

ROBERT BARCLAY

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BIRDS OF  
PASSAGE

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WORDSWORTH PRESS

## Foreword by M. J. Radcliffe

I am an unrepentant fan of classical literature. When asked to write this Foreword, I recalled the story about the literary agent who warned J.M. Barrie that readers of literature tend to dislike unhappy books. He should, therefore, refrain from writing one. He went on to pen his masterpiece about the lonely Jess at her window in Thrums, waiting for a son who would never return. Writers from classical Greece to Shakespeare to Thomas Hardy wisely disregarded such worthless advice.

After reading *Birds of Passage*, I found Robert Barclay's novel isn't an unhappy book any more than Barrie's and is liberally sprinkled with the dry wit so beloved by the English and laconic Australians (respectively, where the author was born and where he now lives). Indeed, the protagonist's teenage girlfriend, "Donegan", could have stepped straight from an episode of *Derry Girls*, and I was unable to avoid voicing her dialogue in a mental "wee liltin' Irish brogue meself".

The story is set, at least initially, in an English village called Boughton, nestled in Hampshire's Test Valley. This quaint village, with its quintessential thatched cottages, lush green meadows and winding country byways, paints a picture of rural serenity.

The novel opens with an introduction to the protagonist, the ageing Robertson Sinclair, portrayed as an unsociable, retired novelist and former newspaper correspondent who once wrote under the name Robert St Clair. He moved to the village some years before the story begins and lives in Mill House with a small, yappy poodle who interposes her presence in the story at precisely the right times (a sure sign the author also counts himself among British dog lovers).

A woman, Katy Yehonala, calls at Mill House. She is a friend of the Spencers, who own the manor house in the village. The family patriarch, retired General Jack Spencer, is Sinclair's one friend, the two men having met two years earlier while walking their dogs in the countryside and found they had much in common. During a tense scene early in the book,

Katy convinces Sinclair to take up his pen and tell the story of Jack's granddaughter Cassandra, a young environmental activist who recently met her death in the rainforests of Borneo (we Brits are unable to shake the glories of Empire and still can't call it Kalimantan).

The reader is carried onto the painted canvas of Cassandra Spencer's life. As events unfold, we are drawn into the glittering life of Katy's unstable daughter, Clara, who is struggling with the price of fame. In the background always lingers the ghost of Kathleen Donegan, the sixteen-year-old Irish girl "Bobby" Sinclair fell in love with while on holiday with his parents in Boughton sixty years earlier, whom he'd met at a Girl Guide camp in the village.

Through the eyes of the reclusive writer, and a narrator who sometimes tends towards the opinionated, we learn about the remarkable lives of the three young women and discover much of the hidden depth of our own. Sinclair's journey into the lives of Cassandra and Clara compels him to face the unresolved melancholy surrounding the death of Donegan. Although the women who grace the pages are said to be entirely imaginary, it is easy to imagine the author looking deep into their eyes and seeing a rare and beautiful love for his heroines as real women, who inspired every word of the story.

In the classical literary vein, *Birds of Passage* is beautifully written, free of the bland, AI-smoothed vanilla that characterises so much dreadful and lazy modern writing. From the enigmatic cover designed by Melinda Childs, we infer that the book may be rich in allegory, symbolism, and motif. We are not to be disappointed. The pages are a continuous treasure trove for a reader who reads rather than skims. In that respect, you may be tempted to revisit many scenes to fully appreciate the allusions—like the protagonist discovering a half-squeezed tube of toothpaste in Cassandra's bathroom after her death, or a rowboat locked in the ice on a frozen lake as Sinclair's journey nears its end, or even the setting for the final scenes high in the Swiss Alps. As might be expected from a novel set in spectacular locations, the landscapes, weather, and seasons are used subtly to govern the pace and mood of the story.

I won't comment further on the numerous other motifs, as it would be unkind to blunt a reader's enjoyment. Instead, I encourage readers to immerse themselves in the story's humanity and messages, rather than focusing only on the usual hero, quest, and satisfying (or otherwise) ending. I will say the locations feel like home to anyone born in Hampshire or, like the author, has wandered beyond the world's tourist traps. And if, like me, you grew up in the sixties, you'll find those parts of the book deliciously nostalgic, perhaps even to induce a teary eye.

Robert Barclay's novel is an exploration of half-finished lives, and we are left with an unnerving thought about what the meaning of "it all" is (I hesitate to use the unsatisfactory label "life"). As he should, he doesn't answer the question and leaves signposts for the reader who may be grappling with the complexities of their own journeys through life. If you are like me, significant questions like these close in on you as you age. In a recent conversation, he told me the closest he came to answers revealed themselves on three occasions while writing *Birds of Passage*. The first was in music played by a haunted young virtuoso who revealed life's *worth* in a nocturne. The second was in literature, which displayed life's *joy* in soaring prose by a writer he claims he will never equal. The third was in love, which he insists may have come closest to answering the age-old question.

*Birds of Passage* is hard to put down, though it is neither a crime whodunnit nor a spy thriller. It is a book that invites you to savour the characters as you would the menu in a Michelin restaurant, to linger over the beauty of each sentence, and be inspired by a blend of timeless storytelling and self-discovery. The narrative is a journey into themes of honour and duty, the price of fame, dealing with loss, and, overwhelmingly, love.

