

Unexploded

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Extract

I

The talk that May afternoon was of the rockfall at the undercliff. A fisherman's dory had been buried, along with his dog, and the collapse had taken part of the sea wall with it. The news, though negligible compared with the reports from across the Channel, was repeated and wondered at in town, as if the nerves of the population ran like thin fuses through the cliff-line's strata of chalk and flint.

She stepped from the dim cave of the house-goods shop into a dazzle of sea light, and, turning left rather than right, walked briskly north up Ship Street, away from the prom where onlookers still gathered in the hope of seeing another boat safely returned. The music from the empty rides on the Pier receded. She shifted the weight of purchases in her arms. At no point did she turn back to take in the spectacle on the beach, for she didn't want to see what the man in the shop had described, the ghostly flotilla of little boats, some pocked by gunfire, listing oddly around the old carousel.

She crossed Church Street and hurried through the grounds of the Pavilion, past its dream of domes and minarets. There was no time to stop in the gardens or to take tea at one of the sunlit tables. She had to be home before Philip. It's what everyone said these days: routine was the thing.

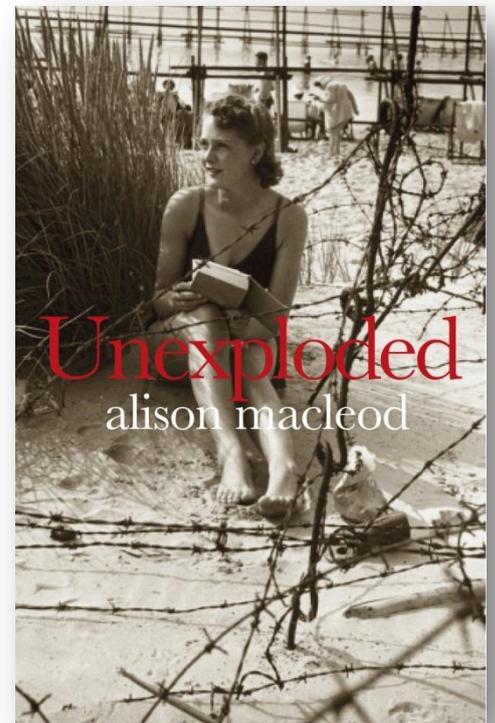
At The Level, the town's public common, she lowered her basket and let herself rest for a few minutes in the meagre shade of an elm.

On the green ahead, a group of old men played a ruminative game of bowls, for the schools had not yet emptied, and even the benches around the boating pond were empty except for a young mother and her runaway toddler.

Locally, The Level was known as such for the simple reason that little else in Brighton was level. Most of the town swooped recklessly skyward, as if it were a dizzying ride that had been plucked from a pier and dropped carelessly on to the coast. On three sides of the town centre, hills climbed north towards the wheat fields of Sussex and the hump of Ditchling's ancient beacon, east towards the rail terminus and the deep, untamed valley of Devil's Dyke, and west towards Race Hill, the racecourse, and the town's perennial Gypsy encampments. For all its effort at gentility down the centuries, Brighton had never managed to escape the wild excesses of its highs and lows.

Like The Level, Park Crescent and its gated acres of garden lay in the flat bowl of the town. But that hot, simmering spring, the bowl was less a bowl than a crucible in which the events of the year to come – their vagaries and intensities – would catalyse into the hard, unyielding metal of the inevitable.

Along Brighton's seafront the five-mile ribbon of the promenade ran east towards the ravelled line of the coastal cliffs and west to the elegant mansions of Hove – among them, Evelyn's childhood home on Brunswick Square. Twelve years before, her parents had disapproved of her move from Hove to Brighton. It had been another measure of Geoffrey's unsuitability. Her new husband was not a man of independent means. Her parents did not know of his family. His mother, they'd learned from local sources, had not been 'of sound mind'. Geoffrey did not drink enough to pass muster in her father's club. Even the very



comfortable townhouse on Park Crescent had failed to impress them. It hardly mattered that its Regency park had reminded her of the gardens of Brunswick Square, where she 'd played and read for long hours as a girl. It wouldn't do to choose a house on a whim, her mother had said. There were slums near Park Crescent. The slaughterhouse was too close. The racecourse was also too close, with its blight of criminality. Even the beach at Brighton had been spoiled by tawdry pleasure-seekers. A Brighton address would be their ruin.

