

The Sorrows of Sisters / Wendy K. Harris

The Sorrow Of Sisters

by

Wendy K Harris

A Note to the Reader

If you should visit the Isle of Wight, you can find many of the places mentioned in this story. But some of them belong in the realms of the imagination, or may have been washed away by the sea.

WH
Isle of Wight 2006

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For Terry
For sharing the island with me

One

My father. Eighty-five years old and still pretending. He sat at his roll-top desk, faking importance, trying to convey that I was disturbing him at some weighty task, just as he'd always done. Sometimes I wondered if he'd prefer me to call him Doctor rather than Dad. Poor old man. He looked frail. The skin drooping under his eyes and beneath his chin had a waxy pallor as if bits of him had already died.

'Dad - '

He flapped a knobbed hand to shoo me away as if I was still a small girl. But I wasn't going to be dismissed, not at my age. I spoke quietly but I could feel the anger spitting through my teeth.

'Dad, I can't believe you simply forgot about her.'

He glanced towards me, somewhere around my middle, blinking rapidly to protect his eyes from the glare of my scarlet fleece with its skating penguins. His chest wheezed under his stained, black waistcoat and he winced. I remembered his cracked rib. He'd tripped over his brass fender last week getting up to examine a patient. Another pretence of his was that he hadn't retired. Some of his old cronies still hobbled into his dismal consulting room to have their abdomens auscultated and their prostates probed. I took a deep, calming breath.

'Did you and Mother deliberately not tell me about her for some reason?'

He still wouldn't look at me - just poked at the solicitor's letter I'd placed on his desk, wanting me to retrieve it. I fought down my impatience and sat in silence, knowing it would unnerve him. Confused, he put on his glasses and peered around the cream and brown room, studying the raw anatomical models of lungs, perusing the sagging shelves crammed with dusty research, as if the answer might lurk there, contained within his life's work. It did seem to focus him, help him get his thoughts together. He tapped the letter a few times, his hand like a crusty toad.

'Really, Jane,' he rasped, 'the truth is, I haven't thought about her for years - long before your mother died.'

He turned away from me in his swivel chair as if that was that. I could smell the old leather as it creaked. Everything about my father seemed to smell and creak these days. He picked up his fountain pen. The nib looked dry and rusty. Perhaps he thought I'd go if he wrote me a prescription. I sat.

'In fact, I assumed - your mother and I both assumed - that she'd died. Lill... Lillian was ill when we left the island.'

He faltered over her name, lips trembling. And then a tremor seemed to pass right through his body as if an icy hand had grasped the back of his neck. I put my hand on the arm of his chair and swivelled him back towards me. I should leave him alone, let his blood pressure settle. But I couldn't.

'Dad, I don't understand. Are you saying that Mother had a sick sister, ten years younger, that she just left behind and presumed died? But why? She told me she was an only child.'

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for his fob-watch as if he had an appointment.

'I don't remember her telling you that.'

'Okay. Maybe I dreamt it. But even if I made it up, why was Lillian never mentioned?'

'I can't think. I expect they disagreed over some triviality and decided to cut each other off.'

'Triviality! We're talking a whole lifetime here - her little sister, her only relative. How could she?' Even as I said it I could imagine my mother doing just that. Victoria had been an apt name for her - rigid as a corset.

He gave a dry cough. 'Things happen in families - time goes by, people forget.'

Exasperated, I ran my hands through my hair. 'But Dad, Lillian was my only aunt and I knew nothing about her and now it's too late.' I felt a pulse of heat gather in my belly and rise up through my chest and face making my head zing. Perhaps I should get him to prescribe me some HRT - except that he'd probably never heard of it.

'Jane, don't get so agitated. You always were melodramatic. All those damn silly books you write.'

But I felt agitated. I felt cheated, and full of the impotent rage that I remembered from childhood that knows it's never going to get anywhere because the forces it is up against are impenetrable. And now he was insulting me. Silly books! My writing was my talent, my livelihood. He'd never even read one of my novels as far as I knew. If he had, he'd never thought to comment. I'd even dedicated one of them to him and given him signed copies of the rest.

I snatched the letter from his desk, startling him so that he jolted his sore rib. In that moment I recognised a feeling of satisfaction that I could inflict pain on him. Sometimes I wanted to hurt him so much. Oh, God, what a cow I was being. He was just a brittle old man, victim of his own generation. Contrition set in as usual. I reached towards him; he flinched away.

'Oh, Dad. I'm sorry. I keep forgetting your poor old ribs. I didn't mean to get angry.' I always ended up being the one to apologise. Why couldn't he ever reach out and comfort me? 'Perhaps you should go and lie down.'

'I'm going to, if you'll let me be.' He tugged off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as if trying to erase me from his vision. He gestured for his stick and heaved himself painfully from his chair. I longed to help him but knew I would only be rebuffed again. 'Perhaps you would be gracious enough to make me a cup of tea,' he said. I leapt up to open the door for him, trying to make amends.