And as for "The meaning of it all"? The question could take a lifetime to answer. After three score years and ten, the author seems to be saying there isn't one, despite what the priests and other peddlers of purpose would have us believe. The great revelation is never revealed despite several characters treading their various paths to meaning—yearning for lost Days of Empire, Catholics (fallen and otherwise) seeking an

ecclesiastical truth, or atheists living under the lugubrious gaze of their dynastic ancestors. According to the author, we're just here. Don't despair, he seems to be saying, the truth lies in our ability to celebrate the majesty of life in the daily miracles we take for granted, and we should never consider these moments ordinary. The miracle of life, he tells us, can be found in catching the subtle truths of a fairytale, experiencing sudden flashes of insight into something monumental, and embracing literature, music, and loving all living things, especially those who came before us and left their marks. Simply put, by revelling in the experience of being alive. After reading *Birds of Passage* and finding the pages ran out far too soon, I discovered that's been the meaning all along—or one answer.

For lovers of classic fiction told in the literary realism style of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Louis de Bernières' *Birds Without Wings*, or even Daphne du Maurier's masterpiece, *Rebecca*, and similar writers who require the reader to pay attention, you may enjoy this novel. As a reward, like other books by the author, *Birds of Passage* offers the additional pleasure of armchair travel. It is a work by an author who has not cobbled his scenes together from dry research, TripAdvisor, or from just an overactive imagination. The sights, sounds, and smells infused into every page penetrate our senses straight from the author's own, garnered from his much-travelled and varied existence.

If you are familiar with the author's other novels, you'll recognise many of the characters also live in those works of literature. The protagonist in this one, Robertson Sinclair, does not appear in the earlier books. The story told through his eyes means *Birds of Passage* and its message stands alone as a unique work of literary fiction. However, for readers who love exploring the depths of characters portrayed in literature, their histories are available on the author's website and in the many published articles about the Butterfly Dynasty novels.

Michael J Radcliffe, Dublin, 2025



## CANTO THE FIRST

Today, I heard a bee-bird died

## The resident of Mill House

On the whole, novels are true. A second incontestable fact is nothing lasts forever. The greatest empires crumble, the mightiest dynasties fall, the blackest nights pass. Every end begins somewhere. Robertson Sinclair also kept his appointment with the dictates of destiny.

He died peacefully three years ago, and at peace, or I like to think so. Shortly after his death, a draft manuscript titled *Calypso's Daughters* arrived by FedEx at my home in Phnom Penh, accompanied by a letter. The letter said he'd made a promise not to publish the manuscript and asked me to do with it what I thought best. Except where memories vary, as they often do in retellings, the story he wrote is true because I knew—and still know—the people in it and love several of them. I asked each of them what to do. They all wanted Robertson Sinclair's story told. So here it is, as he wrote it, with some added recollections from those who knew him.

His odyssey—for that's how he once described it to me—began in the frosty wonder of sparkling crystals, iced puddles and biting winds common on March days in Hampshire. When his gate latch clicked, Clara, a black poodle roughly the size and texture of an ushanka hat, announced his rugged-up caller with Napoleonics at the cottage's latticed window.

Callers were a rare occurrence at Mill House. From the day he bought the house, five years earlier, Robert, as he permitted me to call him, made it clear shepherd's pies and invitations from hospitable villagers to pitch in with community work were surplus to his needs. The local vicar even came by once on a pastoral care visit. He suggested their new community member might find the company of other moth-eaten locals "nice" when they met at The Fox and Hounds for seniors' lunches, discounted for pensioners, on the first and third Tuesday of each month. The vicar assumed Robert would enjoy companionship in his advancing years, even hinting the village harboured one or two still-serviceable widows. Robert

thought the idea ghastly.

Predictably, his choice of solitude over sociability supplied fodder for village gossip. One rumour pegged him as a Mafia whistleblower hiding out from hitmen; another as a witch living with a familiar in his secluded stone cottage on the river's edge—though in fairness, Clara's jet-black winter coat, coupled with the demeanour of a Baskerville hound, lent some credibility to the theory. He cared nothing for such speculation so long as it reinforced his wish to be left in peace.

The truth about the village's reclusive inhabitant turned out to be no less enthralling: the owner of Mill House once worked as a foreign correspondent for *The Guardian*. The exposure came courtesy of a local archivist, Miss Jane Hutchings, herself a lady with considerable mileage, who'd chanced upon a photograph and newspaper feature he'd written under his literary alias, Robert St Clair, during the wave of popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in what became known as the Arab Spring. He also used to be a novelist—an award-winning one, no less—another discovery unearthed by Miss Hutchings' meddlesome detective work. Had he lived in a more literary community, Robert's name and face might have sounded a distant drum for fans of literary fiction earlier than it did.

Neither the revelations of his past, pleas from his literary agent, nor offers of a substantial advance on any future novel by his publisher tempted him from social withdrawal. Less still to take up his pen. Robert hadn't written more than a solitary letter to *The Times* since buying Mill House and decamping to the quaint Hampshire village. Acting quite in character, his letter to the editor lamented the appalling decline of his beloved English language which, he argued, might well be undamaged by bending the so-called rules, but the line must be drawn at sloth. His outburst berated *The Times*' violence to his native tongue by legitimising the Americans' grammatical laziness with countable nouns.

