

A woman is seen from behind, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with a pink fabric tied around it. She is looking out over a vast, flat landscape that appears to be a beach or a coastal plain under a hazy sky. The overall tone is soft and nostalgic.

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Appeal of
Gillian Pugsley

a love story

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For Grandma
I hope your poems have finally found their home.

*When I grow old, my prayer will be,
To find content,
In memories of how I tried as days sped by,
To do a little good –
A helping hand,
A kindly word,
A tear for tears,
A burden shared,
A load made less because I cared,
And hope reborn, where lived despair.
And when at last my youth has gone,
My memories dim, my story told.
I pray that peace will bless the days,
Still left to me when I am old.*

Chapter 1

I HAVE A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION. One that hasn't marinated or stewed but has been gobbled up faster than my withering body can digest. Life. If I look down at my crimson coat and scarf covered in Scotty dogs, I'm sure I'll start to laugh. Who in their right mind would wear something so festive to such a dreary place? But my barometer always seemed broken when it came to expected behavior. And I wasn't about to fix it for anybody, including this doctor.

Leaning back on his chair, the hospital wall behind him is stippled with pockmarks like a worn institution. But what I remember most clearly about this place was the joy in holding my granddaughter in my arms for the first time. I swaddled her in apple green pixies, getting a look of horror from the nurses' station. But I glared right back as two sets of white clogs slunk behind the desk. *They* couldn't see my granddaughter's eyes light up with wonder the way I could. Of course, it was over twenty years ago; now I'm afraid I'm the one who needs to be swaddled.

I close my eyes for a moment trying to forget where I am, but the hum of his pager plucks me from my trance. Look at him sitting there. Now, I've seen my fair share of sulky

lumps, but this doctor champions the lot. If he only knew what a grand life I'd led, I'm sure he'd be tapping his toes by now. Poor thing, trying to muster up the strength to tell me the worst.

"Mrs. Pugsley," he says, clearing his throat and looking as though I am his one and only patient. I can tell because he's flushed a warmer shade of pink and his eyes look as though they'll well up at any moment. I couldn't have asked for a kinder doctor. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Suddenly I'm not so sure about him. Bad news doesn't sit well with a name like Pugsley, as distracting as it's always been. The first time I heard it, it jangled my nerves. *Angus Stanley Spencer Pugsley*. How cruel could a mother be? The poor scamp wouldn't have a hope in a month of Sundays attached to a name like that. But I love it now and wouldn't change it for anything.

"Perhaps you should get your things in order," he says not knowing what else to say. I'm sure he's right, but I don't know what my *things* are. I have this big nose of mine. That I know. Wherever I glance, left or right, I see its shadow pestering me. I wonder if it's true what they say, that noses never stop growing, because mine is now far too unwieldy for my head. Angus' really got in the way, I thought, toward the end. I sigh, my chest crumbling inside me. *Angus... how I wish you were here.*

A puff of air suddenly reaches my lungs, snapping me back to reality. But of course he isn't around to help; he usually wasn't. Angus preferred to be waited on hand and foot, bless his heart, but he wasn't about to get it from me. The least he could have done was show a little discretion when he tried to get it from the likes of Charmaine Dipple. Good God, the way she flaunted her appendages. Well,

good luck I said to him, but he was back groveling within a week. I find it a wonder sometimes how I miss him so, but soon enough. *Perhaps up there you can dote on me.*

I FEEL MYSELF ON UNFAMILIAR GROUND, walking away with an insidious gob of cancer feasting on my body. But I won't spend another minute in that hospital until I set things straight. I suppose without knowing it, that's what the doctor meant. A nasty chest cold it was when I walked in and a nasty chest cold it shall be. The family doesn't need to know anything different... for the time being anyhow.

I walk along the sodden bricks to the car park with my arm coiled in my granddaughter's in a country where I never thought would take my last breath. Granted, I wish I were walking to my fiery Mini Minor in the old country instead where Angus and I spent a number of years. Mildred was a loyal car and I always felt like a champion driving her. Even Leslie, the watchmaker in Ascot, would step onto the threshold of his shop just to eye my arrival. Oh yes, Mildred in her pearly white overcoat knew how to draw attention. Instead, this little pixie is kindly fetching me yet again. What Gilly wouldn't do for me!

ALTHOUGH GILLY OFFERS TO COME UP, I want to be alone. My flat isn't much, but it's where her grandpa drew his last breath, and I want to feel near him. It's been quite a day after all and tired has come to have a new meaning altogether.

I plop into my cushy pink lounge chair and gaze over the other seven high rises that surround me. They all look the same—gray. Gray in a London that couldn't think up a name for itself, so it has echoed the original's for nearly two hundred years. I suppose it's flattering really; truth is it

made me feel at home instantly. I dare say I even take kindly to Canada's version of the Thames, snaking its way through all the names that are dear to me. Still, it's not the real thing.

And it's certainly not Ireland, my first home, apart from the weather today. But I see the balcony door hasn't been washed for months. Yet if I squint my failing eyes to the rain now trickling down the railing, I can feel something resembling relief. I wondered when it would be my time. Now I have only weeks; months if I'm lucky. Just a cruel blink to sum up a whirlwind of eighty-nine years.

I don't want to say good-bye.

I don't want it to be the end.

I can feel my chest crushing my bony frame as I draw a breath. I never used to notice my age unless I looked in the mirror. But where I used to sashay, I now lumber; I'm afraid I can't bounce back from this wobbler. All in all, I feel perfectly morbid, and I don't think I like it. Angus would knit monkeys in his grave if he saw me like this.

IT'S EXTRAORDINARY HOW TIME FLUTTERS BY. Another early autumn with the bluest of blue skies and I can't imagine being anywhere else with my granddaughter. Three days, two and a half hours have passed but I refuse to count. I'm on a mission here, and the fire sizzling underneath me isn't doused yet!

"Here's a good spot for us to sit, Grandma," Gilly says while brushing some pine needles off a bench. "But watch your step."