As he shuffled past me he paused. 'You wouldn't have liked her - your mother's sister - strange, mad thing she was.' He looked at me at last, rheumy-eyed, and words tumbled out before he could stop them. 'Don't go over to the island, Jane. Nothing of interest there. Wraith Cottage is just a hovel. Let the solicitor sort it out. There might be a few pounds in it for you. Not worth wasting your time.'

For a few rare moments I held his eyes and then I felt a sinking down of myself inside as if I was being diminished and I had to look away. I could smell the hill fog seeping into the hallway under the front door. His stick rattled on the floorboards as he waited impatiently for me to come out of his study and close the door so that he could lock it behind me.

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Emmeline stood at the edge of the cliff, looking out to sea. She had come out to watch the full moon but heavy clouds were blanketing most of its shine. She must remember not to venture too far. A chunk of land had fallen recently, taking a bite out of the overgrown end of the vegetable garden.

She peered down to the beach below. She felt momentarily giddy and steadied herself with her stick. Silver streaks of moonlight flickered on the shore mingling with the sweep of the beam from St Catherine's lighthouse. She imagined she could see Lilly running barefoot along the edge of the waves, her blonde hair streaming out behind her in the wind, sand sticking to her brown legs and arms, laughing, she was

always laughing.

Emmeline smiled. Lilly trailed sand everywhere, sprinkling the carpeted corridors of Wraith Cove Hotel and the velvet upholstery of the chairs. Nobody minded. The guests patted her head, her father swept her up and sat her on the marble-topped bar. Even Henry would lift her onto his shoulders and carry her down to the beach, jogging her up and down until she squealed. It was the only time Emmeline could remember seeing him smile - really smile, his whole face alight with pleasure. Victoria didn't smile though. She watched with her mournful brown eyes, waiting to catch Lilly and torture her with brushes and combs, and squeeze her wriggling feet into patent leather shoes.

Emmeline sighed deeply and closed her eyes. 'Help me, Lilly,' she called, feeling her words whipped away across the dark sea. She stood, sensing Lilly in the buffeting wind, hearing her in the tinkling shells which hung on strings from the driftwood sculptures that filled the garden of Wraith Cottage. She could see her in the shreds of mist that spiralled over the sea. Wraiths, Lilly called them, the souls of the drowned playing in the moonlight. 'You must help me remember everything, Lilly.'

'But, you know everything, Emm.' Lilly's voice was clear in Emmeline's head.

'I know what happened. But I want to know everything - all the pain you kept from me.'

'I didn't keep anything from you.'

'You protected me, Lilly - to prevent me from killing him. You closed part of yourself away.'

'I was protecting myself too, Emm. I was protecting myself from feeling your pain as well as my own.'

'We should have talked before - I didn't know you were going to leave me.'

'I couldn't help it. My heart was stretched too thin to go on. But I won't leave you. I will stay until you're ready to come with me.'

'The truth has to be told first, then I will come.'

Emmeline opened her eyes. The wind had blown a clearing through the clouds and the moon was beaming a silver pathway from the horizon, across the sea and sand and cliffs. She was standing in a pool of light.

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'Poor Henry, sounds like you gave the old chap a hard time,' Chas said, examining his teeth in the dressing-table mirror.

'No, Chas. A hard time would've been my hands round his baggy old throat.'

Chas closed his mouth and clacked his teeth together to test their strength. He was always tinkering with bits of himself, checking them out for durability and signs of wear. I often thought he'd make a good car mechanic. He straightened up, turned sideways, breathed in and inspected his reflected paunch. After a few seconds he released his breath and allowed everything to sag comfortably.

'This has really got to you, Janey, hasn't it? She was only an old aunt. I expect we've all got one of those lurking somewhere. Why are you so upset?'

'Oh, I don't know.' I slung my book at the bedside table and slumped down in the bed. 'It's just the usual feeling of not being considered. Apart from Dad, she was my one and only blood relative. I feel that's important. I know she only left me her cottage by default - there was nobody else - but I would like to have met her. When Dad dies that's it. I'm the end of the line.'

Chas buttoned his pyjama jacket and tucked it in. He climbed into bed, his bulk making me bounce up and down. 'You've got me,' he said, hoisting an arm round my shoulders.

I felt the comfort his big warm body gave me. I leaned against him, smelling Imperial Leather. Thank God, yes, I had him. But sometimes I felt the lack of family like an unknown void. I wondered how it would feel to be without my father, even though he enraged me and eluded my love. And Chas, who I adored and depended on too much - suppose he died suddenly. What would it feel like to walk the world with no ties, no roots? Would my close friends ever mean as much? Their families must always come first for them. Who would I leave the meaning of my life to? I suspected only one's own children could be that involved.