To be precise, he'd asserted a "bunch" wasn't intended as a generic term for anything that walked, flew or swam, bordered on a criminal offence, and they ought to know better.

"We have perfectly adequate words in the English language to



embrace the diversity of our wildlife, and we do not need to mimic our ill-educated cousins from the United States, who choose to equate them all with flowers.”

He’d then proffered a few examples to make his point (a cete of badgers, a clamour of rooks and a hover of rainbow trout), prompting a tetchy but mildly apologetic reply from a sub-editor.

Besides thinking him a disagreeable recluse, you could be forgiven for also thinking he preferred *The Oxford Style Manual* over his fellow humans. However, you would be only partly correct. Robert had not entirely abandoned our species, the one exception to his self-imposed exile being his friendship with Jack Spencer, master of Boughton Manor. Now in his eighties, Jack was roughly a decade his senior.

They first met while walking their dogs three years after Robert bought Mill House. Jack owned, or was owned by, an ageing golden retriever named Matilda (Tilly to all) and meeting someone on a wooded bridle path and not acknowledging the other’s existence stretched the boundaries of incivility, even for Robert. Besides, Clara promptly set about launching hit-and-run attacks on the gentle Tilly, trying to entice her into a game.

Jack commented on Clara’s rudimentary military tactics, saying they reminded him of Borneo’s *Konfrontasi*, and they began conversing. Jack admitted to the more formal title of General John Spencer, DSC, MC, a veteran of every British military skirmish from World War Two to the Falklands. Since then, the two of them usually met once a week for walks over Boughton Down among the beeches, ant mounds and bell heather, or they followed the picturesque Clarendon Way to the neighbouring hamlet of Hawton Mallet for lunch at The Jumping Hare, each finding the other’s company congenial.

Jack Spencer’s wife died a year before they met, which Robert remembered reading about in *The Winchester Chronicle*. Jack often talked about Liz, whom he met during the war while serving as a young cavalry officer. Back then, she was the Hon. Lizzy Hamilton-Smythe, a pretty eighteen-year-old ATF pilot (affectionately called “LHS” by the fighter pilots), who flew unarmed Spitfires and the occasional Lancaster bomber

in the perilous skies over England, delivering them to airfields for young men to carry the fight to Germany.

On their walks, he learnt much else about the Spencer family, particularly Jack's pride in his granddaughter Cassandra's activist work in the world's rainforests. He also heard about the Spencer family's decades-long friendship with a Chinese woman or, as Jack correctly insisted, a Manchu woman, and the recent news of her intended marriage to his son, James. He listened attentively, albeit with bemusement, whenever Jack recounted stories of Katy Yehonala's remarkable life. In all other matters, Jack Spencer decried anything not born and raised on his sceptred, wet and windy island, *this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England. This teeming womb of royal kings...*

Katy's daughter, also named Clara as it happened, was the product of her doomed love affair with an Australian man, Simon Bailey, as well as Cassandra's closest friend. Prior to learning of their friendship, Robert knew Clara Yehonala as a piano virtuoso, an emerging voice for children's rights, and the global face of Valentin—the world's preeminent luxury brands empire. Their sassy Ms Boulevard label, Clara's musical genius (whose concert recordings he enjoyed) and her voluntary work with children had established Clara as the world's poster child for millennial women. He'd recently seen her on a *Time* cover as the magazine's "Face of a Generation".

To his friend Jack Spencer, Robert's time as a foreign correspondent in Middle Eastern war zones afforded him excellent debate topics during strolls along country byways. For the first time in decades, someone didn't immediately leap to attention when he barked and, better still, wasn't in the least backward telling him the world's political problems didn't always need his illustrious Blues and Royals to set matters straight. Jack also admitted his daughter, Emily, was CO of the manor, not him, albeit with threats to deny it in any other company.

As for Clara and Tilly? They agreed to a truce and reconnoitred the woods, hedgerows and downlands together, occasionally setting off on an ambitious pursuit of a startled rabbit, or got to lie on the banks of the River Test eyeing the swans while their humans carbashed each other at The

Jumping Hare—as old men everywhere are wont to do.

Thus far, you may rest assured you’ve met enough of the *dramatis personae* for me to begin the tale of Robert’s road to redemption (and his return to the best-seller list). For writerly correctness, I’ll use the present tense of “used to be an author” from here on to appease the testy gentleman’s reputation as a grammar nazi. His book—not, I hasten to add, the rough manuscript he sent me—guaranteed a rendezvous with the Fates for the man who’d sought escape from another life in the sylvan charm of the English countryside.

As for the manuscript with its pencilled margin notes and scribbled revisions that turned up in Phnom Penh, it begins this story halfway through when Jack’s granddaughter, the young activist Cassandra Spencer, is murdered in the equatorial rainforests of Borneo. However, first things first. As any narrator knows, getting too far ahead of oneself in a story never pays, lest the plot quickens.

So, here, you should pause, take a breath, settle comfortably in your usual way and listen for the fateful knock on his door about eight years ago. It’s time to meet Robert’s caller on that crisp March day.