They moved into Number 7 on the 1st of May 1928 and shocked her mother by dispensing with a live-in maid. Instead, Tillie came to them each morning from her own house on Magdalene Street, or, rather, she had come until the week before, when her husband was called up.

In the shop that afternoon, Evelyn had clutched Tillie's list and gathered the items as if each were a talisman against uncertainty, and if the uncertainty was great, the weight of her basket was greater still. On her journey home, she balanced an oversized box of soap flakes, a storm lamp, parcels of candles, boxes of matches, a bottle of witch hazel, first-aid provisions, bars of carbolic soap, emergency lavatory paper and a bottle of cod liver oil. As she walked, she stopped several times to shake the blood back into her right arm, though she never let go of the plait of onions that she gripped to her ribcage with her left arm.

When the King had surprised the country with his unprecedented call for a day of national prayer, it was warning enough. Whatever the BBC said, the situation could only be dire. Still, she'd procrastinated, pushing Tillie's list deep into a pocket and avoiding the town centre for most of that week – the seafront in particular, for she couldn't bear to see the boats lurching on to the beach and toppling with the wounded and the frightened.

Fear was an infection – airborne, seaborne – rolling in off the Channel, and although no one spoke of it, no one was immune to it. Fifty miles of water was a slim moat to an enemy that had taken five countries in two months, and Brighton, regrettably, had for centuries been hailed as an excellent place to land.

At home again, in the kitchen that had until only the week before been Tillie's domain, Evelyn lowered her basket, pulled off each glove, unbuckled her jacket, and gobbled water from her hand at the sink. It was hot for late May, ridiculously hot, but she felt relieved by the success of her expedition, and now, as she heaved open the kitchen windows, time slowed. Her breath deepened. The scent of lilac spilled in from the terrace. Only when the front door slammed and Philip charged up the stairs to his room – singing out his hello – did she turn at last to reassemble the day.

Her prize onions lay where she 'd dropped them, on a kitchen chair, looped like three feet of baubles on a piece of parcel string. She'd forgotten the ticket in her purse and had experienced a childish rush of pleasure and embarrassment that morning as Mrs Chavasse waved her forward to the front of the WI hall to collect her winnings. When would anyone have French onions again?

She slipped out of her jacket and into Tillie's apron. At the table, the arc of her nail cut cleanly through the first onion, and its skins fell away, crackling like static. Soon the rhythm of the knife on the chopping board lulled her beyond thought. She couldn't know that this was the last beat of a pure, untrammelled present; a final moment of uncomplicated absorption.

When she sensed someone in the room, she turned, expecting to see Philip, happily clutching his cornet of sweets. He and Tubby, Tillie's boy, still made their Saturday pilgrimages to Billet's, laying out their pocket money in a row of grubby coins, and although Philip always tried to make his sweets last the week, he usually succeeded only as far as Wednesday. But today, as she turned, it wasn't Philip she discovered but Geoffrey in an odd sort of profile: his broad, pin-striped back rested heavily against the door jamb; his chin was doubled on his chest. She hadn't heard him come in.

Go back, she wanted to say. Go back to our routine. Don't you see? There is nothing so beautiful and so necessary.

Her eyes stung and welled. She glanced at the clock on the windowsill. Not even four o'clock.

'I came direct from the station,' he said, bending to kiss her neck.

London, she reminded herself. Wednesday afternoons were London. Monday afternoons were the Camp.

She smiled up at him but she didn't want the words. She didn't want anyone trespassing on a peace of mind that was already, like fresh snowfall, pocked with the chaos of prints. 'Philip's upstairs,' she said, reaching for the chops in the Frigidaire. 'He 'll need help with his multiplications. Would you mind, darling?' Her husband's jacket smelled of platform waiting rooms and the stale brake dust of trains. *Go back, go back.*

Another new recipe. They rose from the pages of *Good Housekeeping* like orisons of calm.

Place 1 lb. of onions in salted water.

'Did you get that tooth looked at?' she heard herself say.

Boil till softened.

'There wasn't the time.'

'But you're back early . . .'

Keep the water. Mix the breadcrumbs and seasoning with the whisked egg. Put chops in the Pyrex.

'Seymour- Williams wanted a word.'

She looked up – his voice was flat, like something dead under a tyre – as she reached for the next onion. On and on she chopped, producing far more than the recipe required. Her eyes streamed, but she heard her voice grow oddly sing- song, as if her effort at cheer would encircle them like a charm. 'I hope it wasn't that business about what's- his- name again . . . the prodigal ledger clerk. How did he think he would get away with it? A bit of me admires the man's gumption but does he lack *allimagination*? How many embezzlers risk prison for a future in *sandbags*?' She pulled a po- face but Geoff rey didn't laugh.

