

## CODA

The envelope contains two letters. Lesley unfolds the first, official and typewritten.

Dear Miss Bell

Our records show that in 1951 you consented to the legal adoption of your new-born daughter through this agency. New adoption legislation now makes it possible for adult adoptees to trace their birth parents, and your birth daughter, Joanne, has contacted us to this end.

We have enclosed a letter from Joanne...

She had known, of course. Before she had even opened it, she had sensed that an unraveling was about to begin. She props the envelope centre stage on the mantelpiece, the second letter unread.

Fiona's plump fingers navigate a run of complicated semi quavers in a style which might kindly be called *reasonably allegro*. Miss Bell nods, tap-tapping her pen against the piano's rosewood veneer at the pace Clementi had intended. The late autumn light is dwindling. By the time the lesson is over, Fiona's score has turned from warm cream to ash-smudged grey, and Miss Bell is obliged to switch on the passage light as she shows her out. At the doorstep, in a fine drizzle, she nods briefly to the girl's father, patient behind the steering wheel of his van. "See you next week Fiona. Don't forget those chromatic scales, now."

Miss Bell has a fondness for chromatic scales. If the truth be known, she makes her students practice them more often than is strictly necessary. The dissonance of sharps and flats both disturbs and satisfies in a way she is reluctant to describe. White key, black key, harmony, discord, promise, pain.

They are tailing off, she thinks, her students. Too many sons and daughters going away to university. Discovering the limitless world of public transport, if not the imagination. Some will return, of course, when they've lived enough to know that life is just life, whatever the view from the window. So very few children though. Only last month Mrs Elliot was telling her the school roll was down to twelve this term. Lucky to have two of them, she supposes.

Twenty nine years ago, not quite 16, Miss Bell had been the first to leave in peace time, a scholarship to the Royal College of Music like a ticket to the moon neatly folded in

her only handbag and her mother's *your father would be very proud* playing in her ears. Less than five years later they all watched her silent, inexplicable return with a mixture of sympathy and disdain. Tall, tight-lipped and no better than herself, Lesley McKenzie Bell clawed her way back to the beginning and stepped straight into the warm space her mother had left. Back to Post Cottage, its purpose in life now removed to Pamela Duncan's flat-roofed extension a mile up the road. Back to a thousand rainy Sunday memories of church and piano practice, *Jesus Loves Me* and *Fur Elise* incessantly contrapuntal.

Today is the third Wednesday in the month, which means the Women's Rural Institute, preceded by an early bath and a light tea of drop scones and damson jam. Perhaps some cheese. This month's competition is a self portrait. Any medium. She has found it difficult. In a moment of wry humour she has fleetingly considered playing a chromatic scale, but knows it would fall flat on everyone except Edith Walker. God forbid a reawakening of that woman's curiosity. In any case, the village hall piano wouldn't do it justice. She really must press them to have it tuned more accurately. Again with humour, a blank canvas. But where would she get a real artist's canvas? She has spent hours studying herself in the bedroom mirror, pencil in hand, drawing pad balanced precariously on her lap. There are one or two reasonable sketches she is pleased with. They are adequate, like young Fiona's piano playing, but nothing special, nothing truly *her*. She wonders how many of the others have agonised over this month's entry. How many have even attempted it? It is, after all, just a small extra in the evening's proceedings, a bit of fun at the periphery of the main attraction. Tonight, if she remembers correctly, there is a slide show and talk from the editor of the *Advertiser*. His pet subject, The Ancient Egyptians.

Lesley bathes in extravagant bubbles, courtesy of Gilchrist & Soame. The remains of a Christmas indulgence. She runs a chamomile-infused flannel along her legs. Leans forward to the tap end to gather the bubbles in her arms and spread them evenly across her body. Sinks down into the bath's full bowl so that only her eyes and nostrils remain above water. Jeremy. She can smell his skin even now, years later. Soap and sex. Kisses teasing in an exquisite repetition of advance and retreat, the denouement simply another beginning on another, higher plane. Unbuttoning her. Too easily. The only period in her life she has been greedy. After the first time, in an apartment he had access to near the College, she had held her hands in front of her face, her slender fingers stretched out like golden starfish in the afternoon sun, and understood for the first time that they were attached to her body.

She dresses in the dark, an old 78 of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faun* scratching on the radiogram. She knows time and memory have altered the reality of him. He has grown, like one of Douglas Carter's tall stories. She knows this. But still.