## The caller

That day, a silver mist netted Palestine Brook. The trees along the bank glistened with morning frost, whitening the raised ridges of the rough bark and the ivy slithering up their trunks. She paused momentarily to listen to the lapping and gurgling of moving water, the only sound to profane winter's cathedral silence and noticed the gauzy, woven twigs of last year's nests and an occasional ball of mistletoe in the bare branches. From its origins in the heart of the earth, the brook's peaceful melody calmed her nerves, and she mused over how little ever changed in villages like Boughton. She often said if someone removed the telegraph poles and cars, she'd struggle to decide which century she'd landed in.

Standing there in the frigid air, she reaffirmed her mission and shivered—not only with the cold. She pulled her scarf tighter and plunged numbed hands deep into the pockets of her black astrakhan coat. Shoulders hunched, she continued down the diamond-speckled lane, her passage marked by footprints on the frost.

The lane followed the course of Palestine Brook and led her towards Mill House. According to Emily Spencer, her friend at Boughton Manor, the mill ground wheat for the village bakery until the early 1900s. Then, the advent of electricity and motor vehicles ushered the twentieth century into Boughton, bringing an end to the miller's livelihood and the familiar sight of his horse-drawn cart laden with flour sacks. She said the brook still sluiced through an inoperable waterwheel housed in the cottage's adjacent wooden shed, though the paddles had long since clogged with crowfoot weed. Nowadays, the colder depths of the millpond were a favoured haunt for large rainbow trout who migrated upstream from the mightier River Test to spawn. However, even the boldest anglers ceased asking the vinegary Robert for permission to fish on his stretch of water—and woe betide the odd juvenile poacher who tried.

So it transpired that an attractive Asian woman in her forties and my dear friend, stood on the vine-covered porch of Mill House with her breath forming in clouds of fog and, it should be admitted, a renewed bout of

unease. Despite her accumulated summers and several icy winters in an even colder place, she could pass for years fewer than the true number. She stamped her feet, her cheeks flushed, her ears burning red and her teeth chatter in the cold, despite the long coat, leather boots, scarf and stylish beret.

My friend tapped on the door with the heavy iron ring of an old Tudor knocker and introduced herself when the door opened. He presumed her identity and remembered their conversation as if it occurred yesterday, her English *too* perfect, her grammar *too* meticulous. She asked if the deciduous porch vines were clematis. He nodded, saying he preferred to call them *jackmanna*, a purple genus, in a homage to one of his favourite writers. He offered no further particulars. They agreed on the pleasures to come as the season changed to spring.

Robert's caller spoke with a delightful, British-educated fluency that would have fooled an American into thinking her English; she might have deceived him for fifteen seconds had she not charmingly confused her colourful idioms and used the odd malapropism. She also dropped her "r"s now and then, a sure sign of having spent time in the company of Australians. Robert noticed details: a legacy of his earlier life. Intrigued and knowing something of her history from Jack, he laid aside his customary brusquerie and invited Katy out of the cold and into his home.

He took her coat, scarf and beret, taking in the upscale Ms Boulevard and Valentin labels as he hung them in the hall. He led her into the sitting room, gesturing towards one of two vintage leather reading chairs set around an old stone fireplace. Straightaway, she felt the heat radiating from the log fire bathing her face. She thanked him and sat down, rubbing her hands together briskly before extending her arms towards the blaze, wincing at the sharp pricks from tiny needles on her bloodless fingers. The sting soon dissolved into a comforting warmth.

He asked if she'd like a coffee, insisting he'd been about to make one for himself anyway, so there would be no large inconvenience.

'Do you take milk and sugar?'

'My usual home is in Melbourne, Mr Sinclair. Our Italian community believes it's a crime to add either, as does my daughter's Italian partner, unless for *macchiato* or *cappuccino* and then only before ten,' replied she,

hoping to tempt her host into a conversation.

Robert responded with a stifled grunt, which might or might not have been friendly.

‘As the sun’s over the yardarm, I’ll take it you mean “no”. And I assume you don’t wish me to offend you by serving up a vile instant.’

His visitor smiled. ‘I’d be grateful for anything hot enough to liquidate me from the walk here.’

He ambled off to the kitchen without further comment. Katy crossed her legs, relaxed into the soft leather and studied her new acquaintance. She saw he still retained the frame of someone who once exercised regularly, though the usual girth of age had evened his waistline to match the upper and lower portions of his torso. His face showed signs of time spent outdoors in sunnier climes than England’s; in his youth, she guessed he’d been a handsome man. With a bit more care about his appearance, she thought he’d look quite distinguished even now. His grey hair probably used to be fair and wavy and looked unbothered by the labours of a trained hairdresser; she hazarded a guess he cut it himself for convenience rather than grooming. Had Robert been a friend back then, she would have rummaged around for scissors and trimmed off the uncooperative strands curled over his ears and collar herself, also trimming off five years. He wore a shawl-collar knitted pullover, far from new but a favourite, which hugged him like a lover. Her’s too, she decided, with its bottle green colouring matched with beige corded pants. His brown, casual shoes looked expensive, the leather distressed from wear and polished to within an inch of their lives, though wearing down at the heels. She concluded the owner of Mill House was an odd combination of fussiness and indifference.

