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opening extract from

The Bride's Farewell

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1

On the morning she was to be married, Pell Ridley crept up from her bed in the dark, kissed her sisters goodbye, fetched Jack in from the wind and rain on the heath and told him they were leaving. Not that he was likely to offer any objections, being a horse.

There wasn't much to take. Bread and cheese and a bottle of ale, a clean apron, a rope for Jack and a book belonging to Mam with pictures of birds drawn in soft pencil, which no one ever looked at but her. The dress in which she was to be married she left untouched, spread over a dusty chair.

She felt carefully inside the best teapot for the coins put away for her dowry, slipped the rope round Jack's neck and turned to go.

Head down, squinting into the rain, she stopped short at the sight of a ghostly figure in the path. It had as little substance as a moth, but its eyes burned a hole in the dark.

'Go back to bed, Bean.'

It didn't budge.

She sighed, noticing how the pale oval of a face remained stubbornly set.

'Please, Bean. Go home.' *Oh God*, she thought, *no*. But it was no use appealing to God about something already decided.

Without waiting to be invited, the boy scrambled up on to Jack, and with no other option she pulled herself up behind him, feeling the warmth of his thin body against her own. And so it was, with a resigned chirrup to Jack and no tear in her eye, that they set off down the hill, heading north, which at that moment appeared to be the exact direction in which lay the rest of the world.

'I'm sorry, Birdie,' whispered the girl, with a final thought for the husband that should have been. Perhaps at the last minute he would find another bride. Perhaps he would marry Lou. Anyone will do, she thought. As long as it isn't me.

2

The open road. What a trio of words. What a vision of blue sky and untouched hills and narrow trails heading God knew where and being free – free and hungry, free and cold, free and wet, free and lost – who could mourn such conditions, faced with the alternative?

They'd been on the road barely an hour when the night began to thin and they came to a village identical to the one they'd just left – one road in, one road out and one longer, less-trodden path that circled round. Every soul in that place knew Pell well enough to know she shouldn't be up and riding away from home at dawn on her wedding day, so she steered Jack wide and skirted each village till the names grew strange and the people they passed started to look unfamiliar. Even then, to be certain, they kept on, stopping only once under a tree for a meal of brown bread and beer.

Bean rode even when Pell slid off to walk, his frame so slight she doubted the horse noticed him at all. When she felt overcome by gloom and doubt and astonishment at what she'd done, he smiled encouragement at her, but most of the time he sat silent, looking straight ahead.

'Don't you want to go home, Bean?' Her idea of freedom had not included him.

But he shook his head, and Pell sighed. What's done is done, she thought, and no use looking back.

They were headed for the horse fair at Salisbury. It was less a plan than a starting point, but it led them into the great anonymous bulk of England where an infinite number of possible lives beckoned. Away from Nomansland, away from Mam and Pa. Away from Birdie Finch.

'He'll make a good steady husband,' her sister Lou had told her, more than once. 'And you like him well enough already.'

'But I can ride and shoe a horse better than he can.'

'Is that your best objection?' Lou wished someone would look at her the way Birdie looked at Pell.

'It will have to do,' Pell laughed, and wheeled her horse off across the heath.

Lou watched them go, pressing her lips together with disapproval.

Everyone knew Birdie and Pell would be married. They'd been betrothed practically from birth, or at least from the first time she'd ridden a horse, just after she learned to walk, set up behind Birdie and holding on for dear life. That pony had no time for children, but Birdie stuck to him and Pell stuck to Birdie, first like brother and sister, and later with her head buried in his shoulder and her arms round his waist.

'When we're grown,' he'd say, 'you'll be married to the finest blacksmith in two counties.'

'You ought to marry Lou,' Pell answered. 'She's the one wants a husband.'

He looked at her, injured. 'I've nothing to say to your sister, and you know it.'

She couldn't contradict him, for it was true that Lou hated

mud and horses equally, was the least likely person to attend a difficult calving or grab hold of a pony's mane and swing up on to its back.

There was a time – an early time – when the thought of marrying Birdie had made Pell proud, not least for besting Lou, whom everyone knew would make the better wife. In those days, boy and girl spent every spare moment together, from first dawn till last light, and there wasn't a horse they couldn't catch, ride and tame. Before she was old enough to know what kissing was, he'd kissed her and said, 'There now, that means we'll be married someday.' And at first she believed him because she wanted to and later because she couldn't think of anything else to believe.