Springbank Park is full of benches by the water. And if you're lucky enough, the odd rowing shell will glide by while ducks by the dozens take life at an easy pace. The number of times I'd walked past the old stone pump house only to

be cut off guard by the sudden bellowing of a coxswain. It always riled me until I realized how much fun it looked.

“Yes, the Canada geese have been at it again, I see.” A smile curls up at the corners of Gilly’s mouth. The first smile I’ve witnessed since the news spread of my illness. My nasty chest cold didn’t fool a soul.

“Are you comfortable?” she says, her eyebrows now arched above her new glasses. The black rims suit her being such a pretty thing—her fair hair lying in folds on her shoulders.

“Of all people, you are the last person I want doting over me, do you hear?”

“I know. It’s just... well.”

“For a young woman who’s never been lost for words, I beg you not to start now. You are a writer, Gillian Pugsley, a woman of words and we share the same name for a reason. You are as stubborn as I am and don’t for a second let that go to waste. If you’re wise, it will serve you well. You must nurture this love of yours and no matter how many rejections those deplorable agents send, you must never stop writing.”

“It seems like only you believe I’m a writer, Grandma. Sometimes I wonder myself,” she mutters lowering her chin.

“Look at me. Go on, look at me, Gilly. Do you wake up in the middle of the night thinking of words? Do you leave bits of paper all over your flat with new words or expressions scrawled across them? Do you go for walks then find you are beside yourself when you’ve thought of precisely the way to word something and you’re without a pen and paper on hand? You begin to recite the phrase over and over until you arrive home. And once you do, you sigh a great relief when you’ve managed to scratch it down as quickly as possible? Not because you have to. Not because someone is telling

you to but because you can't bear the thought of not getting it down on paper?"

Gillian wears a look of amazement in her eyes. "How do you know? It happens to me all the time."

"My dear, *you* are a writer. You don't need to be the next Margaret Atwood to tell a great story. You just need to read and write. The more you do, the stronger you'll become. I didn't have this same luxury. Good reads were hard to come by in my day, and writing was for the foolhardy. It certainly wouldn't have put food on the table. In those days practicality was a necessity—especially during the war."

"Are you telling me, *you* wanted to write, Grandma?"

I feel an ironic chuckle reach my breath. "If you recall, I said you were stubborn, as stubborn as me. It may not have been practical to write in my situation, a young woman caring for those around her, working too many jobs to count while the world was at war, but do you think for one moment that would have stopped me from writing? Not a chance."

"I... I can't believe it."

"Dumbfounded twice in one sitting. Not a good sign my dear. But fear not, the words will come again."

My eyes now travel the shoreline, enjoying the serenity of the river. And the sun makes the water glisten like a thousand green sequins tickling the surface. I was wrong to imply the Canadian version of the Thames was anything but lovely. Imitation or not, it has its own charm, narrow and the color of jade with magnificent oak trees nearly clutching the opposite bank. The odd leaf has changed color, yellow, red. Soon there will be too many to count. A lively selection of mallard ducks scurry toward a little girl who's tossing hunks of bread into the water. Gilly reaches over to clasp my hand.

“Grandma, I don’t want you to go.”

“I know dear. That’s why I asked you to bring me here.” A curiosity springs into her eyes. *Yes*, my Gilly is back. “Please,” I motion to my handbag sitting next to her on the grass. “Inside you’ll find a leather folder. Will you give it to me, dear?”

I glance at the folder now resting on my lap. I still find the grouted pattern affecting although others would consider it dull. Moreover, I can smell a faint tinge of the hide almost as though it were new. This big nose has its uses after all. Tracing the edge stitched in thin leather strips, I unlatch the hardware on the front.

“I won’t bother reading these to you. They’ve never had an audience. I’m afraid the words would jump off the page and run for the hills if I let them loose. But I know that if anyone can catch them, you can. They are yours now. Perhaps you can do something with them one day.” A tear begins to swell in my granddaughter’s eye, though I see she tries her best to draw little attention to it. “I could say that I have nothing of value to leave behind, or I could say that I have everything—a sublime tale aching to be told. Lay as they may be, these poems hide a grand story, a story of life and love. A story that will soon belong to you, Gilly.”

I thumb through the pages sighing, my fingers stiff from years of arthritis. But for the first time in weeks, I don’t feel the crushing in my chest. This breath gives me freedom if only for a moment. I gaze fondly at my granddaughter who is whirling with emotions. I can see it as plain as day. My eyes travel downward, examining the wrinkles folding over my skin, my plum veins far too confident. My hands are withered, aged from writing and living the words in this folder—a folder that took a lifetime to fill.

I look into Gilly's eyes—that tear now falling to her jawline. Her young, smooth hand replaces mine on the leather as she tucks it in her arms. Through another tear brewing, she suddenly looks quizzical.

“If I'm called Gilly all the time, why doesn't anyone call *you* that?”

“Only one person ever called me Gilly,” I say, feeling myself drift into reverie for a moment. “I loved your grandpa. If ever there was a tattered slipper to grow old with, it was Angus Pugsley. But there was another... before your grandpa. *He* called me Gilly. My first love and in some ways a love that cannot be measured by time, a love that has never grown old.” There's a long silence between us.

“His name was Christian and he came from a place you once visited as a child, yet far from where I grew up. A small town on the Bruce Peninsula, well... not much more than a harbor for fishing boats at that time.”

“Tobermory?” she utters, likely wondering how I'd met a Canadian in those days.

“That's right.” I feel a smile working its way into my cheeks, and if I dare say, a playfulness in my tone. “Oh yes, Christian,” I sigh throwing my chin back, gazing up at the treetops that shelter the park. “I'd only ever told two people about him. I'm not sure why in retrospect. Perhaps it had something to do with the times or perhaps my father. It wouldn't do to have the daughter of a prominent Irish Catholic architect bring home a Canadian fisherman. *A colonist!* I can hear him say. I don't think I would have lived long enough to go to my next confession. I can hear the meddling church ladies now, tarnishing every last morsel of my delicious love affair, not that I gave a pickled onion what anyone thought—except daddy. Ironically, I've always

thought Father Kelsey would have approved. He was quite like Christian in ways, adventurous above all. Yes, I would have had his blessing, I'm sure, and a little slap telling me to go get him."