He scooped beans into a hand-operated contraption designed for a Spanish Inquisition’s torture chamber, which, when he began winding the handle, sounded up for cracking the odd digit. After a minute or two’s noisy grinding, he inspected the grains with a judicious eye before tipping them into a modern espresso machine.

*This man brews his coffee as if attending a companion, not from habit.*

She continued to observe him while he chinked around in the

cupboards, searching for a second cup. Entertaining guests appeared to be low on his list of priorities or social calendar. Agreeably distracted by the rich, caramel aroma of coffee brewing—strong enough to awaken her ancestors—and the barista-y sounds issuing from the kitchen, Katy paused her surveillance. She closed her eyes dreamily, giving her senses time to drown before moving on to inspect her more immediate surroundings.

Books. They cluttered his cosy sitting room in overflowing bookcases, on tables and stacked on an antique rolltop desk in a teetering pile that also held a laptop computer, a pair of spectacles and what looked like yesterday's red wine glass.

*He probably drinks wine at his desk the same way he drinks his coffee.*

Colourful post-it notes garnished several books, which she assumed meant they were being read concurrently. Music played indistinctly in the background; she recognised one of Schubert's Impromptus her daughter loved to play. She couldn't recall which one. Perhaps *Rosamunde*?

Anyone seated at the desk's swivel chair looked through a white-painted panelled window onto the path she'd walked along five minutes ago. The ripply glass created slightly out-of-focus images of the gate and across part of the garden, as if both lay underwater. Had he watched her arrive? (He had—drawn by Clara's incessant yapping—noting his caller walked with the natural grace of a self-assured Asian woman, no matter the scarf, turned-up collar and beret partially obscuring her face.)

Like the absent second cup, nothing in the sitting room indicated Robert moved in social circles, confirming Emily's comments about his dour nature. Family photographs were neither hung on walls nor displayed on tabletops—except for a framed picture of a woman and, presumably, her young son on the mantelpiece above the hearth. Their arms were around each other. The woman looked to be in her late thirties, perhaps forty, with a shaggy, short hairstyle, the boy around ten or so. The woman's smile stretched to her eyes, giving her an easy-going, likeable expression. The picture hadn't been taken in England but somewhere in the Middle East, judging by the clothing of the background figures. Curiously, the image somehow bypassed the usual tricks of time, revealing the subjects in the haunting clarity that only older cameras could do—back

in the days when cameras didn't lie. She glanced towards the kitchen again. Nothing else, no grandson's psychedelic artwork, reminder notes or other items decorated the pristine-white refrigerator door. The incongruity of the photograph caused a fleeting furrow to her brow.

To Katy, Mill House appeared more a modest cottage than her idea of house. Still, most dwellings would appear so compared to the grandeur of Boughton Manor, soon to be her new home. Nevertheless, it had charm—if a place lived in by a reclusive septuagenarian man could best be described as charming. Years of accumulated bric-a-brac under the sturdy oak beams of the low ceiling looked to Katy the result of decades of travel. They were neither dirty nor clean, instead having acquired the patina of age. To her, Robert appeared to be a man who lived in the past rather than escaping from it, and few would dispute the sitting room did duty as a man cave. She guessed, incorrectly as it happens, that his bedroom at the top of the circular cast iron stairway looked much the same. All in all, Katy concluded Robert cared not a fig for modernity beyond the coffee machine and laptop. Not even a television. She wondered why he'd allowed her into his hideout in the first place.

To her right, French doors opened onto a brick patio and still-frosty lawn. She turned her gaze to the garden. Beyond the nickelled grass and its serpentine bluestone edging, flowerbeds not yet touched by sunshine lay dormant beneath the frost, though unmistakable signs of spring were emerging through the frozen earth, budding the shrubs and preparing for April. Now warmed by the fire, she savoured the crystalline fairyland—crocuses, snowdrops and clumps of daffodils challenged winter to try harder, their blooms luminous above the foliage of last year's plants, withered since the snails and seasons finished their work.

She wondered if he'd left the garden untended for wildlife shelter, winter interest or just neglectfulness. A tiny robin hopped from beneath a decomposing foxglove leaf with a red berry in its beak, catching her eye and answering the question—at least for the robin. Like her host, Katy noticed things; like her mother, she'd loved gardens all her life. Even her name came from the pretty flaming katies her mother once grew inside their courtyard home in Shenyang during the harsh winters common in



North China's Liaoning Province, which bloomed outside in joyful, multicoloured brashness in the too-brief summers. She adopted their name as a teenager at Shihua School when she first met her English teacher, Emily Spencer, less than a handful of years older than she.

A picket fence, in need of repair and crying out for a coat of paint, enclosed the sizable boundaries of the grounds. It kept company with dense, evergreen shrubbery and large trees. Together, they contrived to erect a bulwark against ramblers, fishermen along the nearby riverbank or, she supposed, over-friendly neighbours. There didn't appear to be any except for Boughton Manor, its chimney tops just visible behind screening trees and an old stone bridge in the distance. The bridge looked around a quarter of a mile upstream as the magpie flew, though the walk to Mill House was much further. Tucked under an elm towards the bottom of the garden stood a sturdy bench, the wood weathered grey over innumerable winters. The low sun reflected from its coating of hoar frost, causing her eyes to squint from the glare. With a pillow or two, she imagined the seat a peaceful place to read under summer's canopy or to doze off after a morning's pottering among the flowerbeds.