He was removing his collar studs and unlooping his tie. 'No . . . I'm afraid it was another matter altogether.'

Change was creeping under the door and through the windows of their home, persistent as gas. (*Be observant. Do not touch door handles or other pieces of metal if spots appear.*) It was gathering over the house in spite of the purity of the day's rinsed blue sky. It was spiralling down the flue. At night as they slept, it would settle over their hearts.

She pushed the mound of onions into a pot, placed the pot under the dome on the range, and washed her hands at the sink. From the corner of her eye she watched him draw back his chair and lower his head, as if there were a one- minute silence she knew nothing of or a solemn loss she was failing to observe.

No one, he said, could countenance it, but given the evacuation from France, Head Office had had no choice but to agree a plan. If the country were invaded by daylight, each branch would bury a portion of its cash holdings, transfer another portion to a designated location, and burn the rest. Much of Lloyds' assets, indeed much of the country's assets, had already been shipped in gold to Canada, and no one, he admitted, could even say whether the transfer was legal. If word got out, there would almost certainly be a run on the banks.

Evelyn felt the hard knot in her chest relax. So this was it. Nothing that had actually *happened*.

But he didn't release her hand. His fingers were cold next to hers. She noticed a piece of dead coke on the floor in the corner, a bit that Rosa, their Spanish char, had missed that morning, and she had to stop herself from rising to sweep it up. She made herself focus. She turned up the corners of her mouth to show she was listening.

'All of this means that I'll be required to take the remaining cash and bonds from the vault to –'

Her eyes widened. 'Not here. We couldn't possibly have it here.'

'No, not here,' he said, and he knotted his fingers in hers. 'I'll take it to the station. From there, we'll travel with it on military passes.'

'Travel?' She laughed. She'd make him laugh it off too, in spite of Lloyds, in spite of Seymour-Williams. 'Geoffrey, no one will be travelling during an invasion, least of all the family of the man who is Head of the Invasion Committee . . . Surely we're duty-bound *either* to stay and be invaded like good citizens *or* to return the case of sherry the Committee is bound to foist upon you this Christmas, firstly as a token of their thanks, and secondly, because sherry is *such* excellent value now that Franco has broken Spain.'

But he didn't return her smile. She doubted he'd heard a word she'd said. 'Seymour-Williams wants my choice of four men by Friday.'

She inhaled sharply – 'But it will be chaos. Philip is too young' – and she felt some frail certainty crack, clean as a wishbone within. 'We can't leave . . .' Somewhere a joist or ceiling beam creaked, as if the house itself were shifting. Only then did she understand what it was that he wouldn't say: 'You'll leave? You'll leave us?'

He closed his eyes and pressed his hand to his jaw to quieten the riot of nerves in his mouth.

' . . . You will.'

'No,' he said, 'only if –'

'For the day? The week?'

The toothache was leeching the colour from his face; his forehead was clammy. 'It's precautionary stuff, Evvie, worst-case scenario. That's all. I daresay they have to have a plan, people at the ready.' He opened his eyes and forced a smile, a digression, a stab at the casual. 'The Bank of England is stockpiling Molotov cocktails. Can you believe it? The clerks, evidently, stink of gasoline.'

But it was too late for laughter. His timing was all wrong. 'For how long, Geoffrey?'

In the flesh of his neck beneath his ear, she watched his pulse jump. 'Indefinitely, I'm told.'

She bowed her head to hide the heat of her face. The tea towel in her lap was stained. Blood among its cabbage roses. She checked her hands and nails, panicking, as if it were her blood and not drippings from the chops. She was no good with all this. She felt queasy whenever she crossed the threshold of Hatchett's, the sweet stink of suet and blood catching at the back of her throat; the flies stranded and buzzing on strips of sticky paper by the overhead light; rabbits, pigeons and guinea fowl suspended on hooks like charms on a ghastly bracelet. Her mother was right. She'd make a mess of things in the kitchen. She hadn't been raised for the kitchen. At her finishing school, she'd been schooled in overlarge centrepieces and *l'art de recevoir*, not in how to joint a bird or gut a rabbit. She wouldn't cope without Tillie, but Tillie could hardly cope with her own family now that she was on her own. Evelyn was lucky. Everyone said so. Geoffrey wasn't going anywhere. 'Reserved occupation'. Until now, she had been lucky. Ashamed of her good fortune. But lucky.