"I never knew you were so feisty, Grandma," Gillian says nudging my elbow, trying to look spirited.

"I wasn't always eighty-nine you know."

"Tell me more," she begs.

"Our story—*my* story—is in these poems. I leave the rest to your imagination. After all, you are a writer. You might consider them a gift or a life sentence, knowing they will likely leave you with bags of sleepless nights, words and frustration churning in your head. But aren't the possibilities glorious?"

Curiosity has snatched my granddaughter now. I see it in her eyes. I dare say I can almost see words fluttering down around her like soft snowflakes trying to find their place on the ground, arranging themselves into sentences. She lowers the leather folder to her lap. I know what she will do, what will drive her. She opens the little blue notebook tucked inside. I see my poems drawing her in. I remain quiet, yet somehow I feel my granddaughter's words begin to unfold my story. Somehow I feel those fluttering words bring it back to life. She is a talent, that one! I draw another peaceful breath—no crushing. It feels lovely. I gaze once again at Gilly, the words around her now whirling into a fury, yet not a sound leaves her lips. Oh, how right I was about her. She's getting my story spot on.

I may have left her dangling in ways, but the details will come. She looks up from the page and smiles, an understanding between us that no one else shares. And though our embrace is warm, it's the first warmth my

shivering body has felt in weeks. It seems to me that I'm unable to control my emotions after all. I feel a swelling in my own eyes now—something I've tried to avoid. What's more, I feel incredibly close to this creature in my arms.

When I squeeze out the tears, I notice the river begins to spread, the grassy bank opposite us folding backward. Gilly's words are happening already! She's caught me off guard. I'm not sure I'm ready for it... but it's thrilling. The grand oaks crank themselves to attention, opening up the sun to the water, while their leaves tremble with striking energy. Fallen acorns by the hundreds begin dancing upward, making way for a slew of delivery boys scooting past on vintage bicycles, three hauling carts filled with newspapers, one milkman with bottles making a terrible racket, and a fifth lagging behind with a basket of live chickens. Odd.

I squeeze my eyes again—sure I'm seeing things—then follow the current to the trestle bridge that now grows into something more substantial, lined with stone guard rails on either side. The pavement just over Gilly's shoulder rolls away, and in its place sprouts a cobblestone path leading to a street filled with merchants and huge front-grilled cars put-putting along, all resembling each other in one shade of black. What's more though, a clock tower, perhaps Big Ben, it's hard to know, clangs its third quarter as hurried passers-by ignore its patrol over London. High Street is something to be relished with its myriad of shops as the widespread grass of Springbank Park in Canada's pint-sized London stipples into something extraordinary, a time where men tipped their hats to bid *good day*. The London I knew as a young woman.

I feel a renewed energy pulsing through me, and when I glance around, my granddaughter is nowhere to be seen,

vanished from my arms. I clutch my hands now rich with moisture, veins barely visible. The sagging I once felt in my eyelids has disappeared, and my sharp eyesight is restored. Even my nose seems to have shrunk a size or two. I'm wearing a coral knit dress, cinched at the waist, draping softly to just below the knee with a fine twirl to it if I turn quickly. I remember this dress. I always felt lovely in it. But this hat tilted to the side. I never liked the damned thing. I much prefer letting my hair ripple effortlessly like Greta Garbo's. Yes, I dare say I'm quite like Greta Garbo in ways... sultry when I want to be—or better yet, a *vibrant intensity*. Although no one knows me that way *yet*, something tells me someone is about to.

I am seventeen years old, far from my home in Ireland. I must be visiting my sister Beaty. She always insisted that I wear a hat and wash my hands upon arrival. When I look up, the knocker beckons me. It is 1931, and I am in London, England at last.

*The trees are in full leaf,
The gardens full of flowers,
We swing into the hammock
To dream through sunny hours.*

*But soon the birds no longer sing
The only sound is pattering rain,
The English summer once again,
Runs true to form, and we the same
In soaking garb, look on dismayed
Through a misty veil this summer's day
To the sheltering porch so far away!
And so it goes from year to year
Hope unfulfilled!*

*And then one day, from morn to night
The sun shines on without a break,
Our greetings fly along the way –
“Oh isn't this a lovely day!”
And being rare, none can deny
The joy we get on this wet Isle,
When skies are blue, instead of gray,
And rain-filled clouds have rolled away!*

Chapter 2

1931

“AHH, LOOK WHAT THE MOUSE DRAGGED IN!” Beatrice said sprightly while kissing Gillian’s cheek. “Do come in dear.” Gillian felt an instant tingling inside to meet with her sister again. “Don’t you look scrumptious in that hat! It’s from *Harrods* if you recall.”

“How could I forget? You remind me every time I wear it.”

“Yes, well...” Beatrice said brows darting straight up. Gillian could swear she’d flattened her hair somehow. Made her ears stick out. “Oh, stop fidgeting with your dress. It’s lovely just the way it is. No doubt you must be terribly exhausted after your long journey. A nap will do you good. First, go have a wash up.” Gillian rolled her eyes hoping she had noticed—the tingling inside falling away quickly. “You remember where the loo is?”

“Yes, Beaty. Why would I forget?”

“That’s a girl.”

Honestly, unless Gillian’s mind was playing tricks on her, she’d swear her sister had just scooted her along. When

would she realize she was a grown-up now? Seventeen years old! Beaty had already left Ireland by the time she was sixteen. No. Beatrice hadn't changed a bit—still ruly and in charge. *It's no wonder daddy let her venture abroad; clearly he wanted to get rid of her!* Gillian had to wait an extra year—too impulsive he'd always say. But secretly she knew he only wanted to keep her around.