She puts her sketch book under her arm, gloves in one hand, keys and handbag in the other. At the car, she changes her mind at the last minute and walks down the side of the house to the back garden. The rain has stopped and the moon casts blue shadows everywhere. The fingers of her gloves reach out dramatically to the far end of the fence

before curling back into themselves near the rose bushes. She bends down and picks a few *Honesty* seed pods, a handful of paper-thin silver translucence, and returns to the car.

On arrival, she overhears Jennifer Hislop's whisper - "Oh dear, Lesley thinks it's flower arranging. Shall we tell her?" – and briskly puts a stop to it.

"Hello Jennifer, where do you want my self portrait? I'm afraid you'll have to forgive me for some artistic license with your 'any medium' rule." She smiles and holds up the bundle of *Honesty*.

"What do you think?"

Jennifer Hislop stares. There are few gardens in Garradale that don't have *Lunaria annua*. Two Pennies in a Purse her mother used to call it. The tall dry autumn stalks are topped with transparent oval heads, strangely ethereal, each with a few dark seeds visible within. She puts her hand on Lesley's shoulder and laughs good naturedly.

"My goodness Lesley, you're the least transparent person I know!"

The *Advertiser* man is in full flow. Hieroglyphics, pharaohs, Osiris. And one too many Hollywood stills of Liz Taylor as Cleopatra. Presumably to appeal to the common man - or woman. Lesley resists the urge to snort. She met his wife once, at some dinner dance affair in town. She drifts off as he begins to talk about the afterlife. Two rows in front, Edith Walker sticks her hand down the back of her jumper and scratches. She wonders how it is, at night, between Edith and Archie. How it could have been between herself and Archie. Three months after her return he had hung about the churchyard one Sunday, waiting for her to emerge, offered to walk her the few hundred yards home and carry her music, like some overgrown school boy. A big, softly spoken man with a pocket book of Robert Burns and a farm to inherit. Not quite a gentleman farmer, he smelled of sweet silage and aftershave. It had been tentative at best. An unfinished major chord. She turned him down. Today they sit together on the Parish Council. Resolve complaints. Fight corners. Occasionally catch each other's eye.

The *Advertiser* man is explaining the process of mummification.

"The liver, lungs, stomach and intestines were washed and packed in a natural salt called *natron* which dried them out. They left the heart behind because they believed it to be the centre of intelligence and feeling and that it would be needed in the afterlife."

Pamela Duncan winces out loud at the image on the screen. Someone behind laughs. The *Advertiser* man smiles, pleased to get a reaction. Lesley pictures the letter on her mantelpiece.

Over tea and cake Mrs Hislop invites the guest speaker to judge the self portrait competition. In between mouthfuls of homemade sponge, he says all the right things. "Nice use of collage. Great perspective." He pauses at Lesley's entry, a few odd flowers that aren't really flowers at all, propped in a jam jar – "Interesting choice of medium" – and finally selects a realistic pen and ink sketch of Edith Walker at work in her garden. Trying not to look too triumphant, Edith steps forward to a round of applause and accepts a bottle of

sherry from the smiling *Advertiser* man. Two minutes later, she's up again for a bottle of magnolia talc in the raffle. It is, it seems, Edith's night tonight.

Driving home, the moon is so bright Lesley hardly needs head lamps. She veers playfully back and forth across the road. Remembers sitting in the passenger seat of Jeremy's sports car, both despising and loving the ostentation. There was a pretty village pub he'd taken her to, somewhere in Hampshire, on days when he had more time. In good weather he lowered the roof and rocketed round the country lanes. She felt like Ann Miller. But mostly it was the apartment, Chopin on the gramophone.

The last time had been – how did the poem go? – *not with a bang, but a whimper*. A new job with the Paris Conservatoire. Once in a lifetime opportunity. *Caroline is practicing her French already*. She couldn't bear it when he mentioned his wife by name, though she never said so. Despite his wife, his new job, and all other evidence to the contrary, Lesley believed he would come back for her. Her body *knew* he would. Her hands played anything in B minor. Liszt, Chopin, Rachmaninoff. Chopin again. By the time she realised she had lost him, it was too late to do anything, even in London, even if she had been so inclined. She played less and less and took to resting her hands on her growing belly, feeling for the movement within.

Back home, she sits with the envelope in her lap and pulls at a tiny brown thread at the hem of her skirt. When she was a child her father used to say to her, "Lesley, you can only do your best. That's all anyone can ask of you." She unfolds the second letter. The handwriting is controlled and graceful. Beautiful even. She traces it with her fingertips.

*Rachel Kerr*