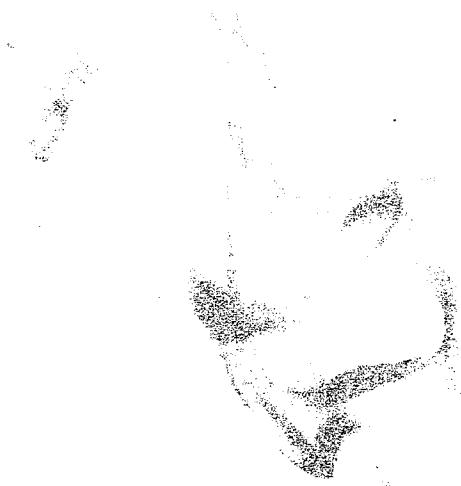


The Prologue (To Everything that Came Before)

By Hope Jennings



Ten years after the last time he saw either of his brothers, Jamie Brennan sat alone in a first-class compartment on the journey from Paris to Lausanne. He contemplated the countryside revealed to him like a film played out in reverse motion across the transparent, though slightly smudged, screen of glass. At one point he was startled by the reflection of his face imprinted onto the rolling scenery passing by, the optical illusion presenting a seeming paradox, as if he were simultaneously present in two different spatial and temporal realms. He recalled, with some irritation, that his father had once observed this very same uncanny, involuntary doubling. Though Jamie could not isolate the exact novel in which that mirrored scene of his thoughts originated, no doubt his father would have expressed it far more eloquently than himself.

As a consolation, Jamie retrieved a fading black and white photograph from his left breast pocket, studying it for perhaps the hundredth time since he'd first seen it. The waif offered him a sullen scowl of distrust. A tumble of black curls framed her pale,

heart-shaped face, slightly tilted to one side in a pose of defiance, her wide, black eyes coldly, contemptuously challenging whoever stood behind the camera. When Jamie first met the woman who'd refused to remain frozen in that single, awkward moment of her childhood, he'd immediately recognized her. One look into her eyes and he'd known she was the spectral revenant of that little girl notoriously evoked by his father in nearly all of his books published over the past twenty years.

The photograph had confirmed Jamie's long-held suspicions: his father's claim on fictional integrity was a fraud. Although Vasili habitually insisted, in countless interviews, letters, and dinner-hour debates, that he'd never plundered his autobiography for the purposes of writing fiction, this statement had always carried the stench of a disingenuous protestation. Jamie knew for a fact, having made a detailed comparative study between the intersecting imaginative processes of schizophrenics and novelists, one's reality had a habit of creeping into one's fantasies; or, one's fantasies infected the reality. His father was not exempt from this phenomenon, though he managed to display greater skill than most novelists in concealing the details of his life within the details of stories about lives he refused to claim as his own. Now, in spite of his father's denials, Jamie had proof of his theorem. The great master of artifice, Vasili Novikov, was guilty of stealing from his own life, and the lives of others, and had failed to disguise certain events and personages as wholly fictionalized creations.

This discovery, however, had taken Jamie some time to digest. After receiving the photograph from its former subject, who'd shown up unexpectedly on his doorstep after more than three years of searching for his missing brother, Jamie pulled down each of his father's novels from the shelves and methodically searched all the relevant passages, glancing occasionally, anxiously at the woman who slept on his sofa for the better part of two days. When she finally woke, he summoned the nerve to ask if she was that same girl his father had repeatedly reincarnated. She'd laughed, nodding, then remarked: 'It was always just variations on a theme, and he actually never knew me as a child.' No, of course, he couldn't have, Jamie demurred, calculating the years, but the photograph still lay

between them as evidence. So she'd had no choice but to tell him her version of the story.

Jamie put away the photograph, not sure if he would have the courage to show it to his father. Besides, if what she'd said was true, and she had no reason to lie, then Vasili had already seen the image at least twice before; there was no point in destroying him with this souvenir of all that he'd lost. He was the only son his father had left, and the burden of this role was something Jamie felt he could no longer manage. He too wanted to vanish and become only a character in one of his father's books, precisely because this was the only means Vasili had of becoming reconciled with the past.

Jamie willed himself into a doze, refusing to dream, declining to wake until the train pulled into the station. There would not be anyone waiting for him at the platform. No one was expecting him. He hired a taxi to drive him the fifteen miles to his parent's small villa tucked away in the sloping hills surrounding Lausanne, the last place they'd decided to call home. He had not brought any luggage, as he was planning on immediately returning to Paris, and so had nothing to set down by the front door to announce his arrival. A meaningless gesture, since his mother now depended on a hearing device, which she rarely deigned to attach to her ear. As for his father, he would be sitting in the garden, beneath the broad shade of the tulip poplar, and counting all the real and imagined butterflies, wafting temptingly above his head, which he was no longer agile enough to pursue with his madly wavering net.

Jamie padded up softly behind his mother, who sat at the kitchen table sorting through the never-ending pile of mail, and gave her bony shoulder a gentle squeeze. She absently murmured hello, unsurprised to find him there, and continued with her menial task of correspondence with the outside world, the sort of thing his father had always left up to her. He sat and waited until she decided to raise her elegant, silvery head, slip her spectacles from her beaky, dignified, nose, and directly acknowledge his presence.

