


THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER'S BOY

A Novel

Barbara Vine



A Dark-Adapted Eye
A Fatal Inversion
The House of Stairs
Gallowglass
King Solomon's Carpet
Anna's Book
No Night Is Too Long
The Brimstone Wedding



The
Chimney
Sweeper's
Boy

A NOVEL

**BARBARA
VINE**



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He wanted a family of his own. He was very young when he understood this, fifteen or sixteen. Because he was accustomed, even then, to examining his thoughts and searching his soul, he corrected himself, deciding that what he wanted was a family to add to his existing one. Children of his own. He imagined giving his brothers and sisters children to love and giving his children uncles and aunts. His dream encompassed them all living together somewhere, in a big house, the kind that he had never known. He was old enough to know how unlikely this was.

A little later on, he understood that it is not acceptable for men to feel like this. Few men do. Women want children and men agree. Or if men want children, it is to carry on a name or inherit a business. He wanted them because he loved being one of many and wanted to add to that number. Friends were not very important in their lives. Why have friends when you have family?

Many things he felt and thought were not acceptable among men. Not right for a man. For instance, if he were to found that family, a woman would be a prerequisite. He knew the pattern of how it should be. He must meet a girl and fall in love, court her, become engaged to her, marry her. It seemed insurmountably difficult. He liked girls, but not in that way. Without knowing much, he knew what he meant by "that way," kissing, touching, all the things they talked about endlessly and monotonously, at school. Those others longed to do such things to girls, and some said they had, but he clearly understood that for him to do it, even to get to the point of doing it, would be an endurance test, a labor comparable to taking an exam in French, his worst subject, or taking part in a hated cross-country run.

How did he also know that it would not be the real thing?

—Gerald Candless, *LESS IS MORE*

It is an error to say the eyes have expression. Eyebrows and eyelids, lips, the planes of the face, all these are indicators of emotion. The eyes are merely colored liquid in a glass.

—A MESSENGER OF THE GODS

“NOT A WORD TO MY GIRLS,” HE HAD SAID ON THE WAY home from the hospital. My girls, as if they weren’t also hers. She was used to it, he always said that, and in a way they were more his. “I’m not hearing this,” she said.

“You’re going to have major surgery and your grown-up children aren’t to be told.”

“ ‘Major surgery,’ ” he said. “You sound like Staff Nurse Samantha in a hospital sitcom. I won’t have Sarah and Hope worried. I won’t give them a day of hell while they await the result.”

You flatter yourself, she thought, but that was just spite. He didn’t. They would have a day of hell; they would have anguish, while she had a little mild trepidation.

He made her promise. It wasn’t difficult. She wouldn’t have cared for the task of telling them.

The girls came down as usual. In the summer they came down every weekend, and in the winter, too, unless the roads were impassable. They had forgotten the Romneys were coming to lunch, and Hope made a face, what her father called “a square mouth,” a snarl, pushing her head forward and curling back her lips.

“Be thankful it’s only lunch,” said Gerald. “When I first met the guy, I asked him for the weekend.”

“He *refused*?” Sarah said it as if she were talking of someone turning down a free round-the-world cruise.

“No, he didn’t refuse. I wrote to him, asked him for lunch, and said he could stay at the hotel.”

Everyone laughed except Ursula.

“He’s got a wife he’s bringing.”

“Oh God, Daddy, is there more? He hasn’t got kids, has he?”

“If he has, they’re not invited.” Gerald smiled sweetly at his daughters. He said thoughtfully, “We might play the Game.”

“With *them*? Oh, do let’s,” said Hope. “We haven’t played the Game for ages.”

Titus and Julia Romney were much honored by an invitation from Gerald Candless, and they had expected to be put up in the house and not have to pay for a room at the Dunes; they hadn’t said so, not even to each other. Julia had anticipated eccentricity from someone so distinguished, even rudeness, and she was pleasantly surprised to encounter a genial hostess, a gracious, if rather silent, hostess, and two good-looking young women who turned out to be the daughters.

Titus, who had his naive side, as she well knew, was hoping for a look at the room when the work was done. And perhaps a present. Not a first edition, that would be expecting too much, but any book signed by the author. Conversation on literary matters, how he wrote when he wrote, and even, now the daughters had appeared, what it was like to be *his* child.

It was a hot, sunny day in July, a few days before the start of the high season at the hotel or they wouldn't have gotten a room. Lunch was in a darkish, cool dining room with no view of the sea. Far from discussing books, the Candlesses talked about the weather, summer visitors, the beach, and Miss Batty, who was coming to clear the table and wash up. Gerald said Miss Batty wasn't much of a cleaner but that they kept her because her name made him laugh. There was another Miss Batty and a Mrs. Batty, and they all lived together in a cottage in Croyde. "Sounds like a new card game, Unhappy Families," he said, and then he laughed and the daughters laughed.

In the drawing room—so he called it—the French windows were open onto the garden, the pink and blue hydrangea, the cliff edge, the long bow-shaped beach and the sea. Julia asked what the island was and Sarah said Lundy, but she said it in such a way as to imply only a total ignoramus would ask. Coffee was brought by someone who must have been Miss Batty and drinks were poured by Hope. Gerald and Titus drank port, Julia had a refill of the Meursault, and Sarah and Hope both had brandy. Sarah's brandy was neat, but Hope's had ice in it.

Then Gerald made the sort of announcement Julia hated, really hated. She didn't think people actually did this anymore, not in this day and age, not grown-ups. Not intellectuals.

"And now we'll play the Game," Gerald had said. "Let's see how clever you are."

"Would it be wonderful to find someone who caught on at once, Daddy?" said Hope. "Could we hate it?"

"We'd hate it," said Sarah, and she planted on Gerald's cheek one of those kisses that the Romneys found mildly embarrassing to witness.

He caught at her hand briefly. "It never happens, though, does it?"