Chas seemed more able to accept our childlessness than I. He came with a copious lineage, annually expanding with nephews and nieces. His relatives were larger than average humans with big mouths and ears and eyes like Red Riding Hood's grandmother. Chas was always trying to escape from being gobbled up. His family was as rotund as mine was spare. He appreciated our pared down life, just the two of us, me wrestling with words, him with numbers. He kissed the side of my head.

'It's the sort of thing that happens to nobody you ever know, isn't it? Letter out of the blue, old Auntie Lill dies on New Year's Day and leaves you her worldly goods. Could be a plot for one of your novels.'

'It certainly could not. I'd never write about anything so hackneyed.' Cheek! First my father and now my husband trivialising my writing. Did everyone poke fun of my books behind my back? 'In case you hadn't noticed, I take my craft extremely seriously. Anyway, there are no worldly goods.'

'An old cottage - that's worldly goods.'

'Dad says it's a hovel and not worth anything.'

'All property is worth something, even demolition value.'

I could tell he'd been giving this some thought. Chas divided life into three columns - debits, credits and a neat balance. Well, I suppose you would if you spent all day doing that. Just like I couldn't let go of a sentence without finding le mot juste. 'Yes, but this is on the edge of a cliff crumbling into the sea. Not even the land is worth anything, no insurance obviously.'

'Superb sea-view... holiday let?'

I laughed at his optimism. He had a way of diffusing my gloom. We were a bit like Winnie and Eeyore. Except when it involved money and then we reversed positions. Chas fretted about our finances just like I lathered over familial angst. Ample bosoms cushioned his childhood but cash was stretched thin, whereas my cushion was financially plump but enclosed in a mausoleum. Chas yawned and checked the alarm clock.

'We could go and see it,' he said.

'Dad said to let the solicitor sort it. He said it's not worth the trip.'

'It might be fun. I haven't been to the Isle of Wight since I was in the cubs.'

'I haven't been there since I was born. And then I was whisked away before I had a chance to gulp the air in case I contracted TB. It all seems a bit paranoid when I think about it.' I imagined being sealed in an oxygen chamber and rushed amidst flashing blue lights to the waiting ferry.

'Well, it's Henry's obsession. He worked with it every day - saw what it did to people. And, I remember your mother had a weak chest. I expect he was only trying to protect you. He does love you in his funny old antediluvian way.'

'Big word - for an accountant.'

'Impressed? I've been saving it up. I read it in the *Financial Times*.'

'Perhaps we could have a long weekend on the Isle of Wight. It would do us

good to have a winter break.'

Chas grunted, removed his arm and shunted down the bed. 'Have to think about it, busy time at work. Ready for lights out?'

I snuggled, drowsy against Chas as his breathing hovered between bearable and unbearable decibels. I had a picture of a small band of goblins excavating deep down inside his throat detonating tiny rumbling explosives.

I wondered if Dad was asleep in his dank home with its outdated heating system. The grey stone house was called Winter Wood, backed up against the Malvern Hills, shadowed and sombre. Was he lying awake under his stiff blankets, listening to the spatter of rain, the moan of the bitter wind, thinking about Mother or me? More likely he'd be pondering the rise in incidence of tuberculosis in dense immigration areas. Even though he'd worked in general practice for years his heart remained faithful to malfunctioning chests. He still wrote papers and sent them off to God knows where.

But I couldn't imagine my father away from his papers and the spores and must of his precious consulting room. Even Mrs Watkins, his multi-purpose slave, wasn't allowed in there to dust. She was always trying to inveigle me, hoping I would chivvy him to tidy his room, as if he were an adolescent. He'd probably die slumped at his desk with his cracked stethoscope round his neck, his hand on his empty appointment book.

But, Chas was right - he probably did love me in the archives of his mind. I wondered if he would have been different if my mother had lived longer. It must be nearly thirty years ago that she died, when I was nineteen. Would he have mellowed? Would they have spent a happy retirement together strolling hand in hand on the hills? Somehow I didn't think so - she was an absent woman, her life spent drawing tight botanical pictures. She catalogued her drawings using a pen as fine as a needle and then filed them in tissue-leafed albums and put them away.

If I was quiet I made her jump when she saw me but if I tried to be noisy to remind her of my existence, she seemed equally disturbed. It was as if she existed with a degree of tension that couldn't abide any fluctuation. She was as obsessed by leaves as my father was with lungs. As I grew bigger and louder and more colourful, she appeared to grow smaller and faded as if I was draining the life out of her. Her heavy brown hair in its fat chignon thinned into a peppery fold. Her drawings grew fainter too; trailing like spiders' journeys. Every time I came home on school holidays she seemed to have diminished. Her breath came in little gasps and she twitched if anyone spoke as if she were constantly being caught out. I felt I had to tone myself down, wear paler clothes, speak softly, in case she crumbled to dust like one of her brittle plants and wafted away, leaving a faint fragrance of violets to remind me that I'd had a mother.

