

# RESURRECTION

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## HALIFAX RESURRECTION

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# PART ONE

**January, 2023**

*Two little girls squashed on toast,  
That is the taste that we love the most.  
Two little boys, squashed on bread,  
They taste awful – but at least they're dead.*

# 1.

I tentatively open my eyes – but only a little in case someone is watching – and stay in my state of pretended sleep. The strangers are still there across the room, drinking coffee with their backs towards me so I can't hear what they're saying. Talking about me like they always do. Don't they have lives of their own to live?

She's Chinese-Australian with big black eyes perpetually on the edge of tears. I call her Ming Zu and him Donis. He's younger than her, in his late forties I think, possibly the most beautiful man I have ever seen: high cheekbones, deep, soulful eyes, a wide smile like a sunburst with perfect teeth; exquisite, alluring, feminine. They're watchful, polite and attendant, slaves to my every whim. Except my freedom, on which they defer to 'the doctor'.

They call me Jane, which is all right with me. It's a perfectly nice and serviceable name. They probably have their reasons to avoid using my real one.

I have lost all sense of time. They say it's been three months since 'the accident' and that Zoe – whoever she is – sat by my bed every day until she had to go back to New York. Such a long way for someone to come. There has been another visitor, a reticent young woman with pale skin, a ring in her nose and bright blue hair. A volunteer, no doubt, organised by the hospital.

Everyone is trying to be so nice. Sickeningly nice. Smotheringly nice. I want to escape and go to a club with live music or a pub with no responsible alcohol policy. I want someone to pick me up and take me back to a dodgy motel and give me drugs until I get my old life back. I want to jump from an aeroplane with Javier Bardem and free fall until he pulls the ripcord and saves us both from crashing into the sea. But I won't of course, I'm too well brought up. Too obediently middle class.

'I want to go home,' I repeat like an empty mantra. I think it's what I'm expected to say. Not that I have any concept of where 'home' is, but I like the predictability of their reactions: silent tears from Ming Zu and an indulgent smile from Donis.

'Of course you do, Jane,' he says. 'It's what I want as well. And you're getting better all the time.' Such a nice, beautiful androgyne.

He has been bringing photo albums for me to look at, and of course I pretend to be interested. But why would I want to see photos of *his* life and family? Nothing to do with me. I like it best when he plays the cello, one of those modern electrified things. Classical, jazz, jazz-classical fusion, traditional Irish songs that bring a keening ache to the soul. He's a virtuoso, a man whose beautiful form becomes an extension of his instrument, a Jacqueline Du Pré without her Barenboim muse, solitary and singularly inspired.

Every time they take me outside, there's a policewoman in the hallway, or sometimes a male. They don't announce themselves as cops, but I can detect one with my eyes shut; I know I've been around them all my life. (Am I a cop myself, injured in the line of duty? I wouldn't be surprised.) 'Hello,' I say. 'Here again today? And your colleague yesterday who likes to tell jokes, the one who loves her sport and can't talk about anything else.' They

never answer my questions directly, which is a give-away right there. Cautious, cards close to their chests Johnny Hoppers. Am I under police protection?

I can't align my thinking with the words that come out. It's like I'm at the dentist and my mouth has been anaesthetised. Everyone speaks in riddles. Every question feels like a test. Not that I'm giving them anything: not till I know what they want.

Oh, here comes the doctor now. This will be interesting. It's amazing how everyone defers to him. But not me. He's not as clever as he thinks he is. I think he's a paediatrician who's used to dealing with children.

'Good morning, Jane.' He smiles. 'And how are you today?'

Well, where do you start with a question like that, given the state of the world? 'Fine,' I say. It's all I'm giving. He's a doctor. He can figure it out.

He shines a light into my eyes and asks what day of the week it is. I give him a look as if to say, 'You don't know?' Some kind of Masonic ritual, I suspect. He knows there are cops in the hallway. Maybe they're here for him?

'What's this, Jane?' he says, holding up a stick.

'A stick,' I say, as if he's the dumb one.

'What's this on the end?'

'Decoration.'

'Yes, but what can it do?'

He runs it through my hair and makes me flinch. Such a personal invasion.

'I'll leave it with you. You might like to use it. To get out the knots.' He places the decorated stick on the bedside table.

As if I'll be doing that. There's no 'nots' in my hair. No 'yeses' either.

There is a big white room with blonde-wood floors. It has an enormous dining table with twelve black leather chairs and a state-of-the-art kitchen that would flatter a three-hat restaurant. There's a two-door stainless steel fridge, a two-door freezer and glass-fronted wine cabinets filled with wine, exotic beverages and cigars. There's one of those dishwashers that uses super-heated steam to do a full load in minutes, a top-of-the-range range (pardon the pun) like a chef would use – gas, despite the environment. There are wine racks all the way up to the ceiling, like a mini-cellar, and a selection of chef's knives that would make a serial killer blush.

