

JESSICA'S BABY By Stephanie Blackledge

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The agent met me at the front door. I could smell the rising damp, feel the wind through the broken window panes, see the Dali-esque cobwebs hanging from every crevice. Yet, it was an Alice in Wonderland moment; something was saying “buy me”.

The house was to become my sanctuary from a failed marriage and a mad world I couldn't cope with.

One day I found a note on the doormat. It read:

“I'm a carer at St Winifred's. One of our residents, she's 98 and very frail, is insistent that she meet you. Could you spare ten minutes? Eileen Carter.”

Curious, I decided to go there and then. Eileen took me to a room on the first floor. It smelt of death, old ladies and rosewater. The smell transported me back to my grandmother's bedroom. A child-like figure lay in the bed. Her fingers searched my face, returning me to 1998. “Have you brought my baby? What are you doing to my house?”

Her house? Who was this old lady? There was something familiar about her eyes. Eileen said, as though speaking to a child “Sarah bought your old house, dear. Where you used to live.” It was a convincing explanation for her note.

An affinity developed that day between Jessica Trollope and me that bridged the generation gap. We had nothing in common, or so I thought, but I visited her regularly, up-dating her on the renovation work.

Jessica asked if I could read to her occasionally and I choose that day the faded green copy of David Copperfield my grandmother had insisted on pressing into my hand the day she died.

Jessica was propped up in bed, the curtains closed against the late afternoon sun. The smell of rosewater challenged death as dust motes fell on the carpet. I began to read the familiar words of the first chapter. “Let me see the book, dear.” Her voice was strangely insistent. Her hands reached out for the book, feeling with her fingers what she could no longer see. “There's an inscription on the fly leaf, isn't there?” she said. “Read it to me.”

I did as she asked. “It says:

Elsie Crawley, from her sister J. on her 11th Birthday. June 12th 1913.”

Jessica sank back into the pillows, satisfied. “Yes”, she said. “I gave her that book. I was 15. Elsie was my younger sister.”

Her words stunned the room, and me, into complete stillness. It was a revelation too many, one I needed to think through. I left her with her thin arms folded over the book, barely alive, dozing peacefully. Instinct told me Jessica would not last the night.

The call came just before midnight. The night was an almost perfect example of prophetic fallacy; slating rain and a cruel north wind, unusual for early July.

She would wait, I knew she would. When I got to St Winifred’s, she seemed to have rallied, found some hidden reserves of strength as so many old people do, just before they die.

“Where did you get my book, the one I gave my sister?” she asked. She seemed to know the answer, didn’t wait for me to answer, just wanted confirmation.

“You must be Elsie’s granddaughter. I knew it. You have her eyes.”

“And so do you” I said. “Nan spoke of you but she said you died when you were 15. She said you were taken ill, went away to convalesce and never came back. You were her favourite sister. She missed you so much when you went.”

”And I her, oh so very much” Jessica said. “I had no choice. It wasn’t the done thing then to have a baby out of wedlock. Such a disgrace. Girls who got into trouble, had to go away. I was too young to be married off. I didn’t know I was expecting; we knew nothing of such things then. Mother realised. Father ordered me out of the house. Mother had an unmarried brother living in Birmingham. She asked him to take me in, until the baby was born. Afterwards, it would be adopted. My uncle locked me in the little bedroom at the back of our house. I wasn’t allowed out of that room for five months, gave birth to her on my own. And then he took her away; I never saw her again. Please dear, before it’s too late, find my baby! It would mean so much to me.”

She had been lucid until that point, now she was inconsolable. Rambling about her baby, the sobs shaking her frail body.

“So, your uncle brought you to our house. How did you become Jessica Trollope?”

“That was His name. I hated him, always hated him. I was terrified of him. He wouldn’t allow me to set foot outside the house while he was alive. He said I had brought such disgrace on the family, Mother never wanted to see me again. The story was, to any-one who asked, I had died. He said, if I refused to marry him, he would never tell me where my baby was. I had no choice. He said I should be grateful he had given me his name, made me respectable.” There was a pause, while she gathered her remaining strength to continue.

“We were married on my 17th birthday. That night, he forced himself on me. He would come to my room once a week, always on a Friday night. If I tried to resist, he hit me, said it was what I deserved. Then he would punish me. Make me stand on a chair in the kitchen, stock

still, not allowed to move, while he threw the saucepans at me. If I flinched, he would beat me with my own hairbrush. I stopped resisting. There were no more babies, he made sure of that. Six abortions. He brought the 'midwife' in to 'see to me', every time. He said it wasn't seemly for a whore like me to have children with a respectable man like him.

She paused again, sighed heavily, her voice growing weaker.

"Our house was my sanctuary. As long as I 'behaved myself', acted the dutiful wife, he was reasonable. I learned to do his bidding. He died on the 4th of July 1954, the day rationing ended. I was finally free of him. He left no will. I was his wife for better or worse; the house was mine. And now it's yours. Our house will help you, as it did me. Take it with my blessing. It's in safe hands."

The effort of telling me what no-one else had ever heard, had exhausted her and she closed her eyes. As I was about to leave, she said, so softly I had to bend to hear the words "You will find my baby, won't you dear?"

"Of course I will", I said. Anything to reassure her.

She died later that night. Her funeral was a dismal ceremony with me and Eileen Carter her only mourners. Afterwards, as I opened the front door, the overwhelming smell of rosewater greeted me. She had come home. The perfume drifted around our house for three months, settling in the dining room, until gradually it disappeared. I knew then that my great aunt was at peace. I thought that would be the end of the matter.

It was a warm evening in late August when I found Jessica's baby. I had successfully moved the ancient stone bird bath to a better position in the back garden when I noticed Ash, furiously digging up the soil where the bird bath had been.

Trailing from his mouth was something long and discoloured. He dragged his discovery up the path, depositing it at my feet. The object was just recognizable as a pillow case, once white, now soil encrusted. There was something inside it, doll sized and hard. A piece of folded paper was just visible, tucked between two yellowing rubber buttons. It read:

Female. Born 13th November 1913

The child with no name I laid to rest in her original grave, in her burial pillowcase, tucked into a shoe box. Her grave is marked with a lavender bush.

Later that night, the house settled itself down to sleep. I closed my eyes and concentrated hard, allowing the smell of rosewater to fill the dining room. Jessica's face appeared before me. Her skin was smooth and unlined, and her eyes, those deep blue eyes so like my grandmothers, were smiling. Her 15 year old self floated gently before me. She didn't speak, just nodded in the direction of the bird bath as if to say "You kept your promise. You found my baby." I felt the slight pressure of a hand resting on my head, in blessing. Then, as gradually as she had appeared, her face faded away. The smell of rosewater lingered for a few minutes and then followed her; it never returned.