'On *that* spot,' he said one day, pointing to the empty field just beyond his parents' house. 'That's where we'll build our house, and fill it to bursting with children.' He held his arms out wide, to indicate multitudes.

Pell stared at him. A house full of children? She had only to look at her mother – worn and shapeless with a leaking bladder, great knotted blue veins, and breasts flat as old wineskins – to reject that plan. And worse, even, than the physical toll was the grinding disappointment, the drudgery, the changelessness of life in this place.

Toil and hardship and a clamour of mouths to feed? Not now, Pell thought. Not ever.

3

In late afternoon, they came to a hamlet comprised of four thatched wooden houses and two more made of cob. Pell stopped outside the one with the nicest garden, where a girl her own age fed soured milk and slops to the family pig. The girl had a face already pulled inwards with troubles, but she wiped her hands on her apron and set down the bucket when she saw Pell. They considered each other while passing the time, one wondering who was the stranger with a child and a white horse, and what was she doing here, the other happy to observe a life of feeding slops to a pig, as long as it wasn't her life.

'Are you travelling alone?' asked the girl, though she might have answered that question on the evidence of her own eyes. When Pell indicated Bean, she looked surprised. 'What, no father or husband?'

Pell shook her head. 'I have no husband and never will.' She was pleased to speak the words out loud.

The girl's sour mouth dropped open, and without warning turned up in a smile. She offered Bean and Jack apples from her apron, as she'd plenty. 'He's handsome,' she said, admiring Jack and murmuring, 'you're handsome you are.' Then to Bean: 'What's your name?'

Bean stared at her, silent and unflinching.

'Is he right in the head?'

Pell felt insulted for him, but said yes, and then volunteered that they were on their way to Salisbury fair to look for work, and watched the other girl's expression. Proper girls didn't declare their intention never to marry, followed by a plan to go to Salisbury with nothing but an odd boy and a horse for company.

Why, she'd never heard the like.

A silence fell between them and Pell was about to move on when the girl held out her hand to Jack once more with an apple, as if to delay their departure by a moment or two. Jack lowered his head and took it softly, and Pell smiled and let him finish before setting off. Even then he dragged his feet, and the girl stared after Pell in a way that said she didn't think it right what Pell was doing, being out in the world on her own like that, but on the other hand she wished it was her.

All along the road they passed empty farms, abandoned to the promise of more money and better lives in city factories and railway yards. At one of these places, in an empty barn, the travellers set down for the night in perfect isolation.

Bean slid off Jack while Pell opened her bag for the old woven blanket she meant to have as a bed, and discovered folded within it a beautiful fine-knitted shawl, large and warm and charcoal brown, made from the wool of new black lambs. The shawl was as good as a message from her sister saying she should use it instead of a husband to keep warm in the world.

Pell wondered how Lou had known her secret. Such was the way with sisters, the knowledge of the other that bound them up in love and hate. Lou could marry Birdie now that her sister had run away, which would have been for Mam a source of deep and

lasting satisfaction. It would prove to her that the fates shared her taste for Louisa over Pell, though in fact the fates did not.

Birdie wouldn't mind which of the sisters he married, despite them being as unlike as fire and clay. His need of a wife was the same as his need of a new suit of clothing or an acre of maize. So Pell told herself.

'Come along, Bean,' she said. And then she wrapped him in the beautiful woollen shawl and settled him into a deep bed of straw, where he nestled down like a calf, falling instantly asleep. Pell watched him and thought of Lou knitting, her quick fingers carding and spinning and looping the soft brown wool. It had been made for her wedding, that much Pell guessed, and she was grateful for it now. The boy shivered a little in his sleep and there was nothing for it but to cover him with more straw and add the other blanket for warmth. He would present no problem, she knew, would demand nothing and express no dissatisfaction with whatever came his way. He had come away for the same reason she had, there being nothing left for him at home.

She tethered Jack, and wriggled down into the straw beside Bean so that the shawl enveloped them both. The little boy and the soft wool smelled of home, of everything she loved and longed to escape.