Anyhow, Gillian felt frustration pinching at her brow, knowing full well it would soon layer itself like a sickly sweet baklava and she'd barely stepped in the door! Even worse, Beaty never seemed to notice these things. The way she treated her like a meek, inexperienced fledgling—ten years the younger! How she managed to get this far in life must have been a mystery to her sister. But she was the only Beaty that Gillian had, and she'd have to do. It was kind to take her in after all. Still, she wasn't her mother, and she'd do well to remember it!

GILLIAN OPENED HER EYES. A stream of sunlight gushed through the partially opened shutters while shadows painted curious images on Beaty's guest room walls. Their evening catching up was lovely, like old times at least for as long as Gillian could hold her eyes open. She felt as though she'd slept for a week. Too long really. She was aching from head to foot. Her toes scurried from the bedding for a peek and some fresh air. Yes, they were still attached to her, and that window was begging for a little attention.

She couldn't see much with the guest room being at the back of the townhouse. Why couldn't she have had the front room? From there she could spy Westminster's cricket boys in Vincent Square, or better yet watch the groundsman's comings and goings for signs of a frothy mystery in the

making. Then again, you could see the *real* goings-on from the back room. Her gaze travelled the white cladding adjacent, pausing briefly at the reflection of some trees in a neighboring window before finally landing on one smallish window beneath a fire escape. If she cocked an eye and then the other, she was quite sure something steamy was at play through that curtain and that her wishes alone could summon it right off the rod. Whatever they were up to made her feel like a peeping Tom, embarrassed but curious, as she slid discreetly to the side.

Gillian could hardly peel her eyes away until a cat rummaging through some bins in the garden stole her attention—just for a moment. She wondered what it would be like to have someone touch her that way. Squinting for details while the silhouettes were melting into one, the moment felt daring. Indeed, the cat down there should run for cover, otherwise her curiosity might just do him in—for good. She glanced back at the curtain, certain her first interlude would be a mix of fear and great discovery. Sometimes when she was alone, she would close her eyes and imagine what it was like. Her body felt sensations now that could be toxic for all she knew. No one talked about such things. But it didn't stop her from feeling them.

A light knock at the door snatched her attention. "Gillian, are you awake?" her sister whispered while opening the door.

"Yes, I'm over here."

"I'm glad you're awake. I trust you slept well. You were out for nearly twelve hours."

"Really? Was I?"

"Traveling will do that, you know. I bet Hollyhead was a nightmare, then all those travelers packed on the boat like

sardines no doubt.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say, Beaty?” she mumbled once again dazed by the rapture behind those curtains.

“Never mind,” she said while throwing open the shutters on both windows. “What a spectacular day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I can’t wait to see London again.”

“In time my dear,” she said while busily fluffing up Gillian’s pillows then tucking the bedspread under the mattress. “I think you should get dressed then join me for breakfast. We have plenty to discuss.”

That’s exactly what worried her. If Gillian knew her sister, she had something up her sleeve along with that hanky of hers. And what kind of twenty-six year old stuffed something like that up her sleeve? She wasn’t going to snag many boys that way. Anyhow, Gillian knew her father wanted her to find work, but surely a few days to soak in the people and sparkle of this place wouldn’t give him indigestion, would it? Might cripple Beaty, though, straying from her plans like that!

BEATY’S TOWNHOUSE WAS LOVELY with its high ceilings and plenty of room for a growing family. Too bad she didn’t have one. Might have had something to do with acting like a prude well beyond her years. That would scare off even the Colin Tuckers of this world. He might have been shy all right through that spotty face of his but underneath Gillian just knew there was a suave blue blood aching to come out. But even *he* was no match for Beaty. Gillian supposed with her sister taking on the role of their mother—or at least trying to—to all their siblings would spoil anyone’s heyday. Pity really. Gillian was too young at the time to understand why her sister had up and left—London was a world away

after all. Now, Gillian had a sneaking suspicion that it was all in pursuit of boys. She wasn't sure if she'd entirely forgiven Beaty for leaving her. It was a bit selfish really when she was needed at home in Longford. Even if she had found a husband, she could never admit to their father that she'd fallen for an Englishman. Bet she was hiding one under the staircase though. Gillian would have a peek later to be sure.

Poor daddy, Gillian thought. *Two of his daughters abandoning Ireland as though it would become a faint memory. Oh, how wrong he could be at times.* He needn't worry; she had no intention of finding a man here—of course, if one should happen to find *her*, perhaps he'd be worth a tiddle. Oh, she could hear her sister now, *that's not a word!* Well it was to her! On second thought, she wouldn't want to face daddy either. He'd either disown her or throttle her at once. Gillian was certain it was one of his greatest fears that any of his seven daughters should marry an Englishman or worse yet a *foreigner*. Trouble was, she found them absolutely charming.

WASN'T THAT JUST LIKE BEATY, laying the table to match the weather? She'd even brought out mommy's Belleek teacups and matching pot.

"The daisies are lovely, Beaty," she said grinning while eyeing one for her hair.

"They do make you feel springy, don't they?"

"Mmm... yes they do," Gillian said tucking a daisy behind her ear, despite Beaty's nose twitching in disapproval.

"It's getting more and more difficult to stretch funds these days. Fortunately, I have a dear friend who has a tiny greenhouse at the back of his garden," she said patting the napkin on her lap as though it were creased.

“His?” Gillian’s eyebrows sprang right up.

“Yes. Horatio happens to be a man, but don’t go getting yourself into a tizzy; we’re merely friends.”

“You mean the way you and Father Clare’s alter boy were *just friends*? Don’t forget I’m the one who saw the two of you kissing behind the rectory.”

“You were six years old!”

“And you should have known better.”

“That’s neither here nor there, I can assure you.” Quiet filled the air for just a moment.

