. Pushed, stretched and stumbling, I was manhandled into a marble clearing. We navigated the echoing corridors, guided to the exit by a misshapen rectangle of daylight, cut with a bold-shaped shadow.

Framed in the doorway stood a grey-haired soldier with loose red skin around one eye that looked like a turkey's wattle, and whose left trouser-leg was tucked under at the point where his knee should have been. An image far more striking than any I had seen that day, both repulsive and fascinating. I was unable to tear my eyes away. My father executed a neat little jig, but the man stepped forwards. "Kingdom." He planted his crudely-fashioned crutch firmly. "I'm glad you felt you could come."

"Well, look who it isn't!" Puppy-like in his enthusiasm, whatever followed would be a lie. The tone was one my father reserved for people he'd been trying to ignore. "Didn't see you there. We're just popping out for some air. The boy's feeling faint."

"I'm doing the same myself. Not my thing, crowds. We only expected half this number. Still," the man inhaled on a cigarette, "shouldn't grumble. We stand a fair chance of turning a profit."

"Well -" My father nodded, taking a sideways step.

The soldier seemed unprepared to let him escape so lightly. "Down for the speed trials?"

"That's right. Fine venue, Brighton."

"And don't tell me. You must be young James!" The soldier smiled down at my drop-jawed recoil, but I was surprised to find a hint of nervousness reflected in his rheumy eyes.

"Yes, this is my son." My father held me back protectively.

"You must be very proud of him." Whatever the man had seen to make my father proud wasn't clear to me: I was distinctly average in everything from hair colour to ability on the cricket pitch. "Did Lottie...?" He nodded rapidly, looking away and scratching one side of his face.

"Briefly." Whatever this single word conveyed, it drew the man's gaze. My father and the crippled man locked eyes, what passed between them remaining concealed. Shielding my own, I looked out of the arched porch: the onion-topped domes of the Royal Pavilion glowed brilliant white against the violent blue of the sky; gulls' silhouettes circled and looped.

"Like to swim, young man?"

I twisted back, surprised that the soldier was addressing me directly. He stood erect, a hint of the military man he had once been.

"Yes, Sir."

"You should ask your father to take you to Saltdean. The new lido's jolly good. Of course, I can only go round in circles." He noticed me staring at his limp trouser-leg, and saluted: not the response I expected. "Don't look so worried. I didn't let them get my favourite one."

He appeared to be keen for me to laugh, but it seemed impolite somehow, and so I stood stupidly, my mouth twitching.

"Anyway, we really must be getting along." Stepping into the soldier's shadow, Father squeezed his arm. "Glad to see you looking so well. Come along, James."

"Who was that?" I ran to catch up with my father who was striding off down the sun-bleached pavement. Our shadows stretched long and thin, all the way to the street corner.

"Just an old Tommy your mother's taken under her wing." He looked left and right distractedly at the junction, seeming to have forgotten what was next on the agenda. "Good sort, your mother."

I remembered her eyes, her hair, her gasp, and wondered what it would take before she decided to take me under her delicate chiffon wing. Not the loss of half a leg, I hoped.