Thank heavens they'd sent me away to boarding school. Most people's idea of purgatory was my paradise; a place where I could play out my fantasies, join the drama group, write technicolour stories, show off. I pushed my behaviour to the edge but stayed just on the right side of trouble. I was popular, the funny girl, a ringleader. I tried to avoid spending holidays at Winter Wood, jumping at invitations to my friends' homes, going abroad with them. My parents never objected to my absence.

When I was very young - like other out-of-context kids - I used to imagine I was adopted. I felt too full of possibilities to belong in that museum of a house. I used to stare at myself in the mirror refusing to see that I'd inherited my mother's chestnut hair and brown eyes and my father's narrow nose. Inside, I was golden and ice-blue and I could fly to the aurora borealis. But the reality of my birth certificate ended that

fantasy: there wasn't a set of miraculous parents searching the planet for me. Even as I grew older my restless imagination refused to be quashed. Perhaps it was a reaction to my monochrome home and the fact that I would rather read than eat. But it seemed to me that everyone contained a latent adventure that only needed a nudge to activate the most curious sequence of events.

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I disentangled myself from the duvet and moved away from Chas who was emitting enough heat to keep the neighbourhood frost-free. I'd noticed recently that if I overheated I would wake sweating and gasping as if I was being strangled. I felt the relief of cooling down and drifted off to sleep wondering about Wraith Cottage and what Aunt Lillian had done to deserve her family's ostracism.

*

Emmeline sat at the kitchen table in Wraith Cottage, her elbows resting in the familiar grooves of the worn wood. She was staring, gritty-eyed, at an open book. On the inside of the glossy cover was a picture of Jane, looking just like Victoria with her heavy chestnut hair and deep brown eyes. At least she didn't look like Henry. Was he dead yet? Lilly had said he was still alive - that she could feel it. But Lilly had been dead nearly five months. Anything could have happened in that time. Emmeline didn't feel anything when she thought about Henry - except hatred.

She put her aching head in her hands, feeling the few wisps of what remained of her soft curls. She knew that if she combed them they would come out leaving her completely bald. She closed her sore eyes and listened to the waves crashing against the cliff and the wind hurling sandy rain at the windows. Small branches were snapping off the trees and rattling onto the tin roof of the outhouse.

'Hold on,' she said to the cottage, feeling the slam of the gale. 'Hold on,' she said to her body, feeling the bite of pain. For a moment she smelt the sweetness of roses. Gentle hands placed themselves on top of hers as she grasped her head. 'Lilly?' she whispered. She felt a kiss brush her scalp and opened her eyes. Marguerite stood beside her, pale-faced with concern.

'Will Jane come?' Emmeline whispered. 'Will I have time?'

Marguerite closed her eyes for a while and then opened them, wide and watery blue. Her mouth moved in a small smile. Emmeline got up and shuffled to the kitchen sink. She shook tablets from a bottle and gulped them down with water. She turned to Marguerite, her face trembling. 'I must sleep now,' she said.

*

I couldn't write. It was as if Aunt Lillian's death had put my life on hold. After Chas left for his office each morning, I went upstairs to my study and waited while my computer growled and tweeted itself through its booting up frenzy. Then I called up my Winnie-the-Pooh screen-saver to hide the blank stare of the virtual page.

What I was doing instead of writing was foraging through my old journals. I had stacks of them dating from when I first learned to write. I started from the beginning, deciphering my faded childish scrawl. Events and outings, school friends and adolescent highs and woes poured from the pages, crowding the room with past lives like resurrection day. But nowhere could I find a reference to Aunt Lillian, or any other relative. There was no mention of the Isle of Wight, my parents' past or my grandparents. My life history, spread out before me, was more about my friends' families. Where were my roots? I was amazed that I'd never thought about this before.

So immersed was I in all this introspection that I didn't become aware of the hours slipping by until I heard the rumble and click of the garage doors when Chas arrived home. I switched off the computer, half expecting Microsoft to flash me a

reprimand about wasting good cyber energy.

'I think I've got writer's block,' I lied to Chas, over pasta and pesto.

'So, what are we going to do about it?' he said, fork raised.

'We? I'm not a bit of plumbing. You can't phone Dyno-Rod to come and unblock me.' We were irritable with each other. Chas was worried about his struggling financial investment department. I could feel him observing me from behind as I banged about the kitchen, making coffee. Was he measuring me up, wondering what size rod I might need? I yanked my shirt down at the back.

'What do you want to do then?' he said, choosing his words with care.

'I think I need a break. A change of place might help me get going. I'd like to go to the Isle of Wight to investigate Wraith Cottage.'

