

Martha

August 2012

The day Martha Winter decided to tear apart her family began like any other day.

She woke early. She always did, but lately she couldn't sleep. This summer sometimes she'd been up and dressed by five: too much to think about. No point lying in bed, fretting.

On this particular morning she was awake at four thirty. As her eyes flew open and memory flooded her body, Martha knew her subconscious must understand the enormity of what she was about to do. She sat up and stretched, feeling the bones that ached, the prick of pain in her knee. Then she reached for her old silk peacock-feather-print dressing gown and quietly crossed the bedroom, as always stepping over the board that creaked, as always silently shutting the bedroom door behind her.

But David wasn't there. She could count on the fingers of both hands the nights they'd spent apart, and this was one. He'd gone to London to see about that exhibition, and Martha meant to put her plan into action today, before he came back, told her she was wrong.

In late August the sun still rose early over the hills above Winterfold, the heavy trees filtering the orange-rose light. *Soon*, they'd whisper, as the wind rushed through the leaves at night. *Soon we will dry up and die; we will all die sometime.* For it was the end of summer, and the Big Dipper was in the western sky. Already she could feel the chill in the evening air.

Was it because autumn was on its way? Or her eightieth birthday? What had prompted this desire to tell the truth? She thought perhaps it was this exhibition next year. *David Winter's War*, it was to be called. That was why he said he'd gone to London, to meet up with the gallery, go through his old sketches.

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But Martha knew that was a lie. She knew David, and she knew when he was lying.

That was what had started this all off. Someone in a gallery in London deciding the time was right for a show like this, little knowing what damage they would do. So innocuous, thinking the past was dead and buried and couldn't hurt anyone. "Didn't David Winter do some rather good stuff on bombed-out London?" "David Winter? The Wilbur cartoonist?" "Absolutely." "Gosh, no idea, old chap. Where was he from?" "East End, I think. Could be interesting. Not just cartoon dogs and all that." "Good idea. I'll write and ask him." And then plans were laid and events put in motion, and slowly, inexorably, the truth would come out.

Martha made herself a pot of tea every morning, singing to herself. She liked to sing. She always used the same mug, Cornish pottery, blue and cream stripes, her gnarled fingers hooked round its scalding middle. She had time to drink tea now, gallons of the stuff, and she liked it strong. "Thrutchy," Dorcas had called it. A good Somerset word, that: Martha had learned it during the war. Evacuated out of Bermondsey aged seven in 1939 – four kids in one room, where life or death was seemingly as random as swatting a fly or missing it – one day she'd simply been shoved onto a train and the next morning woken up in a strange house with a view of nothing but trees out of the window. She might as well have been on the moon. Martha had gone downstairs crying, and there she'd seen Dorcas, sitting at a table like this. "Cup of tea, my dear? Nice and thrutchy, it is."

A long time ago. Martha drained her first mug of tea, then spread her pens out, and the smooth creamy paper. Ready herself for the moment when she felt able to write.

So many years now in this gentle, honest house, every inch of it made with care, refashioned with love. They had been here for forty-five years. At first Martha had thought she'd never be able to take it on. It was a mess when they saw it: green paint covering the original Arts and Crafts wooden paneling, rotten floorboards, the garden one large compost heap of moldy brown mulch.

"I can't do this," she'd told David. "We don't have the money."

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"I'll make the money, Em," he'd told her. "I'll find a way. We have to live here. It's a sign."

The children had bounced up and down, holding on to their parents' arms, little Florence like a monkey, gibbering with excitement, Bill peering out of windows, shouting, "There's a huge dead rat up here, and something's tried to eat it! Come up!" Even Daisy's face had lit up when she saw the space Wilbur would have to run around.

"But do you have the money?" she'd asked, worried. Daisy heard too much, Martha knew it.

And David had swept his daughter into his arms. "I'll make the money, little one. I'll make it. For a house like this, wouldn't it be worth it?"

Martha always remembered what Daisy said next. She'd struggled to be put down on the ground again, crossed her arms, and said, "Well, I don't like it here. It's too pretty. Come on, Wilbur."

She'd run off into the house again, and Martha and David had looked at each other and laughed.

"We have to live here," she'd said, feeling the bright sunshine on her head, the children shouting happily behind her.

David had smiled. "I can hardly believe it. Can you?"

"Shall we tell them why?"

Her husband had kissed her, and stroked her cheek. "No, I think not. Let's keep it our secret."

They had money now, of course, but not then. David was the creator of Wilbur the dog and Daisy, the little girl who thought she understood him. Every home had a Wilbur tea towel, pencil case, book of cartoon strips. But back then Wilbur was in the future and the Winters had nothing much, except each other. Only Martha and David knew what they'd gone through to get to the moment when they stood on the lawn that hot day in 1967 and decided they'd buy Winterfold.

She had forgotten nothing, nothing that had happened, before or afterward. The secrets every family acquires, some small – little indiscretions, tiny jokes. Some big, too big for her to bear anymore.

The morning sun was above the trees now. Martha moved around the kitchen, waiting for more tea to brew. She'd learned the art of patience long ago; learned that having babies slows you down, takes your dreams

of your own career and slowly chips away at them. She had wanted to be an artist too, as much as her husband. But each pregnancy tied her firmly to her home; each night lying awake on her side, feeling the movement, back aching, breath short, and nothing to do but wait for the baby to come. And then you grew older and slower and those babies grew up and left you. You could hold them close but one day they would leave, as sure as the sun rising in the morning.