Caught red-handed, Gillian thought, *that was why her lips were suddenly pursed. Didn’t like it then. Didn’t like it now.* Truth was, Gillian felt horrible when they’d been caught and could feel a tear running down her cheek at the time. Beauty couldn’t sit down for a whole week after that. It was no wonder their father let her go to England, as far away from that boy as possible. Fortunately, Beauty couldn’t hold a grudge for long and Gillian liked when she traded in her apron for a scandalous cardigan, surprising her with a frisky kind of truth. “But if there are any developments, I’ll keep you posted.” Yes, a glint in those eyes proved she wasn’t as innocent as she wanted everyone to believe. Perhaps daddy would need to overcome his prejudices after all.

It was times like these that Gillian wished they had their mother. It wasn’t Charlie’s fault. She thought sometimes their father blamed him. But loads of women didn’t make it through childbirth and even though he was irritating, she thought she’d keep him. Anyhow, he had the life of Riley with seven older sisters mothering him as though he were helpless. And he knew how to milk it. Was a miracle he learned to tie his own shoelaces!

Though Gillian missed her mother, she hardly

remembered their times together. She missed most of all the *feeling* of having a mother, of having someone to look up to, someone who would champion her cause when no one else cared to listen. She glanced up at Beaty. She was busy putting two sausages and a grilled tomato on Gillian's plate alongside a rather sappy-looking egg. She looked so happy to have a bit of company. Gillian supposed in a way, she'd filled mommy's shoes after all.

"How's that?" Beaty said setting the plate in front of her. Gillian smiled back, grateful to have such a sister even though her ears *had* grown since yesterday. "Now listen, Gillian, I understand you'd like to have a looksee around town. We have all weekend for that, but come Monday morning, no sooner than the magpies start rummaging through the bins in the back, you have an appointment."

Gillian nearly choked on her sausage. "An appointment?"

"Yes, with a Mr. Nigel Hardy. He oversees an estate owned by a maharaja of India. Can you believe it? A real maharaja!"

"Why on earth would I have an appointment with such a man?"

"It's well-known that the maharaja has come to England on business for years. He's like a prevailing wind through these parts. Admittedly, now that England—and much of the world for that matter—is seeing the likes of the Great Slump, he has made the wise decision to move his family here in order to clean up the awful mess that has come of his fortune."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, it's only a guess, but I would bet my last shilling on it. He'd need to protect his money, and I dare say it would be difficult from the other side of the world."

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Simply put, he needs a nanny.”

“A *nanny*? Isn't he a bit old for that?”

“Gillian, I can promise you it wasn't easy finding work. Employment is scarce. Everyone's scraping by these days. It took a little trickery on my part but happy to do it, my dear.”

Good God, she just winked at me, Gillian thought. But Gillian knew her sister meant well, whatever was up her sleeve with that hanky.

“It was a Wednesday morning and the bank was slow,” Beaty continued. “I knew something was stirring during elevenses. I thought I would do some investigating on your behalf. The *only* place to start was Winifred Beastly. You know the one. She brings tea to Barclays' patrons whilst waiting for their appointments. Always with her ears pointed straight up. You know,” Beaty said with a devilish grin, “working in a bank has its advantages. The things I learn about perfectly respectable people would horrify you. Do you know that gossipmonger knew well ahead of Mr. Tyler himself that his wife was playing Parcheesi, that God awful American version, with Harry Thicket every Tuesday evening? The little snippet! Well, apparently the bank's postman had a slip of the tongue when he let on within earshot of Winnie that one of his colleagues had delivered directly to the maharaja's residence in Kensington of all places.”

“So, how did he find out about the position?”

“Well, it turns out that he'd had a little fling with one of the maharaja's landscapers.”

“Janey! A woman landscaper?” Gillian gasped. “How thoroughly modern!”

“That’s the juicy bit—every landscaper employed by the maharaja is of the male persuasion. In the end, of course, the bit about hiring for a nanny position was an absolute bore. Not a soul was interested in that—except me. So they agreed to see you straight away. You would be well taken care of— room and board and a little pocket money on the side. Daddy has already wired me saying that he approves, provided you have Sundays free and are treated like the respectable Irish girl you are.”

“But I don’t want to be a nanny.” Gillian felt a nervous uncertainty crinkle into her expression, knowing she had said or done something wrong—quite like the time she’d peered at her classmate’s test paper with that foul beast sitting at the head of the class, glaring from her desk. Suddenly Beaty quite resembled that teacher!

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Beaty said with a frown. “Listen, it’s just something to tide you over until the times settle down and something more profitable can come along. You’ve always fancied writing. Maybe once you get a little experience under your belt, you can look for work at a newspaper or something equally as exciting. For now, beggars can’t be choosers. You’d do well to take my advice on that.”

Gillian couldn’t quite decide whether she should be grateful to her sister or hit her! Before she realized it, the words were slipping off her tongue, “Have you done something with your hair, Beaty?”

“Yes. I have it ironed. Do you like it?”

THE WEEKS ROLLED BY SO QUICKLY Gillian hardly noticed. She loved her new job. Beaty was right to nose around. It had been a wonderful way to introduce her yet again to

London. She was always out and about with the children. They were well behaved and not as whiny as she'd expected. Shashi, the little one, was as sweet as your favorite wish. It was like looking in a mirror really. On second thought, she was always looking up her skirt—not her own but Gillian's. The child fancied her stockings. Gillian had a faint memory of doing the same to Auntie Rosalind. Her dresses always looked good enough to eat, like big meringue cakes with all those layers and layers of petticoats! Samir, on the other hand, was always pulling his sister's hair when his parents' heads were turned. Of course, if that was the worst they got up to then she could count herself lucky.

Her favorite time of day was telling them stories when they were tucked in bed. They had an agreement—if they told her a story about India then she told them two stories about Ireland. They never complained and very cleverly managed to seduce her with never-ending questions about Ireland's countryside and people. They were so curious. Gillian adored that about them. Even more, she adored their gorgeous droopy eyes begging for her attention. She never did figure out how to tell them no.

Shashi and Samir were particularly creative when they were at their weekend home in Wentworth Estate. There, the deal was two stories of India and one of Ireland.