Julia met Ursula's eye and must have put inquiry into her glance. Or simple fear.

"Oh, I shan't play," Ursula said. "I shall go out for my walk."

"In this heat?"

"I like it. I always walk along the beach in the afternoons."

Titus, who also disliked parlor games, asked what this one was called. "Not this Unhappy Families you were talking about?"

"It's called I Pass the Scissors," said Sarah.

"What do we have to do?"

"You have to do it right. That's all."

"You mean we all have to do something and there's a right way and a wrong way of doing it?"

She nodded.

"How will we know?"

"We'll tell you."

The scissors were produced by Hope from a drawer in the tallboy. Once kitchen scissors had been used for the Game, or Ursula's sewing scissors or nail scissors, whatever came to hand. But the Game and the ascendancy it gave them afforded so much pleasure that, when

his daughters still lived at home, Gerald had bought a pair of Victorian scissors with handles like a silver bird in flight and sharp pointed blades. It was these that Hope now handed to her father for him to begin.

Leaning forward in his armchair, his feet planted far apart, his back to the light, Gerald opened the scissors so that they formed a cross. He smiled. He was a big man, with a head that the journalists called "leonine," though the lion was old now, with a grizzled, curly mane the color of iron filings. His hands were big and his fingers very long. He handed the scissors to Julia Romney and said, "I pass the scissors uncrossed."

Julia passed the scissors to Hope as she had received them. "I pass the scissors uncrossed." "No, you don't." Hope closed the scissors, turned them over, and put them into the outstretched fingers of Titus Romney. "I pass the scissors crossed."

Titus did the same and handed them to Sarah, saying with a glance at Gerald that he passed the scissors crossed.

"Wrong." Sarah opened the scissors, held them by one blade, and passed them to her father. "I pass the scissors crossed, Dad."

He closed them, turned them over twice clockwise, and passed them to Julia. "I pass the scissors uncrossed."

Dawning comprehension, or what she thought was dawning comprehension, broke on Julia's face. She sat upright and turned the scissors over twice counterclockwise, handed them to Hope, and said she passed the scissors crossed.

"Well, well," said Hope. "But do you know why?"

Julia didn't. She had guessed. "But they're crossed when they're closed, aren't they?"

"Are they? You have to pass them crossed and know why, and everyone has to see. Look when you know, it's as clear as glass. I promise you." Hope opened the scissors. "I pass the scissors crossed."

So they continued for half an hour. Titus Romney asked if anyone ever got it, and Gerald said yes, of course, it was just that no one ever got it at once. Jonathan Arthur had gotten it the second time. Impressed by the name of the winner of both the John Llewellyn Rhys and the Somerset Maugham prizes, Titus said he was really going to concentrate from now on. Sarah said she wanted another brandy and what about everyone else.

"Another port, Dad?"

"I don't think so, darling. It gives me a headache. But you can give Titus one."

Sarah replenished the drinks, then sat down again, this time on the arm of her father's chair. "I pass the scissors uncrossed."

"But why?" Julia Romney was beginning to sound irritated. She had gone rather red. Signs of participants beginning to lose their tempers always amused the Candlesses, who normally looked gleeful and expectant. "I mean, how can it be? The scissors are just the same as when you passed them crossed just now."

"I told you it was unlikely you'd get it the first time," said Hope, and she yawned. "I pass the scissors crossed."

"You always pass them crossed!"

"Do I? Right, I'll pass them uncrossed next time."

As Titus was receiving the scissors, opening them and turning them clockwise, Ursula came in through the French windows. Her hair, which was fair but graying, and very long and

wispy, had begun flopping down out of its pins and she was holding it up with one hand. She smiled, and Titus thought she was going to say, “Still at it?” or “Have you found the secret yet?” but she said nothing, only passing on across the room and through the door that led into the hall.

Gerald looked around and said, “Shall we call it a day?”

The way the girls laughed, Sarah leaning over to look into her father’s eyes, told Titus that must be the phrase, rather dramatically delivered, he always used to terminate a session of the Game. Probably the injunction that followed was also requisite at this point.

“Better luck next time.”

Gerald rose to his feet. Titus had the impression, founded on nothing that he was truly aware of, that the old man (the “Grand Old Man,” he almost was) had been disturbed by the return of his wife, deflected from his pleasure in the Game, and was displeased. His face, though not as gray as his hair, had lost its color and grown dull. The daughter, Sarah, the one who looked like her mother, saw it, too. She glanced at her sister, the one who looked like her father, and said, “Are you all right, Dad?”

“Of course I am.” He made a face at his glass but smiled at her. “I don’t like port, never have. I should have had brandy.”

“I’ll get you a brandy,” said Hope.

“Better not.” He did something Titus had never before seen a grown man do to a grown woman: He put out his hand and stroked her hair. “We stumped them again, my sweetheart. We boggled them.”

“We always do.”

“And now”—he turned to Titus—“before you go”—a bright gleam in his dark eye—“you said you wanted to see where I work.”

The study. Did he call it that? The room, anyway, where the books had been written, or most of them. It was stuffy in there and warm. You could see the sea from here, too, and more of the long, flat half-mile-wide beach, the water’s edge almost invisible in the distance. Sky and sea met in a blurred dazzle. The closed window was large, stark, with black blinds rolled up, and the sun poured in. It flooded the desk and his chair and the books behind him and the book in front. Gerald Candless used a typewriter, not a word processor, quite an old-fashioned one, and had a bunch of pens and pencils in an onyx jar.

Proofs of a new novel lay to the left of the typewriter. A stack of manuscript about an inch deep sat to its right. Several thousand books filled the shelves ceiling to floor, dictionaries and thesauruses and encyclopedias and other reference works, and poetry and biography and novels, hundreds of novels, including Gerald Candless’s own works. The sun bathed the leather and cloth and colored-paper spines in brilliant light.

“Do you feel all right?”