For now, the elm stood naked. Its leafless boughs reached skywards from a craggy trunk in a plea for spring, evoking an image from her past as winter trees always did—when the eleven-year-old Ye May-ling, as she was then, looked out across the Mongolian Plain of North China. Her mind drifted to when she and her parents returned home to Shenyang from the gulag in a war-weary military vehicle after China's Cultural Revolution finally ended. They and their driver, a similarly exhausted Pirelli man in a quilted Mao suit, shivered together as they ploughed through the windblown sleet of the high plains.

Wiping condensation off the unheated cabin's side window to gaze at the occasional tree, the young May-ling first coined her metaphor—upended fish skeletons—as the lonely trees appeared to her in the bleak landscape. She recalled her parents' laughter and joined in. The fish skeleton analogy wasn't especially funny, still, during two years of forced labour in the foothills of the Changbai "Forever White" Mountains on the Siberian border, the Yehonala family learned to find humour in ordinary things. And why Katy never imagined winter trees any other way. Or

forgot the laughter.

Her parents were long gone now; their lives shortened by the experience of a brutal exile. Their memory remained. She mused over the currents of life which had carried her to Mill House, stirring flashbacks of her mother's iron will and unfailing love during her lost childhood. Today, she'd come to Mill House to see Robert about another mother's love, her resolve firm.

Her host returned with coffee, thick and hot as lava, and an eclectic assembly of biscuits, distracting her reverie. The almost-strangers faced each other around the fire. The smell of coffee, the aroma of old leather, the seductive hint of vanilla over a slight mustiness from the books and the fire's warmth kindled other memories of her father's storytelling around a similar fireplace. She glanced down. Two large, ebony eyes met hers and blinked back suspiciously.

'Her name's Clara. Unlike your daughter, *her* fame's limited to guardianship of the sofa and my protection from passers-by.' As if on cue, Clara introduced herself with a low guttural noise not unlike water running down a plughole.

Robert handed a broken-off chunk of ginger biscuit to his diminutive bodyguard and dunked the remainder in his coffee.

'I assume you know who I am,' he said. 'I daresay you don't habitually drop in on nameless men living alone.'

She sipped her coffee and sighed appreciatively. 'Not all of us Chinese women practise that honourable profession, Mr Sinclair.'

'I didn't—' Temporarily suspending Newton's Law—and saving Robert from what may have been an exquisitely awkward sentence—Clara levitated onto the writer's lap, still muttering her disapproval of Katy's intrusion. Although admitting to a vague sense of trespass, conveyed unconsciously or not by Robert (and plainly by Clara), she felt more at ease after catching him on the defensive.

'I know who you are, Mr Sinclair, and can tell from your expression, you know me. And it seems you also know my daughter.'

'I claim no third eye, Mrs Yehonala—who in the world's not heard of Clara Yehonala? A piano virtuoso people call the Jade Princess and, so far

as I can tell, the icon for millennial women from New York to Timbuktu. Now, if you wouldn't mind, spare me the social niceties and tell me why you're here.'

'I came to see you about something other than me or my daughter,' returned the other, refusing to be intimidated. 'I want you to write a book. And I hope you'll call me Katy. Everyone else does.'

'Then I shall join the flock.' He didn't offer a reciprocal informality; she sensed an unwillingness more than rudeness. 'I admire forthrightness in people, Katy. However, with the greatest respect, why on God's green earth would I want to write anything for you, let alone a book?'

His eyes fixed on Katy's. Dark circles hinted at a profound sadness to her. They held the curious gaze of an observer and a kindness she didn't expect from what she'd heard about him from Emily. Not cordiality exactly, more like she'd become a character in a book and he needed to work out her moods. She squirmed minutely on the chair under his scrutiny, hoping he didn't notice.

'Walking here from the manor took me twenty minutes. I asked myself the very same question every step of the way.'

'May I presume you arrived at an answer? Or are you here on an errand from Jack Spencer?'

Katy returned her coffee cup to the small table next to her chair.

'I'm not in the habit of running errands for anyone. And Jack would be multiplied if you thought he put me up to this. No one did. And no one in the family knows I'm here except Emily. I'm here to see you about her daughter. The book's about her, not Clara or me. Even a private person like you knows what happened to Cassie Spencer; everyone in the village loves her.'

'Jack telephoned the day after he heard. *The Chronicle* and news services also carried the story of her death in Borneo. My deepest sympathy, Katy, to you and the Spencer family. The papers described her as a courageous young woman.'

'Thank you. Since the funeral, it's been a black two weeks for everyone at the manor.'

He nodded considerably.

‘You may or may not know Jack and I are friends. He’s the one person in Boughton I have time for, and we regularly walk in the countryside with our dogs. I’m also aware of his deep affection for his granddaughter. Like everyone else in the village, I walked up to St Mary’s for Cassandra’s funeral. Afterwards, I went to the wake at The Fox and Hounds to offer my condolences to Jack; I doubt you would have noticed me in the crowd.’