'On your own? But I want to see it with you.'

'Well, you can't get away from the office and I need to go now. I could talk to the solicitor, find out what's going on. If the cottage can be sold it will give the bank balance a good boost.'

Chas leaned back in his chair thinking. With his collar open, tie askew, tipsy expression on his face - he only needed a Frank Sinatra hat and a cigarette hanging out the side of his mouth to look like a piano player in a jazz club.

'There's bound to be plenty of holiday lets on the island. It'll soon be June.' I was suddenly feeling excited. 'I might even be able to stay in the cottage if it's habitable.'

'I don't suppose it will be. Anyway, I don't want you falling off a cliff.'

I smiled. 'I wonder if it's got an Aga. All those books I've written in which they feature - perhaps that's what I need to fire me up. But then, I wouldn't know how to deal with one.'

Chas was grinning now. 'Borrow a dog. Dogs know all about Agas, they belong together. You can't have one without the other. In fact you get one free with them these days.'

'What, a dog with an Aga or an Aga with a dog?' I put my hands on his shoulders and kissed the back of his head, noticing how his greying hair was stretched rather thinly over his scalp just there. We could never stay angry with each other for long. 'So, what do you think? Shall I go?'

'Why not?' His face brightened, 'I could wangle it as a business expense for you - research for your book.'

*

Emmeline couldn't sleep. As the storm subsided so did her pain and she lay drifting in a silent sea of images that loomed into her mind as if her life had been shaken up in a bag and emptied out in a heap.

She was a child again, with gangly arms and legs, crouched on the wet sand with Lilly, making sandcastles. Lilly's fine hair was ruffled by the breeze. Henry stood looking down on them, brandishing his fishing net, issuing instructions. A few yards away Victoria worked at her painting, sitting on a folding stool so she wouldn't get her lace dress sandy.

Then Lilly was running up the beach, laughing. It was dark now and they were grown up.

'Do you remember, Lilly?' Emmeline whispered in the darkness. 'Do you remember our New Year's Eve party on the beach with Woody and Neptune?' She lifted a drug-heavy arm across the bedspread, reaching for Lilly's hand, finding only the flatness of the empty bed. But Lilly was there, she could sense her presence, and hadn't Lilly promised that she would always be there until Emm let go?

'Don't look back, Emm. It's all over.' She heard Lilly's voice inside her head.

'No, Lilly. We have to remember. I won't rest until I make him pay.'

'How can he pay?'

'With his confession to those that deserve to know. I want to witness that.

That's how he will pay.'

'Let go, Emm. Let go and come with me.'

'I can't, not yet. Who will care for Marguerite? We have to remember everything. We need to bring it all into the present otherwise it cannot be healed. And I will never rest. You must keep calling for Jane to come.'

'Hush now, go to sleep. I will watch over you.'

Emmeline breathed deeply, but as her body let go, she felt her mind take hold again, restless with her unresolved life.

'Remember, Lilly, New Year's Eve,' she whispered. 'We were so happy... '

'But you have such a good memory, Emm.'

'Not any more. The drugs have clouded my mind.'

'You can read my journals.'

'No. I need to hear your voice.'

'But, I can't tell it to you, Emm.'

'Why not?'

'Because I will feel your pain and I won't relive it as it was.'

'But it is time for me to know.'

'Then I will have to detach from you and you can listen or not as you choose. I will go and sit on my stone and tell the sea.'

'That sounds so cold, Lilly.'

'But it's the only way I can do it freely.'

Emmeline felt Lillian's presence grow less tangible. She could hear the low moan of the sea, settling itself in the aftermath of the storm. Voices came to her on the wind, laughter, the crackle of fire.

'Tell the truth, Lilly,' she called.

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I can hear Neptune calling me as I stagger up the beach to my stone.

'Lillian! Come on weakling, you can manage one more dance.'

I'm so out of breath, my head is ringing - but maybe that's the gin. Emm runs up behind me and grabs me round the waist so that we both nearly fall.

'Lilly, don't be a spoilsport,' she says. 'We can't dance without you. And then we'll have a rest, I promise. Anyway, it'll soon be midnight.'

I look at her eager face in the firelight. Everything about her shines - her eyes, her cheeks, the light curls that are escaping from under the blue bobble hat I'd knitted her for Christmas. Even the misty puffs of her breath sparkle. I would plunge into the freezing sea if she asked me to. I giggle and grasp her mittened hand and we stumble back down to the flat sand. Neptune is sitting on a rock, smoking, playing his concertina, while Woody winds up the gramophone.

'This is the last one,' I gasp, 'otherwise I'll be sick.'

We prance to the Scottish reels, clumsy in our boots and winter woollies, using driftwood for crossed swords, until all four of us are near collapse with laughter. Then we crawl up the beach to our fire and coats and blankets. We sit watching the moonlight shimmering on the sea, me on my big flat stone, too tired to speak. Emm picks at the remains of the food, humming to herself.