Titus had echoed Sarah’s words, because the grayness was back in Gerald’s face and his gnarled right hand was gripping the upper part of his left arm. He made no answer to the question. Titus thought he was probably the sort of man who never said anything unless he had something to say, made no small talk, answered no polite questions as to his health.

“Are you really called Titus?”

The abrupt inquiry disconcerted him. “What?”

“I didn’t know you were deaf. I said, Are you really called Titus?”

“Of course I am.”

“I thought it must be a pseudonym. Don’t look so peevish. Not all of us are really called what we’re called, you know, not by a long chalk. Now take a look around. Look your fill. Have a book. Help yourself, and I’ll sign it. Not a first edition—I draw the line at that.”

One of the things Titus looked for was a copy of his own book. It wasn’t there, or if it was he couldn’t see it. He stood in front of the row of Gerald Candlesses, wondering which one to pick, then finally chose *Hamadryad*.

“Read Finnish, do you?”

Titus saw that he had chosen from the section of translations, so he made a second attempt but was forestalled by being handed a book club edition of the same novel. Gerald signed it. Just his name, no good wishes or kind regards. Sunlight fell on his hands, which, if they didn’t tremble, weren’t quite steady.

“And now that you’ve had your lunch, seen my room, and gotten a book, you can do something for me. One good turn—or rather, three good turns—deserves another, wouldn’t you agree?”

Assent was expected. Titus nodded. “Anything, of course, if it’s in my power.”

“Oh, it’s in your power. It would be in anybody’s who happened to be here. You see the stuff?”

“The page proofs?”

“No, not the page proofs. The manuscript. I want you to take it with you. Just take it away. Will you do that for me?”

“What is it?”

Gerald Candless didn’t answer. “I’m going away for a few days. I don’t want it left here in the house while I’m away. But I don’t want to destroy it, either. I may publish it one day—mean, I may finish it and publish it. If I have the nerve.”

“What is it, your autobiography?”

The sarcastic reply came: “Of course. I haven’t even changed the names.” Then he said, “It’s a novel, the start of a novel, or the end—I don’t know which. But he is not he and she is not she and they are not they. Right? I don’t want it left here. You were coming, I’d met you in wherever it was ...”

“Hay-on-Wye.”

“Right. You were coming, and it came to me that you’d do. Who else is there down here?”

“I wonder you didn’t put it in a safe-deposit box somewhere.”

“Oh, you wonder that, do you? If you don’t want to take it and look after it for me, just say. I’ll give it to Miss Batty, or I’ll burn it. Come to think of it, burning might be best.”

“For God’s sake, don’t burn it,” said Titus. “I’ll take it. How do I get it back to you? And when do I?”

Gerald picked up the pages and held them in his hands. Underneath them, on the desk, was a padded bag already addressed to Gerald Candless, Lundy View House, Gaunton, North Devon, and stamped with £1.50 postage.

“Do you ... Do you want me to ... Do you mind if I read it?”

A gale of laughter greeted that, a strong, vigorous bellow, incompatible with those tremulous hands. “You’ll have a job. I’m the world’s lousiest typist. Here, you can put it in this.”

"This" was a cheap-looking plastic briefcase, the kind of thing that, containing the requisite brochures and agenda, is given to delegates at a conference. Titus Romney wouldn't have been seen dead with it normally. But he had only a short distance to carry it to the hotel. They found Julia in the drawing room, carrying on a stilted conversation with Gerald's wife. Titus had already forgotten her name, but he didn't have to remember it, because they were going. It was 3:30 and they were leaving. The daughters had disappeared.

"I'll walk with you to the hotel," Gerald said. "I'm supposed to walk a bit every day. A few yards."

Julia gushed, the way she did when she had had a horrid time. "Goodbye. Thank you so much. It's been lovely. A lovely lunch."

"Enjoy the rest of your stay," Gerald's wife said.

They set off across the garden, Titus carrying the briefcase, at which Julia cast curious glances. The garden extended to about ten yards from the cliff edge, where there was a gate to the cliff path. From this path, all the beach could be seen, and the car park, full of cars and trailers. The beach was crowded and there were a lot of people in the sea. Somewhere Julia had read this described as the finest beach on the English coast, the longest, seven miles of it with the best sand. The safest beach, for the tide went out half a mile and flowed in gently over the flat, scarcely sloping sand, a shallow, limpid sea. It was blue as a jewel, calm and waveless.

"You must love living here," Julia said politely.

He didn't answer. Titus asked him if he didn't like walking. The way he talked about it implied he didn't like it.

"I don't like any physical exercise. Only cranks like walking. That's why a sensible man invented the car."

A gate in the path bore a sign: THE DUNES HOTEL. STRICTLY PRIVATE. HOTEL GUESTS ONLY. Gerald opened it and then stood aside to let Julia pass through. The hotel, Edwardian red brick with white facing, multigabled, stood up above them, its striped awnings unfurled across the terrace. People sat at tables having tea. Children splashed about in a swimming pool that was barely concealed by privet hedges.

"Your children enjoying themselves?"

"We haven't any children," said Julia.

"Really? Why not?"

"I don't know." She was very taken aback. That should be a question people didn't ask. "I ... I don't necessarily want any."

Another gate to pass through and they were on the turf of the big lawn.

"You don't want any children?" Gerald said. "How unnatural. You must change your mind. Not afraid to have a baby, are you? Some women are. Children are the crown of existence. Children are the source of all happiness. The great reward. Believe me. I know. Here we are, then, back among the throng."

Julia was so angry, she was nearly rude to him. She looked at her husband, but he refused to meet her eyes. She turned to Gerald Candless, resolved on silently shaking hands with him, turning her back on him, and marching quickly up to her room. Her hand went out reluctantly. He failed to take it, though this omission wasn't rudeness. He was staring up at the hotel, at the terrace, with an expression of astonishment and, more than that, amazement.

His eyes were fixed and so unblinking that she followed his gaze.