‘You do me a disservice; I miss very little when it comes to Jack. I saw you and asked Emily who you were. He’s been like a father to me since I first visited the manor as an unworldly university student and Emily’s friend, more than twenty-five years ago. Whatever I am today has a lot to do with Jack Spencer.’

‘He told me about you; I know he holds you in high esteem. He also told me his son, James, and you are to be married and you’ll be living at the manor.’

‘You’re well informed. Yes, that’s true. If Jack spoke about me, you’ll know I’m not the submissive Chinese troop you find in old films—I don’t have the slightest hangup about pulling whatever heartstrings you have to help my friend and her family deal with the horror of Cassie’s death. Unlike me, they’d never dream of asking you.’

The ghost of a smile unfolded. ‘You’ve accurately identified the Englishness in us. However, as I’ve already intimated, I’m not the one you should be asking. Is there anything else on your mind I can help you with before you leave?’

Deliberately, Katy looked into his eyes, ignoring the brush off. ‘Why not you, Mr Sinclair? You write books—the Spencers have at least three of Robert St Clair’s novels in their reading room. I read one of them.’

Unmoved, Robert returned a colourless expression Katy found impossible to decipher. ‘Your otherwise faultless grammar is incorrect on this point. I *wrote* books.’

She leaned towards him, undeterred. ‘Have you ever heard of Cassie’s war on Boughton Down?’ She paused, expecting a response. None came. She pressed on. ‘It’s quite a story, almost folklore in the village. When she was twenty-one, she fought the landowners and the big bugs at the council over letting their cows and sheep loose on the downs—and beat them. The

police arrested her, along with her university friends, after chaining themselves to trees during the battle.'

'Jack did tell me the tale and about some scheme of hers involving rare orchids.'

Relieved at finally drawing a reaction, however non-committal, Katy relaxed into her chair. 'Do you enjoy an occasional walk on Boughton Down with your dog, Mr Sinclair? If you do, you can thank Cassie Spencer for preserving them. She's a heroine to everyone in the village.'

'And, I understand, your daughter's best friend.' He paused to sip his coffee. 'Jack and I do walk on the downs now and again. Why a book anyway? Cassandra Spencer's unlikely to be forgotten.'

Katy went on to talk about Cassie's work. She recounted the sisterlike affection between her daughter and Cassie, comparing them to two bee-birds, feeding off the nectar of friendship and each other's quirky sense of humour. She mentioned Clara's early departure from the manor to fulfil concert commitments, despite her sorrow over Cassie's death.

'I'm sure that must be hard on her; from what Jack's told me, your families have seen enough tragedy.'

'You can rest assured, Mr Sinclair, my daughter's one of the most resilient people I know and more than once has helped keep our heads high during family crises.'

Feeling her confidence growing, she pressed on. 'Cassie spent the last six years of her life in the world's rainforests, fighting to protect them from loggers and palm oil corporations. She called their crimes "rainforest bastardry". In the end, men from a timber company in Kalimantan took her life when she exposed their environmental crimes—'

Barely contained grief churned to the surface, threatening to upset her steely self-control. She got up from her chair, walked to the French doors overlooking the garden and looked out, gathering herself before turning towards him.

'No, I won't use fairy-fluff words. They didn't "take her life", as the newspapers reported. The newspapers sanitised her death so delicate sensibilities wouldn't be offended.'

Katy struggled to swallow the lump constricting her throat and clenched her fists white to hide trembling hands.

‘Men beat her up, raped and then shot her, Mr Sinclair. And they dumped her naked body on a rubbish tip as a warning to others to keep out of their business.’

Her host sat motionless, meeting her gaze. She felt the sharp sorrow of being in an emotional place she’d visited too often during her life.

*Does he care?*

Remembering her mission, she forced herself on.

‘Those men worked for a company owned by one of your British multinational corporations called Boswell Deveraux. They weren’t just some third-world hooligans. Maybe you own shares in Boswells, Mr Sinclair? James told me thousands of British retirees do—and reap healthy profits for themselves. He and I flew from Melbourne to Kalimantan as soon as Elena, Clara’s partner, reported Cassie missing and we were there when the police recovered her body a few days later. James and I brought her home. They told us she must have fought her attackers like a tiger.’

He lowered his eyes.

‘I can only imagine the horror you’ve all been through. Even so, the fact is I’m not the one you should be asking. As I said, I no longer write; it’s years since I published anything—and I don’t intend to again.’

‘*Can* you imagine the horror, Mr Sinclair? James and I had to identify her broken body in a grubby hospital mortuary.’ Her voice faltered. ‘Do you *really* think you can imagine the obscenity of that hellish day in Kalimantan?’

Katy turned towards the fireplace, careful to keep hidden the blurry watering in her eyes. She walked purposefully to the mantelpiece. She picked up the photograph, looked at the woman and young boy, then turned to face him.

‘I see you have a daughter and a grandson. How would you feel if you lost them like Emily and Jack lost Cassie?’

Robert’s shoulders slumped. Wretched, he stared aghast at Katy, his voice a hoarse growl. ‘What the hell right do you have to pretend you know anything about my bloody life!’ He made a move to stand. ‘And that isn’t my daughter’s pic—’

Startled (and a little frightened), Katy jerked a step in retreat at the

assault. She saw the anguish threatening to overwhelm him from wounds she couldn't see.