They were lucky. It was a good place to sleep, dry and snug, and though she cried for a time and held Bean close, before long it was morning and the first night had passed not much less comfortably than usual and somewhat more so without six other souls attending her every move.

4

The light still came early at this time of year, and they awoke in the soft gold of dawn. Jack dozed while Pell rubbed her face with a handkerchief and water, combed her dark hair and plaited it in one thick braid down the centre of her back. It might have been a wasted effort, trying to look respectable with her bare feet and legs brown from the sun. But if people took her for a gypsy, well then, she would tell futures to get by.

Having finished her rough version of a toilette she attempted to smooth Bean's hair and find his features under a layer of dust but he shook his head and fled out of reach and in the end she gave up trying.

They began to walk again, cheered by the road curling up towards Salisbury. It was little travelled, too narrow for a horse and cart and loud with birdsong. Through the shade of ancient oaks and dappled beech groves they walked, Pell leading, ducking her head to avoid the long arms of flowering bramble. She walked barefoot to save boot leather, and sudden patches of sunlight trembled beneath her feet, warming the crumbly soil. At unfamiliar sounds she started, and looked back down the path, though she doubted anyone would think to follow them here.

Mostly they travelled in silence, the regular *thud-ump* of her

horse's tread familiar as the beat of her own heart. They passed a farmer she recognized slightly but it had been years since they'd last met and the woman shape of her was a perfect disguise. He said, 'Hello, nice day,' and she did too, and maybe he peered at her and the boy and wondered for an instant, but that was all. The freedom of being nobody after all those years of everyone knowing exactly who she was made the blood in her veins run a little wild.

They stopped in one village where Pell paid a few pence to buy bread from a woman selling heavy brown loaves still warm from the oven and cheese she made herself. The woman looked at her without sympathy.

'What are you doing on the road all alone?'

Pell wondered for a moment whether Bean was visible only to her. 'I'm going to Salisbury,' she answered.

'For what?' snapped the woman.

Pell's pale face and dark eyes belied the heat of her blood. 'There's no work at home,' she said evenly, and stopped herself adding, *and that's just the start of the troubles there*.

'Hmmph,' said the woman, staring at Pell hard, reading the quality of her horse and her clean face, the worn-out wool of her pinafore and the odd brother, and knowing the girl's history from what she read. She had seen almost every human story pass by over the years.

When Pell unwrapped her parcel sometime later there was an extra slab pressed in against the one she'd bought, an additional thick slice cut off the new round cheese. Both pieces were sweating, pale yellow, and tasted of milk, and Pell felt a rush of gratitude for the unexpected kindness.

In early afternoon, another woman came running after her

panting, and asked if she'd be so good as to post a letter, given that she was going past the village post office in any case, and when Pell nodded the woman produced an envelope and smoothed it flat as if wishing it luck on its way. She pressed a penny for the stamp into Pell's hand, with the explanation that the letter was 'for my son in London'.

Pell nodded again and didn't say a word, but the woman couldn't help puffing herself up a little and adding proudly, 'He's gone there to seek his fortune.'

At that, Pell's heart dipped in sympathy. She had a fair idea of how the story of the son's fortune might go, thinking of next door's son coming back after a year in the big city factories hungrier and thinner than when he left, with tales of cruelty and hardship to freeze your soul.

Pell would have liked to speak more to the woman, to prolong her moment of hopefulness, but Bean sat forward and chirped to Jack, loosening his rein and moving off, so she had to follow. She looked back to wave, and saw the woman still standing, watching, reluctant to let the letter out of her sight.

Pell turned to the road ahead once more and closed her eyes. A vision of Salisbury fair filled her head, with nothing beyond.

5

By mid-afternoon, they had joined the highway, where a slow trickle of humanity headed for the fair. From every direction they came, in caravans, traps and farmer's carts, on foot in little chattering groups, or all alone dragging heavy loads. As the day wore on, the trickle became a stream and the stream a river. Some rode or led or drove horses in strings or pairs, and Pell was glad Jack wasn't the kicking sort, but only huffed once or twice at mares he fancied as they passed.

It became difficult to manoeuvre, and when a thickset young farmer backed his horse into Jack, Pell turned to him smiling, in expectation of an apology. Instead, he leaned in close to her and whispered, 'What're *you* selling?' with a smile that made the blood rise in her face.