'Okay now, Lilly?'

I nod and snuggle deeper into my dad's heavy camel hair coat, pleased that I'd

kept it after he died a year ago. Victoria had insisted it should go to the WRVS, offended by my suggestion that Henry might like it. Later, when she'd gone back to the physician's house, I scavenged it from the WRVS bundle and lugged it from the hotel down to Wraith Cottage. It is far too big for me but perfect for sitting on a cold beach at midnight. I sniff a lapel. It smells of him, a mixture of Havanas and old malts and the staleness that clothes acquire when there's no longer a wife to organise dry cleaning.

Dear old Dad - Old Father William, his regulars nicknamed him. I could see him now, lurching around the bar and lounge of his beloved hotel; slapping shoulders, flattering the ladies. His voice had grown hoarse and his nose purple and pitted over the years. I was glad he'd died so suddenly, right there, in the centre of his domain - mid puff, mid gulp - struck like a harpooned whale. I hadn't wanted my dad to degenerate into an embarrassment, oblivious to ridicule.

I pull the thick greasy collar up behind my head to cushion my neck against the icy boulder. Victoria might have had the coat cleaned if she hadn't transferred her allegiance to Henry's attire. She does the sort of things that wives - and I suppose mothers - do. I don't remember our mother. I'd killed her when I was born. With her dying gasps she'd pushed me out of her body, bursting her tubercular lungs. That is Victoria's version, anyway, implying I was a nuisance right from the start. Emm told Victoria she had no right to make me feel guilty, I hadn't asked to be born. Men couldn't keep their fly buttons done up - that was where the real blame lay. Victoria blushed and tip-tapped away on her high-heeled court shoes. Emm put her arm around me and said Victoria was jealous. She wanted to be the only child, then I arrived, looking just like her mother that I'd unwittingly killed off.

Poor Victoria - ten years old with a bereft father, an unwanted infant sister and her own grief to deal with. No wonder she thought I was a nuisance. I'm surprised she didn't tip me off the cliff in my pram. But why she should be jealous of me is a mystery. She is the clever one and what an artist! She paints huge pictures of the southern shore of the island. Lashing storms rage over her canvas, jagged rocks thunder down cliffs, trees poise perilously. And also, she has a beautiful curving body and long glossy brown hair. I am just straight, skinny and pale.

I nestle further into Dad's overcoat and watch the fire spit and shift, spark and settle, like an irritable dragon trying to doze off. The dank, salty smell of seaweed mingles with the woodsmoke. My stomach feels stretched with sea-sweet lobster, seared potatoes and swigs of gin. I'd helped myself to a bottle of Gordon's for Emm and me, as well as Martell and Johnnie Walker for Woody and Neptune. It felt illicit to take drink which my father had always kept locked up, but Emm reasoned it was mine now. Mine, and Victoria's, of course; I must remember to tell Victoria.

I watch the others dragging driftwood, thinking I've never felt happier. It must be the freedom. This is the first time I've celebrated New Year with my friends instead of helping Emm and Dad organise festivities for The Old Faithfuls - the folk who return to Wraith Cove Hotel year after year ignoring the post-war slump, growing seediness, encroaching damp and creaking beds. And I don't feel guilty either. The fire in the hotel's kitchen before Christmas had been due to my father's disrespect for maintenance and there is no money to carry out the work necessary in order to reopen. Emm, as manageress, sorted out the Christmas and New Year bookings, refunding deposits, cancelling orders, writing letters of apology, compensating staff.

We spent most of Christmas salvaging kitchen equipment and clearing up with Woody and Neptune's help. The fire brigade made us turn off the electricity. Victoria

and Henry took all the perishable food, as they own a refrigerator. They also took the Christmas tree - Victoria said it would go well in her drawing room. I just had time to steal the glass angel from the top - my childhood favourite. They were welcome to the tree - Emm and I always decorate one in the garden with fat and seed balls for the birds. There was plenty of food left too. Victoria doesn't know all the storerooms like we do. It had been fun having the hotel to ourselves. We lit a fire in the lounge, sprawled on the sofas and went back to Wraith Cottage when dusk fell, to eat Christmas dinner. I have no idea what to do about the hotel and at this moment I don't care.

I watch Emm's silhouette against the glow of the fire as she sits down and inspects the lobsters. Emm is permanently hungry, always picking things clean. And yet she remains so skinny. Her long arms and legs with their knobbly elbows and knees are constantly on the move. With her soft brown hair and her round blue eyes she reminds me of a cross between a fawn and a mountain goat. She has big feet too, that know their way around the rocks and cliffs as if they have a mind of their own. My body fills up with a warm flood of joy just observing her. As usual, she senses my gaze. We've been able to do this ever since we were little girls - pick up each other's thoughts and feelings. She grins and holds out a lobster claw.