Nothing to see, no one to look at, nothing to cause this rigid, fixed stare. It was the elder people who congregated there on the terrace, she had noticed from the previous afternoon: those who didn't swim or walk far or venture down the cliff, knowing they would have to climb up again. The old ones sat there under the umbrellas and the blue-and-white-striped awning, golden-wedding couples, grandparents, the sedate, the inactive.

"Have you seen someone you know?" Titus asked.

It was as if he were in a dream, as if he were a sleepwalker arrested in his blind progress and lost, his orientation gone. Titus's question broke the spell or the dream and he passed his hand across his high wrinkled forehead, pushing the fingers through that bush of hair.

"I was mistaken," he said; then the hand came down, and farewells were made. He was smiling the way he did, with his red wolfish mouth and not his eyes. His eyes not at all.

They didn't watch him go back. They didn't look back or wave. As she crossed the terrace to enter the hotel by way of the open glass doors into the lounge and bar, Julia paused briefly to take in the people who sat at the terrace tables, those grandparents. Old people smoked so much. They all sat with cigarettes, overflowing ashtrays, pots of tea and cups of tea, pastries on cake stands, packs of cards, but no sun lotion or sunglasses. They never went into the sun. A woman was making up her face in the mirror of a powder compact, drawing crimson lipstick onto an old pursed mouth.

There was no one to interest him, no one who could so have caught his rapt gaze. More affectation, she thought, more games to impress us, and she followed Titus into the cool shadowy interior.

Sarah and Hope were going out. Hope had already made her plans, a barbecue on some beach farther up the coast. Almost before the guests were out of earshot, Sarah was on the phone arranging to meet the usual crowd in a Barnstaple pub. Not even the prospect of their father's company would keep them in on a Saturday night. To go out with those old companion school friends and friends' friends, was an obligation, almost a duty.

" 'Make my bed and light the light,' " said Miss Batty in the kitchen. " 'I'll arrive late tonight, blackbird, bye-bye.' There's a lot of truth in those old songs."

She picked up Titus Romney's glass off the tray and drank the port he had left. It was something she usually did when they entertained. Once she had gotten into such a state drinking the dregs from fifteen champagne glasses that Ursula had had to drive her home. But what on earth had they had champagne for? Ursula couldn't remember. Miss Batty—who Ursula long ago had begun calling Daphne, just as Miss Batty called her Ursula—drained the drop of brandy and began emptying the dishwasher of its first load.

" 'Bye-bye, blackbird,' " she said.

Ursula never ceased to be amazed by the scope of Daphne Batty's knowledge of sixty years of popular music. If Gerald liked her for her name, Ursula's appreciation derived from the unceasing flow of esoterica. She went back into the living room. Gerald was standing by the open windows but facing the inside of the room. Since he had come back from the hotel, he had spoken not a word, and that look he sometimes had of being far away had taken control of his face. Only this time, he was even more distant, almost as if he had stepped across some dividing stream into different territory. He looked at her blankly. She could have sworn that for a moment he didn't know who she was.

Saturday nights when the girls were out, he worried himself sick. He thought she wasn't aware of his anxiety, but of course she was. While his daughters were in London, as they mostly were, they were no doubt out night after night till all hours, and it never occurred to him to worry. Ursula was sure he scarcely thought about it, still less woke up in the small hours to wonder if Hope was back safe in her bed in Crouch End or Sarah in hers in Kentish Town. But here, when they were out, he no longer even bothered to go to bed. He sat up in the dark in the study, waiting for the sound of a car, then one key in the door, then the second car, the other key.

She hadn't shared a bedroom with him for nearly thirty years, never in this house, but she knew. She was still fascinated by him. As one could be, she sometimes thought, by a deformity or a mutilation. He compelled her horrified gaze, her continual speculation. There was no actual way she could know if he was in his bedroom or not, no indication by gleam of light or hint of sound. The floorboards were all carpeted and the doors fitted trimly into the architraves. His bedroom was at the other end of the house from hers. But she knew when he wasn't in bed during the night, just as she knew when the girls weren't. One of the cars coming usually woke her. She was a light sleeper. And she, too, would be relieved that first if Sarah was home, then Hope. Or the other way around, as the case might be. It wouldn't be before midnight, and probably long after.

His daughters mustn't know he sat up for them. He sat in his study in the dark so that they couldn't find out. They mustn't know he worried about them; they mustn't know he had a bad heart or that on Wednesday that bad heart was to undergo repairs. He wanted them to be carefree as they had been when children, believing their father immortal. She thought for a moment of how it might be for them if he were to die on the operating table, of the abyss that would open before them, and then she put the light out and went to sleep.

She didn't hear the first car come in, but she heard the faint squeak Hope's door made when it was opened more than forty-five degrees. Sarah's car came in noisily and too fast, which probably meant she had drunk too much. Ursula wondered if the newspapers would know whose daughter she was and make something of it when the police caught her one of these nights for driving over the speed limit. The car door banged and the front door shut with almost a slam. Sarah made up for it by creeping up the stairs.

Gerald was almost as quiet. But he was big and heavy and he lumbered when he walked. If the girls heard him, they would think he had gotten up to go to the bathroom. She lay there listening but heard nothing more, and perhaps she slept. Afterward, she wasn't sure, certain only of the silence and peace and that when she put the light on, it had been just after 1:30. The tide was high at 1:50, she had noticed. Not that it made much difference these summer nights when the sea was calm and there was no wind. People said how lovely it must be to hear the sound of the sea at night, but she never heard it. The house might be on the cliff-top, but it was still too far away from that creeping shallow sea.

He had had a shock in the afternoon. Realizing this woke her out of a doze. Or something else woke her. Perhaps she had dreamed of him, as she sometimes did. She remembered his stillness, his stare. He had walked back to the hotel with those people and something had happened. He had seen something or someone, or something upsetting had been said to him. Shocks shouldn't happen to him, she thought vaguely, and she sat up and put on the lamp. Four. She must have slept. Dawn was coming, a thin gray light making a shimmer around the

curtains.