Gillian had Sundays free, but she preferred to stay and stroll the gardens, reading big, fat books by the pond. Oh, the whole of Virginia Water was such a pretty place. She couldn't imagine what her father was going on about—economic slump. What slump? She'd never seen so many large homes. If she squeezed her eyes shut then opened them quickly, she could almost see a far off version of herself actually living in a place like this, pram, husband and all.

Not in an estate though. No, she'd prefer one of the small carriage houses on one of the old properties. Of course, the county of Surrey would just have to wait. Her to do list was being checked off rather nicely thank you very much. Case in point, not a single item had anything to do with marriage.

In the meantime, she enjoyed her weekends in Wentworth Estate. The gardens were full of flowers—they even had a hammock. When the sun wasn't being lazy, sometimes Gillian and the children would fall fast asleep, swinging gently under the trees. This was when they'd dream through sunny hours until the pattering of rain tickled their noses. It nearly always came—the rain. Sometimes she liked it. Sometimes she loathed it.

"Gillian?" Shashi peeped. Looking down at the child cradled in her arms, she was as sweet as lemon drizzle cake. *How does anyone grow such thick eyelashes at that age?*

"Yes, darling?"

"Do you want to be married one day?"

"Well, I suppose that would be nice. But only if Mr. Right comes along."

"How will you know him when you see him?"

"Hmm, good question." Gillian paused for effect. "Well, I guess he'll need to have a good pair of hands."

"Why?"

"So he can build me a house."

"What kind of house would you like? One like ours?" Gillian glanced over her shoulder at the monstrous residence behind her, scouring just a little.

"No I don't think so."

"Why?"

"It's far too big."

"Our house in India is much bigger. This big!" Shashi

said stretching her arms out wide.

“Yes, I’d imagined as much. But I’m afraid both are too big for me. I’d like one the size of a mushroom.”

Shashi giggled, “Mushrooms are too small to live in.”

“Not for me. Wherever I turn, I want to see my family and when they’re little rascals like you and your brother, I’ll sweep them into my arms, scoot out the door and run as fast as I can through the flowery meadow to the edge of the knoll—stopping short of course! We’ll all drop to the ground then roll down in tumbles, and when we reach the bottom, we’ll gaze at fluffy clouds, finding animals until our breath returns.”

Shashi smiled then tucked in a little closer. Hammocks were wonderful things.

SCHOOL HAD BEGUN for the children now. Of course, the rich sent their children to all the best schools. But it did free up a portion of Gillian’s day, so she was grateful. Gillian liked to visit with Beaty as often as possible, for she knew she must have been lonely in that big townhouse of hers all alone, and with her reduced hours at Barclays’ to boot. Sometimes she thought it might do her good if she insisted on bunking up with her, but Gillian knew she’d never hear the end of it if she resigned from her job. That was something one didn’t do in these slumpy times.

The children were in different schools of course, with Samir enrolled in a particularly strict one for boys. Gillian thought they were too hard on such young children, always disciplining the way they did. Samir learned very quickly that fidgeting in his seat wouldn’t do, not one little iota. Trouble was, the poor thing needed to go to the loo constantly. It was bad enough at home where he had the freedom to go to

the toilet whenever he wished, always biting his lip the way he did until the very last second. She could imagine him in lessons burrowing a hole in his bottom lip, quivering and gyrating while he sat on his hands, too afraid to raise one of them in order to ask for permission to leave.

Father Denney, the school's headmaster saw it firsthand without a doubt when he had visited the Reception class for an impromptu read. Samir described every detail of his horrific experience to her through floods of tears. It broke her heart. Gillian had a right mind to flatten that wretched man. Beaty would have said two Hail Mary's after that thought... but not her, no way! Honestly, how could he be so blind? Wasn't it obvious when a child needed to go to the loo? The beastly creature probably became a priest because no woman would have him!

All the headmaster apparently saw from the corner of those woggly eyes of his—yes *woggly*, there was no adequate word for them so she might as well make up her own—was this little Indian prince, a real honest to goodness rajkumar, trying to balance himself on his heel which had been tucked underneath his bottom in the hope of holding it in. Of course *rajkumar* was a word she never would have known before she met the little muffet. How sweet of him to teach her a little Hindi. You know, she could now count to ten and say “How do you do?” and “Thank you very much.” Beaty was quite impressed and had told her that she should become a translator and start her own organization fostering a positive social arena around the world instead of becoming a writer. Gillian had no idea what her sister was blabbering on about. On the other hand, Gillian had noticed her ears twitching whenever she'd learn how to say something new.

Well, when the headmaster had asked Samir what he was

doing, of course the boy was instantly flustered and started to make up all sorts of stories. Father Denney took no nonsense whatsoever and very coolly asked the class to *carry on*. Everyone knew what that meant. According to Samir, the headmaster curled his index finger precisely three times right in front of his “big fat nose.” Samir followed him at once with twenty-six horrified little eyes staring at him. He told Gillian he could see them from the back of his head, every last one of them ogling from the rows and rows of desks. There would have been twenty-eight, but Sebastian Waters was absent that day on the suspicion of head lice.

The long corridor had stretched from the time Samir arrived at school that morning, the Reception class at one end and the headmaster’s office at the other. Nearly half of the year had come and gone now, and still, he remembered that walk being the worst part of all with Father Denney’s key chain clanging from his fists as he marched in front of him, his long shadow magically appearing. Behind the priest followed a little prince with a stream running down his leg. Samir hardly remembered the sting of the ruler—just that walk. Gillian had noticed Samir never drank now before bedtime, and she’d seen his morning juice discreetly fed to the English ivy sprawling over the center of the breakfast table. She didn’t blame him a bit!

Although Shashi’s school wasn’t run by Jesuit priests like her brother’s, it *was* run by a slew of nuns who could stare down the Pope himself. Even so, Shashi’s spangled eyes melted their hearts straight away. Fortunately both children were in day school though there were plenty more who boarded. Gillian felt sorry for them really, hardly seeing their families. Although that would have been heavenly from time to time when she was in school. Her only escape

was the meadow at the back of the garden. And even then she'd still manage to get stalked by little parasites claiming to be her siblings—and always at the climax of a good book!