Bill was still here, she told herself, but he was different, not the man she'd thought he'd become. He was nearly eight when they moved to Winterfold. Daisy and Florence would spend all day out in the garden, or in the tree house in the woods, collecting friends, dirt, stories to tell. But Bill would usually remain inside, playing Meccano or Battleship, or reading his book. Occasionally he would come into the kitchen or the sitting room, his sweet, serious face hopeful: "Hello, Mother. Are you all right? Can I give you a hand with anything?"

And Martha, in the middle of mending a plug or stuffing up a mouse hole, for there was always something to do in this house, would smile, knowing what he knew: that Bill had saved up his visit to her, counting down the minutes, because he wanted to be with her all the time, but knew he couldn't. It was sissy, and Daisy already taunted him about it, not to mention the boys at school. So if she felt she could get away with it, Martha would give him a hug and something to do: washing up, chopping vegetables. Both of them pretending he didn't want to be there, that he was only trying to be helpful. Where was he now, that serious, brown-eyed boy who'd broken her heart with love every day?

At least he was still here. Her daughters weren't. After Bill came Daisy, and the moment they'd handed her to Martha that first time Martha had looked into her green eyes, just like her own, and known her. She could translate perfectly her furious, shifting expressions, her love of solitude, her little plans. Daisy was the only thing Martha and David had ever fundamentally disagreed about in six decades. People didn't understand her. But she'd proved them wrong, hadn't she?

"Daisy? Oh, yes, she's very well. We don't hear from her so much these days. She's very busy and the area she's in has extremely poor communication. She sends a message from time to time. But we're so proud of her." It was a neat little speech, she knew: Daisy had come good. Daisy wasn't who everyone thought she was. Whereas Florence . . . Martha

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often felt Florence was like a giraffe in a family of eels. She loved her, was so proud of her, in awe of her intellect and her passion and the way she'd become, against all the odds, spectacularly her own person – but sometimes Martha wished she wasn't so . . . *Florence*.

Bill, Daisy, Florence. Martha told herself she loved all her children equally, but in the secret part of herself she had a little rhyme: Bill was her first baby, Daisy was her first girl, and Florence was David's. She knew it sounded awful. But it kept coming back to her, this little rhyme. She'd find herself chanting it under her breath while she weeded the garden, walked into the village, brushed her teeth. Like a song stuck in her head, as though someone were playing it while she slept every night. She found she was terrified someone might look into her heart and see what she had done. But the time for secrets was over. It was coming. It was all coming to her, and soon it would all come out.

Would anyone want to come back after the truth was out? There was a set program of entertainment in place at Winterfold, which never varied in the detail. Their Christmas drinks party was the biggest night of the season for miles around: mulled wine served from a huge, two-foot-high pot on the Aga, Martha's famous gingerbread cut into stars and hung with ribbons on the huge Christmas tree, which stood in the sitting room by the French windows, as it had done for years and would continue to do. The Valentine's Day drinks, where the children handed round heart-shaped sandwiches and the guests drank too much sloe gin, and more than one amatory mistake had been made late at night walking back down to the village (the teenage Bill, alighting from the bus late one night returning from another party, swore he'd seen Mrs. Talbot from the post office kissing Mrs. Ackroyd, the landlady of the Green Man, on the other side of the bus shelter). Firework every year on Guy Fawkes Night, a hugely popular Easter egg hunt, and always a summer party in August, around which people planned their holidays: an awning on the lawn and paper lanterns stretching along the driveway.

Nothing changed, not even after the disastrous summer party of – was it 1978 or '79? – which had passed into local legend. The truth was no one knew why, or could have explained how, it was different at Martha and David's. Their house was lovely, the food was delicious, the

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company was always warm and fun. All Martha had ever wanted was to make it clear that you were welcome. Whoever you were. Whether you were the television actress who lived in the mansion at the top of the hill, or the postman who stopped to chat to Mr. Winter about cricket every day in summer. That there was no “gang.” All she and David had ever wanted to do was to make a home, a place unlike their pasts. To give their children a childhood that would stay with them. To work hard together. Be happy.

A blackbird bounced through the herbs in her garden, acid-yellow beak pecking at the cocoa soil. He looked up with a bright, glassy-eyed stare at Martha as she sat by the window, pen poised, and she met his gaze until he darted into a hedge. She took another sip of tea, delaying for just a second. Savoring the final moments of stillness. For she knew that the moment she began to write, something would be set in motion, a time bomb waiting to go off. She would post the invitations and then the party would happen and she, Martha, would finally be able to tell them all what she had done. And it would never be the same after that.

A single tear dropped onto the worn kitchen table. She sat up straight, and said to herself, “Come on, old girl. It’s time.”

Carefully her pen scratched across the surface, lines crosshatching and curling till they formed something, a house, a long low house: the roof, the wooden buttresses, the old front door. Underneath, in her beautiful italic script, she wrote:

*David & Martha Winter
request the pleasure of your company at
a party to celebrate Martha’s 80th birthday*

*There will be an important announcement.
We ask that you please be there.*

*Drinks with friends Friday, 23rd November 2012, 7 p.m.
Family only lunch 1 p.m., Saturday, 24th November
Winterfold, Winter Stoke, Somerset
R.S.V.P.*