It was then that she heard him. Or he had made that sound before and that was what had awakened her. Her nightdress was a thin thing with narrow shoulder straps. She put on her dressing gown, screwed her long hair up into a knot, and stabbed it with two hairpins.

She had never been in his bedroom. Not in this house. She didn't even know what it was like inside. Daphne Batty cleaned it and changed his sheets, humming pop or rock or country while she did so. Ursula said, "Gerald?"

A gasp for breath. That was what it sounded like. She opened the door. The curtains were drawn back and she could see a pale moon in a pale sky. It was quite light. He was sitting up in the single bed, crimson-faced, his skin sprinkled with sweat.

She spoke his name again. "Gerald?"

He struggled to speak. At once, she knew he was having a seizure, and she looked around for the remedy he had, the nitroglycerin. It might be anywhere. There was nothing on the bedside table. As she went toward the bed, he suddenly threw back his head and bellowed out a roar. It was an animal noise a goaded bull might make, and it seemed to come up through his chest and throat from the very center of his stricken heart. The echoes of it died away and he punched at his chest with his fists, then threw out his arms as his face swelled and grew deep purple.

She went to take his hands, to forget everything and hold him. As she had done once before, as she had done the night he dreamed his trapped-in-a-tunnel dream. But he fought against her. He punched again, this time at her, his eyes bulging as if his eyeballs would burst from their sockets, punching like a maddened child.

Aghast, she stepped back. He drew a long breath, a sound like water gurgling down a drain, liquid and rich and bubbling. The color seeped out of his face, red wine drained out of a smoky glass. She saw it grow pale and slacken, the muscles slip. As the death rattle burst out of him, a clattering salvo of final sound, he fell back into the bed and out of life.

She knew it was death. Nothing else was possible. It amazed her afterward that Sarah and Hope had slept through it all. Just as, when children, they had slept through his screaming when he dreamed of the tunnel. She phoned for an ambulance, although she knew he was dead, and then, unwillingly, fearfully, afraid of her own children, she went to wake them.

The meek may inherit the earth, but they won't keep it long.

—EYE IN THE ECLIPSE

SARAH AND HOPE COMPOSED THE DEATH ANNOUNCEMENT TOGETHER. Sarah put in “beloved” because you couldn’t just have “husband of,” and both of them loved “adored.” The lines from Cory’s “Heraclitus” were Hope’s choice, remembered from school and rediscovered in Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*. Sarah found them mildly embarrassing but gave in because Hope cried so much when she protested. The announcement appeared in several daily newspapers.

Candless, Gerald Francis, age 71, on July 6 at his home in Gaunton, Devon, beloved husband of Ursula and adored father of Sarah and Hope. Funeral, Ilfracombe, July 11. No flowers. Donations to the British Heart Foundation.

*I wept when I remembered how often thou and I,
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.*

The next day, his obituary was in the *Times*.

Gerald Francis Candless, OBE, novelist, died July 6, age 71. He was born on May 10, 1926.

Gerald Candless was the author of eighteen novels, their publication spanning a period from 1955 to the present. He will probably be best remembered for Hamadryad, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1979.

His novels were unusual in that, though literary fiction, they were, in the middle years, at any rate, both popular with the public and highly regarded by critics. It was only from the mid-eighties onward, however, that his fiction regularly appeared on best-seller lists, a phenomenon that seemed to coincide with a cooling of enthusiasm on the part of reviewers. It was suggested that his books were “too plot-driven” and sometimes that they resembled the “sensation fiction” of a hundred years before. Nevertheless, in a list compiled by newspaper reviewers in 1995, he was named as one of the leading twenty-five novelists of the second half of the twentieth century.

Candless was born in Ipswich, Suffolk, the only child of a printer and a nurse, George and Kathleen Candless, and grew up in that town. He was educated privately and later at Trinity College, Dublin, where he obtained a degree in classics. After university, he worked as a journalist for various weekly and provincial daily newspapers, first the Walthamstow Herald in East London and, more notably, the Western Morning News in Plymouth.

It was while in Plymouth that he wrote his first book, at the age of twenty-eight. Many years later, in an interview for the Daily Telegraph, he said he had followed the example of Anthony Trollope, got up at five every morning and wrote for three hours before going to work. The novel, The Centre of Attraction, was accepted by the third publisher to whom Candless sent it and was published in the autumn of 1955.

Three more books appeared, to increasing acclaim, before Candless was able to live by his writing. It was a long time, however, before he abandoned journalism altogether, as in the early sixties, about the time of his marriage, he became a fiction reviewer for the Daily Mail, and later, for a while, its book-page editor, then deputy literary editor of the Observer.

He was at this time living in London, in Hampstead, where his daughters were born. Later, he moved with his family to a part of the country that had been a favorite with him since Plymouth days, the north Devon coast between Bideford and Ilfracombe. There, on the outskirts of the village of Gaunton, he bought Lundy View House on the clifftop above Gaunton Dunes, where he lived and worked from 1970 until his death.

Candless became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1976 and was awarded the OBE in the 1986 Birthday Honours. His death was from coronary thrombosis. He is survived by his widow, the former Ursula Wick, and by his daughters, Sarah and Hope.

There were not many at the funeral. Gerald Candless had no relatives, not even a cousin or two. The girls were there, and Fabian Lerner, who was Hope's boyfriend, as well as Ursula's widowed sister and her married niece, Pauline.

"When my mother was young, women never went to funerals," said Daphne Batty, washing sherry glasses. Old Mrs. Batty was ninety-three. "They called it 'following,' and women didn't follow."

"Why not?" said Ursula.

"They was the weaker sex, and it could have been too much for them."

"Aren't they the weaker sex any longer, then?"