Both Shashi and Samir were able to come home for lunch except for Fridays when Benediction took precedence. There were many pupils of other faiths who were exempt from Catholic practices but the maharaja liked them to attend mass and felt it built character to know first hand about the world around them, despite everything being in Latin. Gillian liked their father. She didn't think of him at all like royalty. Besides, she was sure he thought of her as more than just as a nanny—not in the way a filthy mind might think. Even Beaty had warned her about *ill-considered notions*, always appearing cross-eyed whenever she'd meet the maharaja, sniffing him out like a bloodhound. Gillian didn't know him, not really. It was only that he and his wife, the maharani treated her quite like part of the family. They made her feel a part of something, patching up the tiny gap that was always saved for homesickness.

Just last weekend at their Wentworth home, Gillian was included in a lovely celebration to honor their tenth wedding anniversary. She was the only one in attendance who was not Indian, so she was instantly chuffed. It wasn't at all like one might imagine—not the least bit stuffy.

There were two men sitting on the floor, one that resembled a pouty, overstuffed doll, his skin like porcelain. Gillian had an urge to tap it and see if felt like one of her dolls. This man was in charge of the two very tall candelabras. The other was as hairy as they come—not the candelabra but the man. They must have used some kind of paraffin for the fire since there were no candles. Gillian didn't dare ask questions. The maharaja and his wife were standing above

one of the candelabras, waving a small flaming chalice. The maharaja's dress was a very plain white, but his wife wore her usual breathtaking colors and fabrics, both wearing a boa of tightly knit flowers.

All of the guests, sixteen if you counted the tiny woman who just stared, not moving a single muscle, proceeded to whoosh their hands over the flames then touch their foreheads. Gillian hadn't a clue what she should do. She sat there, gobsmacked by it all. They were playing with flames for ages it seemed, even swirling a plate of flames above the maharaja's head. Good God, she thought he'd catch fire! Wouldn't it have been marvelous if Beaty could have been there? She'd have been bewildered with their fixation of foreheads. The guests kept touching and wiping the maharaja's and his poor wife's brows as though they hadn't cleaned properly. *If anyone tried to do that to an Englishman, he'd swat them like a fly*, Gillian thought.

There was more food than Gillian had ever seen in one room—each plate wafting with a dizzy aroma that could knock out even the air around it. The whole evening was playing with her senses: the music, the dancing, the colors, the flavors that made her eyes water. She couldn't help but forget about the world outside. For those few hours, she felt like a newborn pixie discovering her magical world for the first time.

The smell of incense from that evening lingered even now in her mind. Sometimes she liked to hold a piece of the children's clothing to her nose when they had returned from an event. It took her to a far away place. Beaty thought it was ghastly and liked Gillian to wash up twice when she dropped by. Beaty was harmless of course—just didn't understand their ways.

The children had taught Gillian so much about their culture, and here they were far from their homeland. She couldn't have been more impressed with them really, settling in so well to a strange country with mostly their nanny for comfort. They'd given the sun yet another reason to smile each day, and when it was cloudy, Gillian took its place. As pokey as her room might be, the door was always open for them.

Tonight the children were tucked away in their dreams rather early. It took them no time at all after sneaking down for something sweet before bedtime. Since she was in cahoots with them, they'd made a promise to settle down quickly, and kept to it.

IN THE CORNER OF GILLIAN'S ROOM stood a long oval mirror tilted on its feet. As she appraised her clothing, a simple blue day dress with cap sleeves and a cardigan over top, she thought the garb of today was sadly becoming more and more drab. She saw it around London every day. The slightly more daring shades of violet and orange from the twenties were becoming rather queer in this decade she thought, muted somehow as though they'd been soaked in tar then scrubbed on a rusty washboard a hundred times too many. She loved a bit of color and wouldn't let the difficult times take it from her life. The way some people looked at her—honestly, it was as though they thought she was insulting the era. They couldn't fool her. She knew what went on after dusk. That was when backless gowns and adornment on sleeves and ruffles stepped from their cars. No one wanted to be dreary, not really!

Gillian slipped her cardigan off her shoulders then unbuttoned her dress letting it drop to the floor. Her new

pink knickers to the waist felt gorgeous against her skin, and her bra made her bust look like something from the cinema. She smiled, lightly gazing at her figure, but her hair was a right mess. When she whisked across the room searching for her brush, her grandma came to mind. "A girl's hair is her crowning glory, so brush it well." Another smile. Gillian missed her. A deep sigh took her to the towering window where the night sky was calling.

Gillian unlatched the hardware then opened the windows wide, letting in as much of the cool, damp air as possible. It was freezing against her bare skin. It felt glorious. Little shivers danced on her skin as she looked upward through the smoky clouds. There was hardly a sound, though the house was so large it wrapped around its own courtyard, not a soul could be found at this late hour.

The stars somewhere behind those clouds begged her for more attention. Gillian wondered what her future held and if she'd be standing here at this window a year from now. Two? No. She couldn't imagine so. Either way, the chill took her breath. Perhaps there was a man out there, somewhere near or far, looking up at the same stars at this very moment and wondering about her, a girl... no a woman... he had yet to meet. A man she had yet to meet. She threw her head back running her fingers from her chin to the hollow of her long neck. She stopped there, daring herself to caress her breasts and feel them against the cold night air. Gillian slipped the strap of her bra off her shoulder, almost feeling him touch her instead. She knew he was there, perhaps an ocean or two between them, yet she felt him just a breath away.

The window was left slightly ajar as a faint glow from the sky peeked at her bed. She slipped between her sheets

feeling beautiful and smiled at the thought of him.

NEARLY A YEAR INTO GILLIAN'S EMPLOYMENT NOW, and Mr. Hardy had called for a meeting. It was hard to get past the lines across his forehead. They made him look like a walnut. Mr. Hardy informed her that the maharaja and his family would be returning to India indefinitely, but they wanted Gillian's services to continue. Thrilled wouldn't begin to describe her excitement at being offered such an opportunity. She had always wanted to see the world, and she and the children had grown so close.