Robert slumped back into his chair. 'Put the damn picture down, Mrs Yehonala. Right now. You've gone too far. It's time you left my home.'

Now he did get to his feet. His glare turned to a quiet appeal. 'Please.'

'My sincere apologies, Mr Sinclair; I meant no offence. I'll leave. Before I go, may I tell you something?'

'I've no doubt you're going to tell me anyway—whether I want you to or not.'

'Yes, I am.' Katy straightened her shoulders and met his eyes. 'We haven't told your friend Jack all the circumstances of Cassie's death. He'll find out one day. I've no doubt it will kill him; he already blames himself for what happened to her. Did you know he encouraged her to go to Kalimantan—or Borneo, as he still calls it from his wars there?'

'He never mentioned it to me.'

'Nonethemore, it's true. The IRA killed his eldest son, Mike, in Northern Ireland some years ago. Mike was a lieutenant in his old regiment, and Jack saw Cassie as the last of the Spencer warriors. You said he spoke about her, so you'll know of his pride in her activist work with Polaris. You're a writer, used to putting yourself in another's shoes. I beg you to put yourself in the Spencers'. Write Cassie's story for Jack. Please.'

She replaced the photograph on the mantelpiece and noticed a small, tarnished badge alongside the picture frame, shaped like a cloverleaf. She turned back to face him.

'We need our heroines, Mr Sinclair, and for their stories to be told. And the Spencer family, my family, the village and yes, even the world, should grieve for Cassie's passing and remember what she died for and all she achieved in her short life. We Chinese have a saying that life springs again from calamity.'

Katy paused. She'd made her case, not as well as she wished. She realised her request wasn't just about persuading a retired writer out of his seclusion, as she first imagined. She made her way with him to the hallway. He helped her into her coat while she retrieved her scarf and

beret, slipping them on.

‘Thank you for your hospitality, Mr Sinclair. I’m truly sorry for speaking tactlessly; it’s one of my many failings. However, I *will* call on you again next week. Whether you let me in or not is up to you.’

By now, Robert had recovered his composure.

‘I should not have spoken so severely, Katy. It is I who should apologise. The picture and the badge are treasured possessions. You were not to know.’

He opened the door. Katy stepped outside and turned to face him for the final time. ‘I understand you’ve lost your desire to write, Mr Sinclair. I hope the same isn’t true of your humanity. I won’t give up.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you will.’



## From the manuscript...

Jack had spoken about Katy Yehonala. He hadn't prepared me for the living version. I was aware of her family lineage, which placed her as the fifth-generation granddaughter of the Dowager Empress Cixi, the last Manchu ruler of the Qing Dynasty. In a world without the communists, she'd be a princess—proof enough that dynasties don't last forever. I'm reserving judgement on the blackest nights.

In Katy, I recognised that rare yet familiar quality of Donegan's velvet toughness, which made her hard to ignore—or refuse. I never doubted she'd keep her promise to return. Her visit disturbed me, not for the visit but for the memories she'd evoked. In the loneliness of that night, I paced back and forth around the bedroom. Once, my hand reached for the drawer in the bedside table and pulled it open. I looked at the small, white box inside, slowly pushed the drawer closed, determined to conquer the earlier years' dependency.

I woke up three times, tossing and turning. Not for long each time. Just long enough to break my sleep into nightmarish vignettes from the past, seeing images like those of Cassandra's brutal death. Unlike downstairs, my bedside tables held a dozen cherished photographs of birthdays, places and friends from times past. They'd finally become keepsakes for wistful reflection, more than the maudlin and inebriated ones they used to be—until Katy's visit.

The third time I woke, sweat beaded my forehead. The bedside clock showed 04:37. I regretted my obstinacy over the Ativan. Unconsciously, I reached across the bed for Donegan, a gesture I concede had all the earmarks of Pavlov, though my outstretched fingers found Clara. She licked my hand. Clara had slept alongside me since I brought her home as a twelve-week-old puppy three years ago, then a black furball who'd strutted around Mill House with an air of dignity only a poodle puppy who'd barely mastered walking could do. I rolled my head towards her, my anchor to innocence and love, freely given—as freely as an occasional, silent fart that could evacuate a building faster than a Beirut bomb threat.

‘The woman I met today wants me to write a book, little one.’

Clara fidgeted over in the half-light, rested her head on my shoulder and licked my nose. As in the lonely predawn moments of earlier years, I imagined holding Donegan, her frail, trembling body as light as a sparrow’s. I remembered us being sixteen and in love, then older until, at the end, as if she existed only in books with unfinished chapters—of romances and tragedies, wonderful and dreadful, left on a bookshelf to gather dust like the moor’s last sigh.

‘Do I want to write on those blank pages, little one? Am I to be the chronicler of others’ bloody wars again? I’ve scarcely survived my own.’

Since buying the house five years ago, I’d kept my truth hidden—when fate conspired with destiny and brought me here briefly as a teenager over half a century earlier. Katy Yehonala, unwittingly, reopened the wounds yesterday. This wasn’t the first time I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. I gave up trying to sleep and went downstairs, revived the fire and made coffee. I sat quietly with Clara on my lap, looking into the flames, reflecting on why I lived like an ascetic in a John Constable landscape.

End of sample