'Want any more, Lilly? I'll pick out some nice bits for you.'

'No thanks, Emm. I'm full up.' I wish I could say yes - just to have Emm feed me, to feel her gentle fingers on my mouth.

Woody and Neptune are down at the water's edge pulling their boat further in. I can see their dark shapes bending and swaying, their oilskins glistening in the lantern light. The sea sloshes and sucks at their boots. Their little terrier, Booty, is daring the waves to catch his paws, crouching, tail up, letting out excited yelps of warning. The two men talk together, their heads close - Neptune's close-cropped, Woody's wild and unkempt. I smile to myself, wondering how I was ever troubled by thoughts that Neptune was sweet on Emm.

I remember the time, about ten years ago, when he rowed proudly round to Wraith Cove from Puck's Bay in his first boat. He'd saved hard for it and repaired it himself, painted it white and inscribed Neptune in careful blue letters on the side. He was trying to appear nonchalant, imploring us with his deep-set eyes to like it. He offered to take Emm out for a row and I'd been convinced he had his heart set on her. We'd called him Neptune from then on; a name that stuck and he appeared to like. And then Woody had arrived and we understood how things were between the two of them.

We all love the sea and the wild rocky shore; we have such fun together. The four of us felt invincible until the war came and took Woody away from us and sent him back broken. But he is mending; this beautiful place and our love are healing him. We are lucky, Emm and I - it is like having two brothers. And I'm glad for Emm; it makes up for her own brother, Henry, being rather unkind to her. I reach out and touch her arm and receive a flash of white grin, a glint of blue eyes.

Woody and Neptune are dragging half a tree up the beach. They stash it at the foot of the cliff near our cave where the incoming tide won't reach it, unless there is an exceptional storm. The four of us always pile the sea's bounty there - mindful of war debris - ready to be sorted for usefulness. I pick through it for interesting shapes to decorate Wraith Cottage, Emm and the others for things to be utilised. The men have practically rebuilt their dilapidated fishermen's cottage in Puck's Bay with materials gifted by the oceans. Those two know the sea, descended as they are from a distinguished line of smuggling families.

They join us in the horseshoe of boulders, warming their hands at the fire. Booty starts a methodical clear up of the remains of the food. Emm hands round the brandy.

'Can't be far off midnight,' Neptune says, taking a swig, shuddering as it goes down.

'Half past eleven,' says Emm peering at her watch. 'I wonder what nineteen-fifty-three will bring? Resolutions, anyone?'

'Oh, let's not think about the future,' I say, not wanting the night to end. 'I just want to enjoy this.'

Woody gets out his baccy tin and offers shaggy rollups. A match flares orange and the singe of tobacco adds to the smoky air. I always worry that he will set his beard on fire. Neptune picks up his concertina and begins playing softly. I can see the wraiths begin to rise and drift over the sea, illumined by the moon. They always respond to music. Victoria laughed at me when I told her the ghosts of the drowned play at night - Silly Lilly, she calls me. But Emm never laughs, just stares at the waves, trying to see what I see.

Every few seconds a beam sweeps the beach from St Catherine's. I love the lighthouse - it seems such a symbol of human goodness - this act of safe guidance. I gaze up at the indigo sky with its brilliant stars, wondering how lost sailors could navigate by them. How must it feel to be adrift on the vast, dark sea? I can hear Neptune's boat gently knocking against the rocks - a bigger boat now with an outboard motor. But still, such a tiny vessel.

'I think this must be the best way to see in the New Year,' Neptune says, puffing rings of blue smoke. 'We should do this every year. No matter where we all are, we should make a date to come back here.'

'Sounds like an Enid Blyton pact,' laughs Emm. 'The Famous Four at Wraith Cove.'

Woody gives his slow smile. 'As long as we don't have to be heroic and rescue anybody from a villain.'

'But we'll always be here,' I blurt out. 'Why should we go anywhere else?' I feel tears spring to my eyes just at the thought.

Emm puts her arm through mine. 'Of course we will, little Water Lilly.'

We listen to Neptune playing his sea songs. Booty settles at his feet, his head on his paws.

'What are Henry and Victoria doing tonight?' asks Neptune.

'They're at a party in Ventnor. The posh crowd. Victoria bought a new taffeta gown. But I'd rather be down here.' I pull Dad's coat tighter, wishing Emm was cuddled against me; there is enough room inside for two. It is getting very cold. I can see little bursts of moisture in the air as we speak.

'Do you miss Old Father William and the hotel?' asks Woody.

'No. Well, I miss Dad, but it's nice not to be rushing about trying to keep the old place going, isn't it, Emm?'

Woody gets up and begins thrashing his arms across his body to keep warm. 'Oh, yes. I'd forgotten about your job, Emmeline. I suppose that's gone too, and what about your room?'