"They've been getting stronger through the years, haven't they? You know that." Daphne looked over her shoulder, checking that she wasn't about to be overheard. "That Fabian one came because he'd never been to a funeral before," she said. "He told me. He wanted to see what it was like."

"I hope it came up to expectations," said Ursula, thinking of Hope's display when the coffin was lowered into the AstroTurf-lined pit. For a moment, she had thought her daughter was going to throw herself in on top of it like Laertes in Ophelia's grave.

Gerald's publisher had thought so, too. He took a step forward and she heard him mutter "Oh no, no."

But Hope had only crouched down on the glittering green plastic stuff and wailed while she watched the last of her father disappear into the earth. Wailed, and when Pauline—Why her? Who asked her to do it?—threw a handful of gravel in on top of the coffin, she sobbed and flung herself backward and forward, clutching handfuls of hair from under her black velvet pancake hat.

Sarah said, "She's taken it very hard. We all have. It's just as real for us, but we don't show our emotions the way she does."

Ursula didn't say anything.

"He was the most wonderful father anyone could have had. When I think of the fathers of other people my age ... When we were little—but I can't talk about it. I can't yet. I just start crying. I'm as bad as Hope, really."

"You're not as ostentatious," said Ursula.

Sarah looked closely at her mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee in front of her. Ursula was a sturdy, straight-backed woman with rather pretty but not memorable features, a still-unlined, smooth face, calm blue-gray eyes, and untidy fairish gray-streaked hair that was always coming loose from its knot. Long hair done up in a bun from which strands constantly escape looks charming on a young girl, thought Sarah, but on an older woman, it's just a mess. But there were few people to see her mother, no one real now that Gerald was gone, except Daphne Batty.

That put her in mind of what she wanted to say. Not exactly what she wanted to say, but what she thought she should say. "You know I can't stay on here. And Hope can't. Not after tomorrow. So would you like to come back with me?" It didn't sound very gracious. She tried again. "I'll be happy to have you. You can stay as long as you like. You could stay in and have a quiet time while I'm at work, or you could go shopping and ... well, have your hair done." She thought of adding that Hope would come over in the evenings, but she couldn't be sure if this was true.

"You could go shopping at Camden Lock," said Sarah. "You're a great walker. It's a nice walk to St. John's Wood."

"It's a nice walk along the beach to Franaton Burrows," said Ursula. "It's very good of you, Sarah, but I shall be quite all right here. I think I should be alone. I should get used to it." She didn't say she had been alone in all important respects for three decades. Having someone else in the house, a large, clever, overbearing yet indifferent presence, mitigates loneliness not at all. But she didn't say it, because she had never said such things to her daughters or indeed, to anyone. "In any case," she said, "Pauline is going to come and stay with me for a few days."

Although she cast up her eyes, Sarah made no adverse comment on this solution to what she saw as Ursula's problem. She and her mother were so unaccustomed to telling each other what they really felt, so habituated to the utterance of platitudes or casual remarks, that she didn't now say, "Rather you than me." Or "Why are you doing penance?" She said only, "I suppose she'll be company for you."

Pauline was company. She was more company than Gerald had been, because it didn't really matter much what you said to her, or if you said anything at all half the time. She was thirty-eight and had often come to stay when the girls were little. She was just sufficient older to enjoy looking after them. And like all young girls who came to the house, the house in Hampstead and later this one, she had thought Gerald Candless the nicest, kindest, loveliest grown-up she had ever known. When she was fourteen, she had been in love with him. Then there had been that trouble. No one knew exactly what kind of trouble except Pauline and Gerald, but whatever it was, he had gotten over it and she had, and when she got married at the age of twenty-one, she asked him to give her away, her own father being dead by then.

Pauline's children were now adolescents and could be left at home with their father and their grandmother, who would come in to do the cooking. Pauline had worked for her living for just three years before she was married, and never afterward. This gave her a lot in common with Ursula, or she thought it did, for Ursula, too, had not worked, in the sense of being a wage earner, since some months before Gerald married her in Purley in 1963.

"You typed all Uncle Gerald's manuscripts, though, didn't you?" Pauline said one lunchtime after she had been at Lundy View House for nearly a week. "He wrote them and you made sense of his terrible handwriting and copied them on that old Olivetti you had."

"That's right," said Ursula. "Like Sonia Tolstoy."

"Who?" said Pauline.

"Tolstoy's wife. She made copies of all his books, seven copies of each one, and they were all very long, and she had to do it by hand because typewriters hadn't been invented. Or they didn't have one, anyway. So it wasn't as bad for me as it was for her."

“But you didn’t get paid for it?” asked Pauline hopefully. If Ursula had been paid, even by her husband, this would partly have excluded her from the sisterhood of unemployed married women. “Uncle Gerald didn’t pay you?”

“He kept me,” said Ursula.

“Well, of course, that goes without saying. Brian keeps me, if you like to put it that way.”

“I didn’t always do it. *Hand to Mouth* was the last one I did, and that was 1984. After that he typed them himself.”

“But why did you stop?” said Pauline.

Ursula didn’t answer. She was wondering how many minutes after they got up from the table she could go out for her walk. Twenty, probably. Pauline began to clear the table. She hadn’t yet asked Ursula if Uncle Gerald had left her well-off or comfortably off or just able to manage. She hadn’t asked if Ursula would have to sell the house or take in lodgers or do anything else. Ursula and B, though Ursula knew she was dying to know the answers to all these questions. Everyone assumed that Gerald had left everything to Sarah and Hope, and Ursula, though she had gotten over the shock of his death, if shock it had been, hadn’t yet adjusted to his surprising bequests.

“I shall go out for my walk in ten minutes,” she said when they had loaded the dishwasher.

“In this fog?” said Pauline with an artificial shudder.

“It isn’t fog; it’s just sea mist.”

“Oh, I know that’s what you call it. You always did call it sea mist. It was the only thing I didn’t like about coming to stay here, that white sea fog. And Uncle Gerald hated it, didn’t he? I remember he would never go out in it; he used to shut himself up in his study. Why was that?”