She reined Jack hard, cutting through the crowd and setting off a volley of complaints. Behind her the farmer laughed unpleasantly, and Pell forced her mind away from him to the happy distraction of horses bound for market. Some were driven, some ridden and some led; some strode past graceful as gods, others looked broken down and ready for the knacker's yard. There were greys and bays, chestnuts and roans, Roman noses and deep chests and high bony withers, but most were just big honest

beasts looking for a good home with someone who would work decent hours beside them and feed them decent food. Which was what the men wanted too.

At least half of the horses on the road were coloured gypsy types splashed all over black or brown and white with big domed heads and feathery legs. But even among so many the same, there were gaits and heads that drew your eye and said *look at me.*

And Jack as good as any she saw and better, Pell thought.

Passing through a little village and over a narrow wooden bridge, Pell found herself riding beside a middle-aged man with a pleasant face, who, after some time and one or two sidelong glances, ventured a conversation.

'That's a very fine pony you have there, miss.'

Pell continued to look straight ahead as if he hadn't spoken, but his voice sounded friendly and it felt wrong, somehow, to snub him. She offered the smallest of nods.

'Are you taking him to market?'

Below Pell's elbow, Bean craned to look at the man, and smiled encouragement.

The man smiled back. 'It'd be a shame to sell him, now wouldn't it?' He addressed his comments to Bean. 'Or perhaps you're buying?'

With her back straight and chin high, Pell pressed Jack to step out ahead. Bean looked across and shook his head.

The man kept pace. 'May I enquire, then, as to your mission in Salisbury?'

'No,' said Pell primly, and both the man and Bean laughed. Defeated, Pell glanced over at him. From his immaculate green livery she guessed he worked for one of the big houses. His face was round and open and he rode an elegant chestnut mare,

leading a matched pair of bays with long necks and fine heads. The three animals claimed more than a full share of his attention, and it showed some horsemanship that he managed to keep in step with Jack.

Pell had prepared a polite rebuff to any further attempts at engagement, but it proved unnecessary, for at that moment a young lady just ahead waved a large white handkerchief to catch the eye of her friend, causing the chestnut to spin sideways, eyes bulging. Another rider would have lost his seat, Pell thought, noticing how quietly her companion followed the mare's temper, how he sat still and calm without leaning on his mount's mouth to right himself. She was a spooky creature, scared of her own shadow and not interested in proving otherwise to anyone. Bean giggled.

'You're sensible wanting rid of her,' Pell said, thinking, That mare's had more than a few guineas wasted on her and will have again.

He glanced over, pleased at eliciting a response at last. 'Aye, but just look at her. There'll always be someone wanting such a fine-looking mare, and willing to take the rest with it.'

'She's fickle as fortune,' murmured Pell.

At that he nodded, adding in a low voice, as if talking to the horse, 'You're right there. But it's hard to blame her, poor thing, for she had a bad fall over a fence with a fool of a rider. How do you tell a horse to settle and trust you after that?'

'You just tell her.'

The thought seemed to amuse him. 'Go on, then.'

Pell rode up, drawing even with the mare's head, then leaned over and spoke softly in her ear. 'That's enough, now –'

'Desdemona.'

Pell looked startled.

'The much-wronged wife from a play by Mr William Shakespeare,' the man said, with a raised eyebrow. 'So I am told.'

Pell laughed. 'All right, then. That's enough, now, Desdemona, you won't fall again.' The mare flicked one ear back to catch the girl's voice. Pell turned to the man once more. 'You see? It's what she's been waiting to hear.'

He laughed softly. 'But who knows if what you've told her is true? Depends to whom she's sold and how she's ridden.'

'Well, then,' Pell said coolly, gazing straight into his eyes, 'she's perfectly right to be anxious, is she not?'

He laughed again, pleased to be bested, and she noticed that his face wasn't a bad face, if you were the sort of girl who cared about such things.

Having established a connection, they rode together companionably, speaking of horses because it was a subject neither seemed likely to exhaust. When the man turned off to claim lodgings at the Queen's Head, Bean looked up into Pell's face as if searching for something. Not finding it, he lowered his gaze and sighed, dejected for reasons he kept to himself.