She glances at me and squeezes my arm. 'Lilly and I are going to have to think about all that. But first I'm moving into Wraith Cottage and we're going to live together. People can think what they like.'

'Well, that calls for a toast,' says Woody, searching through the bottles. 'I'm glad for you both.'

'Me, too,' says Neptune. 'But don't be surprised if you get a bit of stick from the local jabs. They've got nothing better to do. When Woody moved into Puck's Cottage with me, they came round every night for a while, jeering outside. Didn't they, Wood?'

'We just ignored it - best policy,' Woody says, filling glasses. 'They soon got fed up. But if you have any trouble let us know.'

'Thank you, both,' I say, raising my glass. I don't feel the least bit afraid with these two around the next bay. And who could possibly want to harm Emm and me?'

'Will you have to sell the hotel, Lillian, if there's no money to do it up?'

Woody asks.

'Henry wants me to - me and Victoria, that is.'

'What's it got to do with him?' Emm's voice is sharp.

'Well, he is Victoria's husband - '

'And she's welcome to him, arrogant - '

'Emm! He's your brother, don't forget.' I sometimes forget this myself; they are always so formal and irritable with each other.

'I don't care, Lilly. He lords it over everyone as if it was his right.'

'He's just trying to look after us. He says he understands how to do these things, he knows the right people.'

'Bloody nerve that man's got,' Emm mutters. 'You and Victoria are grown-ups.'

'He thinks women - '

'I know what he thinks about women! He thinks we should all get married and knuckle down to looking after husbands like stupid Victoria. I used to think she had some spirit but she's given up.'

'Oh, Emm!'

'She has, Lilly. She gave up her job at the gallery. She doesn't even paint any more.'

'She's very busy.'

'Busy! Doing what? Starching his collars? Polishing his stethoscope?'

'She's the wife of a successful doctor. That's what she wants.' I look around the circle of faces, all suppressing grins. 'Well, isn't it?'

Emm bursts out laughing and makes a grab for me. 'You have no idea sometimes, Lilly. If you always look for the best in people you might sometimes overlook the worst.' She strokes my hair. 'Little innocent,' she whispers.

'But you won't sell Wraith Cottage will you?' Woody sounds concerned. I remember how he used to come there when he came back from the war, injured and appalled and grieving for humanity. He would wander around the garden and cliffs, or sit in a chair at a window staring out to sea, not moving or speaking for hours. I could still feel his deep anguish if I let my soul touch his. I try to enfold his mind with love until I feel him let go.

'No, never.' I lean forward to touch him. 'We'll find a way to keep it.'

I wish I had my notebook with me. I want to write down my feelings about the lighthouse and the goodness of humanity. I want to write about the dark agonies inside Woody. I've had this urge to write things down since I was small; can even remember the first time it happened. Victoria was combing my long fine hair and tugging the tangles so that my eyes filled with tears. But the tears didn't belong to my pain, they belonged to Victoria's. I felt desperation in her, a primitive need to sink into her lost infancy, for someone to relieve her of the burden of me. She yearned to be cradled in strong arms, to be held to a breast that wasn't made of tissue paper. She wanted me to stop following her around, to cease needing her and loving her. And all

she could do with her rage and frustration was yank my hair.

When she'd finished plaiting and pulling, I rushed away to find paper and pencil. Words dropped onto the page, my eyes and head stopped stinging and I felt better. I hadn't questioned this, it just felt natural, to be done at times of intense beauty and pain. Years later, I told Emm and showed her my notebooks. She read and read and told me I could be a great writer like Virginia Woolf, expressing innermost feelings that everyone could recognise. But I have no desire to write stories or make anything up. I want to write down great gulps of feeling that arrive in my mind and demand release.

Sometimes I am surprised at what I've written, words I never thought I knew, as if I have a wiser, older self inside me. Or else it is the books. We read all sorts of books out loud to each other, Emm and I, in bed, lying on the beach, cosy around the fire in Wraith Cottage. We are collecting quite a library.

Distant bells from the villages dotted along the coast begin to chime and a fairy-lit cruiser out in the Channel lets off a flurry of fireworks. We clamber upright to toast the New Year. I am engulfed in a tangle of creaking clothes, warm breath and chilly noses, tobacco and alcohol, and the quick slosh of Booty's tongue on my hand, as we kiss and hug. We make the fire safe and push the boat out for the men to sail back round the rocky headland to Puck's Bay. We watch them and Booty climb aboard and putter off, their lanterns flashing on the water.

Emm and I make our way up the cliff steps, holding tight to each other and the rope rail, giggling from the gin, seeing the glow of Wraith Cottage through the dark line of the winter trees.

*

Lillian's voice started to fade from Emmeline's mind. Exhausted at last, sated with happy memories, she slept.