“I don’t know,” said Ursula.

“Does it upset you when I talk about him, Auntie Ursula?”

“I think you could drop the ‘Auntie,’ don’t you?” said Ursula, not for the first time.

“I’ll try,” said Pauline, “but it will be very hard to get out of the habit.”

Hardly anyone came down to the beach when the mist rolled in from the sea. The car park emptied, the surfers retreated into their caravans, and the hotel guests went back to the indoor swimming pool. The beach, which was seven miles long and, when the tide was out, half of a mile wide, was overhung by a white curtain, so that when you were on it, in the sand, the dunes and the sea became invisible. Ursula could see her own feet, and the beach stretching away in front of her and on either side of her for some yards, but she couldn’t see the hummocky wrinkled green dunes to the left of her or the water, to the right of her, creeping silently across the sand.

The mist would wet her hair and settle on her clothes in fine droplets, but she didn’t mind this. It wasn’t cold. Sometimes she thought she preferred misty days to clear ones, when you could see the headland and the estuary and Westward Ho! and, looming on the clifftop, the hotel and its garden and all those flowers in primary colors. She walked southward halfway between the edge of the dunes and the edge of the incoming tide, sometimes looking up to see a distant dazzlement of sun through the thickness of white gauze, but more often down at the sand.

The sand was sometimes quite flat and packed hard, but on other days, by some strange action of the tide’s passage, it was pulled into wrinkles like the skin that forms on boiled

milk. Today, though, it was smooth, a dark ocher color, but streaked here and there in a chevron pattern with a fine glittery black dust. Visitors to Gaunton thought the black streaks, which looked as if a magnet had drawn them into that shape as it might draw iron filings across a sheet of paper, were from tar or some other pollutant, but Ursula knew that the powder was ground-up mussel shells, pulverized by the pounding and the kneading of the sea.

Shells were everywhere on the beach, white scallop shells and ivory-colored limpet shells, chalky whelks and blue-black mussel shells with a sheen of pearl or a crust of barnacles, razor shells that looked like a cutthroat razor in an agate case. When the girls first came here as small children, they collected shells every day, until they grew tired of it. Ursula found all the dull, dusty, smelly shells in a cupboard years later. She put them in a carrier bag and took them back to the beach, scattering them onto the sand as she walked along. The next day, when she walked the same way, the shells had been washed clean and shining by the sea and those she had restored to the beach were indistinguishable from those that had always been there.

Today, there was no one else on the beach. And the mist remained static, hanging, quiet, still. The solitude pleased her, the chance to think. No thinking could be done at Lundy View House while Pauline was there, and at night, when she was alone in her room, she took one of the sleeping pills the doctor had insisted she have. She asked herself why she liked the mist so much. Could it be because Gerald had disliked it? The possibility that this was true had to be admitted. She liked it because he didn't, and in a way, that made it hers, a secret, inviolable possession.

Perhaps, too, she liked it because it obscured so much. Lundy View House, the other houses on the cliff, people, Gerald. It hid everything but the clean flat sand and the pure white and blue-black glittering shells. Now, of course, she no longer needed this obfuscation. Savoring it, she repeated the word to herself. Obfuscation. Once, long ago, she had set herself the daily task of learning long, difficult words to impress and please him. What a fool, she thought, but she thought it calmly and in a measured, considered way.

As she turned back, or rather, wheeled round, to retrace her steps nearer to the incoming sea, she wondered not for the first time why she had reacted as she had to Gerald's death. At least she would have expected to feel shock. But there had been very little shock, only surprise and, very quickly, relief. No guilt, either. She had read somewhere—ah, what a lot of books and magazines and periodicals and journals and newspapers she had read over the years!—that bereavement brings with it a sad and bitter longing to have the dead back, only for a few hours, to ask those questions that were always there but were never asked in life. And she thought, Yes, I would like to ask why. Why did you do this to me and take so much away from me? Why did you make me second-best—oh, much further down the scale than that—with my children? Why did you marry me? No, why did you *want* to marry me? She would have to be a different person, though, whom she brought back to life. The Gerald she knew wouldn't answer.

That brought Mrs. Eady into her head. She hadn't thought of Mrs. Eady for years. A big, sad old woman with a daughter in a nunnery and a murdered son, his photograph in a silver frame beside a small green-speckled vase. She could see it still as clearly as she could see the sand and shells. And less than a year later, they had moved away from Hampstead and come here to the clifftop and a house with a view of the Bristol Channel and Lundy Island.

The mist was lifting. Ursula knew the mist on this coast and the way it behaved and she understood from experience that it wouldn't lift fully all day, but come and go, rise and fall. The white curtain had rolled up a little ways and thinned a little to let in pale, steamy shafts of sunshine. She could see the hotel now, its angry red, the gables too shallow and the roof tiles matching the geraniums that hung all over it in innumerable hanging baskets. The fog curtain disclosed it almost coyly, as if there were an audience on the beach longing for a glimpse of its beauties.

Her own house was briefly revealed. It was her own now. Not held in trust for her to live in, not merely affording her a life interest, but hers. And his future royalties were hers, and apart from generous legacies to Sarah and Hope, all he possessed. The will had been much more of a shock than his death. She had thought about it on these beach walks of hers and now she believed he had made this will to make up to her for what he had done. He wasn't showing her that he had loved her after all, but that he was in her debt. He owed her for taking her life and misusing it.

On the clifftop, Pauline had come out into the garden and was standing by the gate waving. Ursula waved back, but less enthusiastically. Later on, she thought, she would do something seemingly out of character and take her niece to the hotel bar for a drink.

The mist descended again quite suddenly, as she had known it would, and hid the figure of Pauline, still waving.

A man believes everything he reads in the newspaper until he finds an item about himself that is a web of lies. This makes him doubt, but not for long, and he soon reverts to his old faith in the printed word.

