

*The  
Weight  
of Ink*

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Richmond, Surrey

**L**ET ME BEGIN AFRESH. PERHAPS, this time, to tell the truth. For in the biting hush of ink on paper, where truth ought raise its head and speak without fear, I have long lied.

I have naught to defend my actions. Yet though my heart feels no remorse, my deeds would confess themselves to paper now, as the least of tributes to him whom I once betrayed.

In this silenced house, quill and ink do not resist the press of my hand, and paper does not flinch. Let these pages compass, at last, the truth, though none read them.

November 2, 2000

London

SHE SAT AT HER DESK.

It was a fine afternoon, but the cold sunshine beyond her office window oppressed her. In younger days, she might have ventured out, hoping against reason for warmth.

Hope against reason: an opiate she'd long abandoned.

Slowly she sifted the volumes on her desk. A dusty bilingual edition of Usque's *Consolação* lay open. She ran the pad of one finger down a page, before carefully shutting the book.

Half past one — and the American hadn't so much as telephoned. A lack of professionalism incompatible with a finding of this magnitude. Yet Darcy had said the American was his most talented postgraduate — and Darcy, perhaps alone among her colleagues, was to be trusted.

"Levy can help with the documents," Darcy had said over the phone. "Glad to lend him to you for a bit. He's amusingly ambitious, in the American sort of way. Thinks history can change the world. But even you should be able to tolerate it for three days."

Recalling, Helen almost chuckled. *Even you*. Good for Darcy. He, evidently, still thought Helen someone worth standing up to.

Three days, of course, was nowhere near the time required to make a true assessment. But it was something — far more time, in fact, than Helen had any right to. Only the Eastons' ignorance of the usual protocols had prevented them from laughing her out of their house when she'd announced that she required further access to the documents. She'd dared ask no more, sitting there at the dark wooden table opposite Ian and Bridgette Easton — the sun from the windows lying heavily aslant

the couple's manicured hands, the towering mullioned windows casting bars of shadow and diamonds of light . . . and Helen's own thoughts tumbling from what she'd just glimpsed.

Consultations like yesterday's weren't unheard of, naturally; people sometimes turned up old papers in their attics or at the bottom of handed-down trunks, and if they didn't think to call an antiquities council they contacted the university and asked for the history faculty. Yesterday's caller, though, had asked specifically for Helen Watt. Ian Easton: the name had meant nothing to Helen, though he said he'd been her student once, years ago.

"My wife, you see, inherited a property." Easton's manner over the telephone was apologetic; Helen might not recall how she'd graded his efforts as a student, but evidently he did. "The house, which belonged to my wife's aunt, dates from the late seventeenth century. Our plan all along has been to renovate, then open a gallery in the house. Of course it's all my wife's idea — she's the one with the aesthetic sense, not me, and she understood right away what could be done by juxtaposing high modern art with those seventeenth-century rooms. Unfortunately, though" — Easton paused, then continued carefully — "there have been delays. Two years' worth, in fact. Consent to renovate a listed building is hard to come by in the best of cases" — an uncomfortable chuckle as he hastened not to offend — "not that the local planning authority's caution is inappropriate. The conservation officers are only doing their job. But, rather inconveniently, it seems my wife's late aunt spent decades offending members of every historical preservation group in the vicinity. Now that we've finally obtained all the requisite permissions, we've had an electrician open a space under the old carved staircase to put in wiring. And the fellow quit work after fifteen minutes. Called me over to say he'd found a stash of papers in Arabic and the building ought to be checked for hideaway imams or maybe terrorists, all the same to him, in any case he'd be off to another job till I sorted it. Seems he didn't notice that the papers he found are dated more than three hundred years ago. I had a look, and I think the lettering might in fact be Hebrew — there's something, I think it's Spanish, addressed to a rabbi. So . . ." Ian Easton's voice trailed off awkwardly. "So," he added, "I'm calling."

Telephone cradled to her cheek, Helen had let the pause lengthen. She considered the file open on her computer, the cursor blinking end-

lessly as it had the past hour, midway through a paragraph she'd no taste for. She couldn't remember ever feeling dull about her work. But this was how it was lately: things that had once felt vibrant were draining from her—and, now and then, other sparks had begun appearing in her mind as though thrown up by hammer blows. Flashes of memory, riveting—the soft thump of a shed door closing in the desert heat, smells filling her nostrils for a dizzying instant. Sparks extinguishing, thank heaven, before they could catch.

She'd straightened a low stack of books. "Perhaps Monday," she said.

"Thing is"—Ian Easton's voice attained a slightly more anxious pitch—"I wonder if you might come today. We've had quite a time getting this electrician, and we don't want him to take another job. And the papers seem fragile, I've felt I shouldn't move them."

In truth, she knew she could afford a few hours. She'd barely progressed in her writing all day, and this paper she was writing was mere cleanup work, something she'd promised herself to finish before retirement. A summation of the sparse facts known about the dispersal of the London Jewish community during the 1665–66 plague—their imported rabbi fleeing England the moment the pestilence set in; wealthy congregants escaping to the countryside; then little trace of London's Jews in the city's records until the community re-formed a few years later under new leadership. She'd not be sorry to leave the work behind for an afternoon.

Still she'd hesitated, interrogating Ian Easton for further details of the history of the house. When at last she acquiesced to his request, it was in a tone certain not to encourage romantic fantasies regarding some collection of old papers under his stair.

A brief drive to Richmond to check out some papers, then. She'd undertaken it with a dim sense that this was the sort of thing she ought to be doing: getting herself out and about on a clear day, while she still could.

As she'd settled into the car, her keys had rattled so wildly in her hand that she'd had to tame the keyring with both fists before singling out the right key. Forcing it into the ignition took three tries. Today was a bad day, then. She'd need to bear that in mind.