Through Mrs Dalrymple's open window next door, the BBC's afternoon organ music boomed out suddenly, ludicrously. An acrid sharpness bit the air. Burning. Something was burning.

She pushed back her chair, walked slowly across the room to the range, and lifted the smoking pot off the heat. 'That's it, then.' She'd forgotten the water. She'd forgotten to add water to the pot. How stupid. Her prize onions were a black mulch.

He was on his feet, opening the back door. 'Evvie, never mind it now. Let's just get some air.'

'No . . . Really. It's fine. It will clear in a moment.' She couldn't move from where she stood. 'I'll bring you a brandy for your tooth. Why don't you relax in the sitting room?'

But he held the door, waiting.

Outside, the perfection of the day – a flat, Gilbert & Sullivan sky of endless blue – irritated her. In the Park, two rows of Girl Guides were being led through a frenzy of jumping- jacks by smiling older girls. Where had they come from? Why was everyone exercising German- fashion these days? Didn't young women read furtively any more or smoke or fall in love with unsuitable men? Had there ever been a time when everyone wasn't so cheerfully public- spirited, when privacy hadn't been selfish? (*Make a note of the thoughts you get. Test them. Are they honest? Unselfish? Neighbourly? Clean? If not, what can you do about it?*)

What had happened to all the reprobates in town? Where were the malingerers, the mobsters and the pimps in their camel- hair coats and glacé shoes? What had happened to the artists in their run- down digs and the happy adulterers dancing in the open air on the Aquarium's deck? Where were the pretty boys and the men who walked the prom, their white socks flashing their code beneath the hems of their trousers? Had even the peep- show girls and the dandies joined the war effort? Had Fear made good citizens of everyone?

Not that she didn't want to be steady and decent and true, to follow Geoffrey's lead. She 'd married him for his intelligent kindness, for his sense of fairness, for his loyalty to people. On Tillie 's envelope each week, he'd never failed to write, 'With our very sincere gratitude', and he meant it. He didn't regard one's servants as a different class of human. She 'd married him because he was a banker who had little regard for the trappings of wealth or class; because he'd been, in this respect, so entirely different from her parents, with their reverence for 'old money'.

The year before, he'd defied even her dowager mother. 'But some boys,' her mother had exclaimed, 'are sent away to board as young as the age of four! Philip is seven. Think of the opportunities already lost, Geoffrey. Think of Philip, of my grandson, not of yourselves.' The local Grammar would do, he had told her. He wanted Philip to grow up as he himself had, on the coast with the sea air in his lungs. He wanted the boy to understand that life was not one large, eternal club. Whatever advantages his son had been born to, he would not grow up with the sense of entitlement Geoffrey had witnessed among so many of his peers at Oxford. Her mother had turned to her then. 'Careful, darling,' she'd warned with her vinegary smile, 'or you'll be acquiring doilies and an aspidistra next.'

Her parents had disapproved of Geoffrey within minutes of meeting him, and while the force of her mother's feeling had dulled with the years and with the death of Evelyn's father, it had never disappeared, for Geoffrey was everything they were not: reasonable, thoughtful, fair.

Yet who was he today? When had he ever taken a major decision without consulting her? She turned to him, studying his face as if reading his lips, as though he were speaking to her through a thick pane of glass. He was pointing to a patch of earth. 'Just there,' he was saying. He hadn't coaxed her on to the terrace simply for fresh air. There was something else. That's what he was telling her as he pointed to a spot beneath the lilac bush.

'Whatever do you mean?' she said. Tears, real tears, not onion tears, pricked at her eyes. He was going to leave them. They had never been apart as a family, not even for a night, yet now he was capable of abandoning them.

From the branches of the old beech tree, rooks lifted into the sky, drifting like blown ash. Over the red-brick walls of the private park, a tram scooted by on Union Road while, from the high hill of Elm Grove, came the wail of an ambulance.

'I've buried it. Not too far down . . .'

'I don't understand . . .' She had to shake herself.

'Two hundred pounds –'

'*Money?*'

'A precaution.' Each syllable was a labour. 'Two hundred pounds and . . .'

A girl in a bright cardboard crown ran past them on the park path at the bottom of the terrace steps, her brown plaits flying.

'Geoffrey . . . ?'

He looked away. 'A keepsake . . . That photo you liked of the three of us on the Pier last summer.'