—THE CENTRE OF ATTRACTION

THREE NEWSPAPERS WERE DELIVERED TO LUNDY VIEW HOUSE every morning. Ursula had kept the paperboy only for Pauline to have something to read at breakfast, but once her niece was gone, she intended to cancel the delivery. It was something to look forward to, not seeing newspapers. She liked to look at the view of the beach while she was eating her grapefruit and her toast.

The sea was calm this morning and a deep clear blue, not streaked with emerald as it sometimes was, and the sky was a pale, luminous, unclouded blue. The tide was out, was still going out, and where the sand was still wet, a boy of about twelve was building an elaborate sand castle with a keep and turrets and a moat. A man with his two small children was trying to fly a large red-and-white kite, but there wasn't enough wind to lift it off the beach. He reminded her of Gerald, who had also flown kites, who had built innumerable sand castles.

"Have you noticed," said Pauline, looking up from the paper, "that no one ever points out the simple truth about unemployment. The fact is that half the unemployment is due to women not working. If women didn't work, men wouldn't be out of work, but no one ever dares say this."

"It wouldn't be politically correct," said Ursula.

"Did you ever want to have a job? Apart from working for Uncle Gerald, of course."

"I once thought of taking on some baby-sitting at the hotel. They always want child-sitters."

Pauline looked at her to see if she was serious. Ursula's face was quite blank.

"But you didn't?"

"Gerald didn't care for the idea."

"I'm not surprised. The wife of a famous writer looking after other people's kids for a couple of pounds an hour!"

"It was three pounds," said Ursula. "If you've finished, I'll clear the table, because I like to do that before Daphne comes. No, sit there. I'll do it. Read your paper."

When she came back into the room to fetch the coffeepot, Pauline said, "There's a letter here about Uncle Gerald. Would you like to see it?"

"Not particularly." Ursula had already suffered from her niece's propensity for reading aloud, so she sighed a little before saying, "You read it to me."

"It's rather peculiar, quite a mystery. It says: 'From the editor of *Modern Philately*.' "

"The *Times* always does that."

"Peculiar. Well, here goes. Listen. 'Sir, I refer to your obituary of Gerald Candless, the novelist (Obituaries, July 10). The writer states that the late Mr. Candless was employed as a journalist on the *Walthamstow Herald* in the postwar years. I was chief subeditor of the

newspaper from 1946 until 1953 and can assure you that if that humble organ had been so fortunate as to number a graduate of Trinity and future world-famous novelist among its staff, this is not a distinction I would have forgotten. I am afraid you are in error when you name Gerald Candless as a *Walthamstow Herald* “alumnus.” I am, sir, your obedient servant, James Droridge.’ What’s an alumnus?”

“Someone who is a former student at a university.”

“Oh. Why did they say Uncle Gerald worked for that newspaper if he didn’t?”

“I don’t know, Pauline. It’s just a mistake.”

A burst of song from the kitchen heralded Daphne Batty’s arrival. Ursula carried out the coffeepot to the strains of Merle Haggard’s “Today I Started Loving You Again.” Daphne had brought the *Daily Mail* with her, and while anxious for Ursula to read Mary Gunthorpe’s interview with Hope, she had no aspirations to read it to her. It was titled “Oh, My Beloved Father! The Loss of Hope.”

Ursula thought she might as well bow to the inevitable now. She remembered how Gerald had sometimes resolved not to read the reviews of his books in newspapers, but they had been impossible to avoid. Sooner or later, someone would ring up and tell him what was said of them, or send them to him with passages underlined in red, or quote from them in letters. Daphne would leave the paper behind and Pauline would find it, and then she would be in for a worse ordeal. She began to read, with Daphne looking over her shoulder.

He was a tall, burly man with big features and a wide, ironic smile. She is slender and rose petal-skinned, her dark hair long and softly waved, her eyes almost too large for that heart-shaped face. Yet Hope Candless is the spitting image of her father, the celebrated novelist who died two weeks ago. There is the same intelligence in those same brown eyes, the same penetrating glance, and the same musical voice.

That voice has a catch in it now and those eyes are bright with tears. To her embarrassment, they spilled over as soon as she began to talk about him. Wearing a pink-and-white shirtwaister dress and white high-heeled sandals—impossible to imagine her in jeans and T-shirt—Hope, thirty, dabbed at her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief. It was the first handkerchief I had seen since my grandmother died ten years ago. Hope’s had a pink H embroidered on it.

“I miss him so much,” she said. “He wasn’t just my father; he was my best friend. I really think that if I could have chosen just one person in all the world that I’d spend my life with, it would have been him. I suppose you think that’s totally mad?”

“When my sister and I wrote that death notice that we put in the paper, we had to find an adjective that expressed what we felt. Beloved wasn’t strong enough, so we used adored, because we did adore him. And we had the lines from that Victorian poem because we really did tire the sun with talking.

“Isn’t it funny? Each one of us firmly believes she was his favorite. But I think he really loved us equally and he had so much love for us. I’m sorry, you must excuse me, the way I keep crying. He bought me this place, you know, and he bought a flat for my sister, too.”

*“This place” is the large, airy ground-floor flat of a house in Crouch End with a big patio and a garden full of fruit trees. The author of *Hamadryad* and *Purple of Cassius* bought it for Hope when she qualified as a solicitor seven years ago. She had come second in her year in the Law Society’s exams and before that had come down from Cambridge with a first-class honors degree. Her sister is Sarah, two years her senior, and a lecturer in women’s studies at the University of London.*

“Sarah has a flat in Kentish Town. Do you know what he said? He said, ‘I wish I was a rich man and could buy you homes in Mayfair or Belgravia.’ He was always thinking of us. When we were children, he was with us all the time. If we cried in the night, it was he who got up to comfort us. He played with us and read to us and talked to us all the time. I’ve wondered since when he got time to write his books. When we were asleep, I suppose.

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