I think I know most of the people at the table, though I couldn't tell you their names. The pretty woman with the smiling cheeks and self-effacing ways is a poisoner, the man beside her with the axe, a charming killer. Dark, handsome, with a habit of laughing at his jokes with a raucous self-congratulatory roar, he is someone who needs to be watched. The woman seated on his other side is trying to ignore the gash in her throat, but her food keeps tumbling out. She dabs at the spillage with her napkin as if it's perfectly normal, and maybe it is: no-one else seems to care. A child, no more than ten, with parchment skin and bloodless lips, is sucking on a lollipop pacifier made of glass. She needs to take some iron.

I can tell the men (and a solitary woman) at the other end of the table are cops: they keep trying to chat me up. Even the blonde with Jonah Cole . . . There – I do remember a name after all. Jonah Cole, the crazy cop with a heightened sense of smell. Gave a whole new meaning to sniffing out a crime scene. He once bought me the entire contents of a florist shop in an

attempt to impress me. All it did was make me worry about his medication.

The most charismatic man in the room is called Robert. Well, that's what they call him, though I don't know his name myself. Sometimes he looks twenty years old, sometimes twice that age. It's how the light catches him I think, or how he catches the light. Either way, it's a trick. I think I've encountered him a number of times, unless he's just a cypher. People often are, in that twilight world between wake and sleep. It's hard to know who to trust.

Robert is tall and thin and slightly hunched with incipient scoliosis. His preferred dress is a black Fedora, a green velvet waistcoat, tight-fitting jeans to accentuate his skinny legs and big, too-white sneakers like clown shoes. A heavy leather bag swings on his left shoulder though you can tell there's not much inside. Like most things with Robert, the bag's an affectation, more signature than accessory, part of his swagger and groove.

Robert is a fabulist. He can't lie straight in bed. A born storyteller whose imagination is unfettered by logic or probability, he would be infuriating if he wasn't so exquisitely entertaining. He doesn't tell lies, he tells whoppers – stories whose facts are so patently disconnected from the truth that the listener's not fooled for a moment. Fables so extravagant and unbelievable, the only suspense is in wondering how far he will go.

'I once guided a party of amateur American ethnologists down the Sepik River in search of a lost tribe of head hunters. We built a shrine on a raft made of tractor tyres in the hope it would give us protection, and slaughtered goats to pacify the gods and fed the entrails to the crocs. An heiress from Florida, who thought she was the love child of Dian Fossey and Louis

Leakey, dressed herself in a loincloth and wore a necklace of papier-mâché shrunken heads like a priestess. When we failed to find the head hunters, she staged her own abduction, thinking the party would abandon the journey until they found her and hopefully stumble upon the lost tribe in the process. But the others in the party thought it would invalidate their travel insurance and voted to continue the journey without her. When we returned to civilisation, they claimed the head hunters had kidnapped the heiress and that they had only just escaped themselves owing to “the guile and bravery of their guide”. The whole adventure reinforced the myth that head hunters really did exist along the Sepik and led to the *National Geographic* sending photographers out on a futile expedition to try to verify the story.’

This was classic Robert. I knew he had never been down the Sepik. He’d never been out of Australia, let alone to New Guinea. Or ever worked as a travel guide. In fact, he thought the river was somewhere in East Africa. The entire story was based on something he’d read in a magazine and seeing *Gorillas in the Mist*.

I think the big white room with blonde-wood floors is Robert’s home. He seems familiar with the environment and knows where everything is.

‘Where’s the corkscrew, Robert?’ Jonah Cole asks.

‘In the drawers over there – second one down.’

‘Is that a pink oleander in the garden?’ asks the poisoner. ‘Would you like me to decorate the table?’

‘That would be nice,’ says Robert.

‘Maybe the axe man can cut you some branches if you ask him nicely,’ I say.

'I'd swing more than my axe for you,' the man roars, as if his charm and sexuality are irresistible.

Sometimes the room is empty and, with nobody there, strangely familiar. I seem to know it intimately, like a room I have examined in detail. I could have told Jonah where to find the corkscrew. And the oleander is hardly hidden: you can see it through the kitchen window. I think the owners are older than Robert, a man and a woman we've seen on TV. I don't know why I think this. I don't think they're alive any more but I don't know how they died. Violently, perhaps, but it's only a vague impression – like most things are at the moment; shadowy and indistinct, like motifs in a piece of cello music, resonant of something just out of reach.

There's a fuzz in my head like cotton wool, keeping my thoughts at bay. The doctor says this is normal, but how would he know if every case is different? Doctor Two-Bob Each Way, Doctor Spin the Wheel and Bet on Red, Doctor Don't Ask Me – I'm a Neurosurgeon.

I will have to figure it out for myself.