Twenty minutes later she'd parked her car in Richmond and was walking up a half-sunken stone path, her steps slowing as she caught

her first sight of the house. Ian Easton had said over the phone that the building was from the late seventeenth century, yes, but Helen had until this moment thought the claim unlikely—there were few original seventeenth-century houses in this area, most fastidiously preserved and documented down to the last weathered brick.

But there could be no doubt that this house was of that era. Looming in the chill afternoon light, it was so unlike its neighbors it seemed huddled in silent conversation with itself. The ornamented eaves, the inset stone carvings midway up the façade of soft-cornered bricks, even the small rounded stones of the path to its heavy front door—all were unmistakable. This house's design was an obvious echo of the few remaining seventeenth-century manor houses of the area, though not on their palatial scale. Still, here was a structure clearly built in that same age by someone with considerable wealth and social aspirations. It was easy to see, too, why this building lacked the status and renown of some of its contemporaries. Whatever grandeur it had possessed in the seventeenth century, the house had clearly been brought half to its knees by neglect—and, worse, by bits of slapdash modernization: an incongruous addition to the left of the main entry, more Victorian than English Baroque; a length of degraded aluminum gutter laid amid the slate, presumably to manage a long-ago leak; telephone and power wires blizzarding the house, slicing across the strict lines of the mullioned windows.

She approached the door, her cane slipping on the irregular stones. Her breath was uneven from the unaccustomed exertion—she slowed to calm it. On a narrow window beside the door, a reflection of her own bent figure. As she leaned closer, it rippled as though on the dark surface of a stream: a pale, aging professor in her outdated suit. Tilted to one side, leaning on her cane.

She set one hand, tentatively, on the cool brick beside the window. Like a common housebreaker, then, Helen Watt leaned in. Her breath fogged the glass, but as it cleared she was able to make out the dim atrium, at first faintly but then in greater detail. She drew a sharp breath. Wooden cherubs lined the lintel above an interior doorway. More like them wreathed the top of the great room's dim hearth. The very same cherubs adorned half the seventeenth-century manors and palaces still extant in Surrey, though the name of the master carver whose calling card they'd been was lost to history.

Straightening, she took the cold iron knocker in her hand. Both—the smooth weighty metal and her thin quaking hand—were impervious to the sunlight that fell profligate over everything: the door, the marble threshold, the sleeves of her wool coat. The knocker’s blows reverberated dully through the thick door and died. And in the silence—the unmistakable silence of an old house—she felt, for just an instant, the old feeling: the impossible ache of standing so close to a piece of history. A feeling like something dropping endlessly inside her—like being in the presence of a long-ago lover who had once known her every inch, but now refused to acknowledge her.

A tall, well-coiffed blond man opened the door. “Professor Watt. We appreciate this more than we can express, truly”—Ian Easton’s strained greeting echoed in the dim cavernous entry as he gestured her inside, but she hardly heard him. Heavy wood carvings, a towering ceiling framed by a balcony that looked down from the house’s third story, rows of boxed artwork resting on the stone floor. The smell of fresh paint.

Ian was talking, his brow furrowed. “I was your student ages ago, naturally you won’t remember me.” He was at least well-mannered enough to spare her the necessity of saying as much. He led her forward into the atrium, slowing his gait to match hers. “I’m so sorry we’ve had to trouble you, surely you have more important things to do with your time.”

She stopped walking. Above her the broad lintel loomed, the carved cherubs arrayed like sentinels.

Ian stopped beside her, though after a respectful pause he continued his explanation. Of course when he’d seen what he thought was Hebrew lettering he’d recalled her expertise in the area. Really, if she could offer some suggestion as to what to do with the papers he’d be tremendously grateful, because—

Even under a thin coating of dust, the cherubs’ smooth faces shone with expressions of childish wisdom.

Ian was speaking, but the house was speaking louder—the house was nearly deafening her. It struck Helen that there was a chance it might matter very much indeed how she got along with her former student.

She forced herself to bring her attention to bear on the casually but carefully dressed man stooping to address her as though still anxious to earn his professor’s approval.

“The thing is,” he was saying, “we’ve already had such a hard time getting permits. At this point, any further delay . . .”

Under Helen’s sudden scrutiny, Ian faltered. Leaving the rest unspoken, he led her toward the grand staircase. She had time to take in an abundance of burnished wood, the heavy banisters and side panels ornamented at every step, and more elaborate carvings ascending the walls where the staircase turned and rose toward the second floor—but Ian led her past the stair, around its base, to a plain paneled area facing away from the entrance.

There, on a small card table beside the window, was a single cracked leather-bound volume. Beside it lay the two pages Ian had told her about over the phone: the first items his electrician had removed from under the staircase upon discovering the documents.

For an instant she allowed herself to stare at the pages, taking in the thick textured paper she dared not touch; then at the counterpoint of two alphabets on the page—the Portuguese lettering that led from left to right, interrupted by scattered Hebrew phrases that ran in the reverse direction.

Slowly she read, and reread.

Ian’s voice, coming from just behind her. “Over there,” he said, and pointed.

She lifted her eyes. There, in a dim corner at the base of the staircase, untouched by the blinding light of the landing’s windows, was a small panel that had been forced open.

Ignoring Ian’s tentative offer of help, Helen approached the opening. Lowering herself slowly to the floor, her cane trembling heavily under her weight, she knelt before it like a penitent.

She stayed that way for a long time, her hands pressed to the cool floor, and a great heaviness nearly overcame her, as though all her years had suddenly taken on physical weight. For a long while she simply stared at the crammed shelves, breathing very quietly. Then finally, knowing she should not, she lifted a quaking hand to remove a single page.