A telegram the following day read:

ORIG LONGFORD IRELAND

GILLIAN MCALLISTER C/O BEATRICE MCALLISTER 33B
AUBREY CLOSE LONDON =

NO DAUGHTER OF MINE SHALL MOVE TO INDIA
= OVER MY DEAD BODY = MR. SAMUEL SEAMUS
MCALLISTER +

A second wire arrived:

ORIG LONGFORD IRELAND

GILLIAN MCALLISTER C/O BEATRICE MCALLISTER 33B
AUBREY CLOSE LONDON =

ENGLANDS ECONOMY IS SUFFERING BADLY = IT IS
BEST YOU COME HOME AT ONCE = YOUR FATHER +

Wire number three:

I WONT GO TO INDIA BUT I REFUSE TO COME HOME
= PLEASE UNDERSTAND DADDY = YOUR DAUGHTER
GILLIAN +

She could see him scowling through the airways now, his lips vibrating under that shaggy moustache of his curled at the sides as though a ferret had fallen asleep under his nostrils, “Disobedient little imp!”

Wire number four:

FINE I HAVE ARRANGED FOR YOU TO TRAVEL TO
CANADA FOR THE SUMMER SINCE YOU ARE YOUR
MOTHERS DAUGHTER OBSTINATE = YOUR AUNTIE
JOYCE AND UNCLE HERBERT THERE HAVE AGREED TO
TAKE YOU IN FOR THE TIME BEING = THE QUESTION
REMAINS WHAT TO DO WITH YOU THEN = PERHAPS A
CONVENT IN TIBET = DONT BE ALARMED I AM NOT
DISOWNING YOU YET = YOUR GREATEST ADMIRER
DADDY +

Gillian spent the next several days trying to imagine why on earth Daddy would want her to go to Canada of all places. She needed to let the idea soak in. Honestly, she was furious with the man. India sounded so exotic—all those spices! Canada sounded, well... wild. She felt a tingling in her nose, hard to tell if it was pollen or excitement.

At long last, an answer... she hoped.

What a lot of waggle this telegram business was. Everyone she'd ever known had been put off by them—nothing more than unwelcome news stitched into the paper most times. Here she'd been sitting restlessly, waiting for the darned thing while her father was enjoying every moment of her turmoil. He knew she had tiny champagne corks for toes. She wanted to know why Canada!

Wire number five:

DEAREST GILLIAN = HAVE I LET YOU STEW LONG
ENOUGH = WHY CANADA YOU ASK = BECAUSE YOU

CANNOT TAME A WILD BOAR +

Wire number six:

DEAREST FATHER = ARE YOU CALLING ME A PIG

DADDY +

Wire number seven:

IF THE HOOF FITS MY DEAR +

Wire number eight:

I DEMAND A BETTER REASON FOR LEAVING CHEERY

LONDON +

At double long last she received a proper letter in the post from Ireland, just days before she should leave for a country that both excited her and terrified her. Gillian held it in her hand with a potpourri of emotions, wondering what Daddy might say. She slipped her nail in the envelope, tearing gingerly along the edge. She slid out the paper—just one piece then unfolded it. To her surprise, Daddy had written only a few lines after his salutation.

1st of May 1932

My one and only, (that's not to dismiss my seven others of course)

Cheery is it now? I hardly think so in these times. You want a good reason? Perhaps this will soak in better.

Obstinate = adventurous = fascinating = you

Why Canada? Because it needs to be stirred up by the likes of Gillian Rachel McAllister!

Your very proud father

Post Script – May I remind you that you are in no position to demand anything from me. However, if

you are in need of even a peanut, don't hesitate to ask. Do be safe and mind your manners.

Post Script Yet Again – Perhaps your cheekiness has cushioned me after all, otherwise the grief of losing you to adulthood would surely kill me if I didn't dislike you just a little bit. Now, a word of advice—you are the loveliest girl Canada will ever have seen and you will attract plenty of young men. Because you will draw such attention, you need to remind yourself of the blood that runs through your veins—the meat and potatoes blood of the Irish. Be wise my dear but above all never think of yourself as anything other than absolutely fantastic.

The note fell to Gillian's side. All that pacing, and for what? A silly note that told her nothing. She drew a breath, deep and soothing. His words began to settle in nicely until mini gasps of air reached her lips, causing an instant rush of longing for Daddy's arms—his words far from nothing. At the same time, Gillian felt like a goddess. How did he manage that? She supposed that she'd been wrong. She had all the details for the journey that Daddy had sent two weeks ago, and now he championed her cause, a cause that had been blazing inside her since she learned to walk. Maybe she *was* a wild boar after all, but clearly Daddy didn't think she was the least bit piggish. A smile crept into her face. She would save this note for all time.



About the Author

SUSAN ÖRNBRATT was born in London, Canada and grew up on the dance floor until her brother's high school rowing crew needed a coxswain. Quickly, she traded in her ballet shoes for a megaphone and went on to compete in the Junior and Senior World Championships and the XIII Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland.

A graduate from the University of Western Ontario in French and the University of Manitoba in elementary education, as well as attending L'Université Blaise Pascal Clermont-Ferrand II in France while she worked as a *filles au pair*, Susan has gone on to teach and live in six countries.

Although a maple leaf will forever be stitched on her heart, she has called Sweden her home for the past sixteen years with a recent three-year stint in North Carolina, USA for her husband's work. It was there where Susan wrote *The Particular Appeal of Gillian Pugsley*.

Susan lives in Gothenburg with her husband and two children and an apple tree beloved by the local moose population. If she isn't shooing away the beasts, you can find her in her garden with some pruning shears, a good book and always a cup of tea. If Susan were dried out, she could be brewed.

A reader's guide will be available
at the end of the final edition of this book,
which will be released for sale in April 2015.

An author interview is available online:
lightmessages.com/susanornbratt



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