'You should have told us you were coming,' she reprimanded Jamie.

'It's only for the afternoon.'

'Your father will be disappointed,' she left no doubt that she

equally referred to herself.

'How is he?' Jamie asked.

'He is as well as he has ever been,' she offered, which, considering Vasili's mercurial moods, implicated anything ranging from manic elation to suicidal ennui.

'Now, why don't you go say hello? He'll be thrilled to see you, and I'm sure you have important matters to discuss.'

'Actually there's something I need to tell both of you,' Jamie was breaking the rules; she'd always preferred to have whatever news her sons might have brought with them to be repeated to her later, privately, by her husband.

'Oh?' she lifted one thinly drawn brow into an acute arch, an incomplete question mark, as if she simply had to wait and sooner or later the information would be revealed to her without expending the energy of acquiring it.

'I'm going to be married,' Jamie blurted, knowing it was the only way.

'You are too old for marriage,' she laughed indulgently. 'Really, Jamie, you are nearly forty-years-old. Can you imagine what our lives might have been like if I'd married your father when he was that age? It would have been quite impossible!'

Yes, Jamie thought, impossible that any of her sons might have been born; for once, he refused to allow his mother to distill the unknown complexities of his life into a convenient analogy that mirrored his father's own stubborn peculiarities.

'I appreciate your concern, mama, but it is decided,' he informed her, dismissively, cruelly. 'I only wanted to tell you in person.'

'Oh dear, how considerate of you.' She feared the redundancy of her old age; her thoughts relegated to the nattering complaints of an inconsequential crone, even if she'd rarely offered her opinions before, at least when it mattered most to do so. 'You always were a conscientious little boy. Are you at least going to tell me the name of this woman?'

Jamie inwardly cringed. He had no choice. 'Mina Byrne.'

Deirdre did not erupt into a tempest of fury; she simply slipped on her familiar, glacial mask, though Jamie detected the faint trace of appalled outrage in her eyes. Mina Byrne would not leave his

mother alone. Miss Byrne had always been intent on stealing for herself every last possession of Mrs. Novikov. Jamie waited for the words she would use to disown him, but the words that did come were the ones his mother always wielded, translating everything of significance back to her husband.

'You're aware of what this will do to your father,' she stated.

'It won't destroy him,' Jamie weakly insisted. 'Nothing that happens, no matter how awful, is capable of destroying him.'

'So you'd like to make a go of it yourself. Of course, your brothers had to, so why not you as well? I never expected it of you, Jamie. My God, you know nothing of this woman, or you would not be marrying her!'

'I know everything, mama,' he coolly silenced her, aware she would not want him to name what that word, everything, contained, because then she would have to reveal her own complicity in covering up the facts. 'Besides, papa writes it all down in his books. He needs some way of communicating the truth to the rest of us.'

'You never wanted to be a part of this family.' —

'Did you?' Jamie lobbed his winning point, the victory far from satisfying.

'Go talk to your father,' she dismissed him, resettling her spectacles on the perch of her nose. 'And when you're finished, you may leave by the garden gate. I'll call you a taxi.'

Jamie rose, stooping helplessly to kiss the silvery crown of her head. She refused to budge, paralyzed by the unwanted ghosts her son had brought in with him. Jamie hoped this would not be the last time he saw her. His father, also, did not acknowledge him until he'd finished reading the last paragraph on the page in the book he held in his lap. Jamie sat beside him and observed his gnarled, spidery blue-veined hands, their joints protruding in a deformed, arthritic contortion, like the hands of an ogre in a fairy tale, though Jamie could only see their frailty, or at least their imagined frailty. Vasili eventually glanced up at his son, scowled, replaced the bookmark in the slim volume, slammed shut its spine with considerable force, and then lifted the book in the air, shaking it gleefully beneath Jamie's nose.

'It just arrived by post, first printing, hot and steaming! This one will throw them all off the scent. Once again, I've slipped a wrench in their clumsily cogitating brains!' He laughed inanely, to which Jamie could only reply, 'That good?'

'Oh no, my boy, it is far from good!' Vasili exhorted. 'It is the most ingenious disappearing act man has ever devised for himself. The great Houdini would grovel in envy and shame! A fatal sucker-punch if there ever was one! Have you read it?'

'Yes, papa, of course I have.' Other than his mother, Jamie was expected to remain his father's most loyal reader. Jamie had, in fact, not read it. When he'd received the galleys, he'd immediately handed them over to Mina, allowing her to translate for him Vasili's convoluted sense of humor, which Jamie no longer had the stamina or desire to appreciate on his own. It seemed that in this latest of the great Novikov's books, Novikov had cleverly concealed himself behind the mask of Novikov, and this achieved, just as Mina herself had remarked, a sinuously spiraling, self-referring, if not self-parodying, ever-receding hall of mirrors. Jamie, however, had not come here to discuss the enigma of his father's slippery intellect.

'Papa, there's something I must tell you...'

'What, you weren't happy with the book? You think it was too daring, too arrogant of me. I know you always secretly harbor that opinion about my novels, but –'

'No, papa,' Jamie cut him off, as it was the only way of deflecting Vasili's attention onto himself. "I'm getting married, to Mina Byrne.'

Once those words were uttered, Jamie saw his father shrivel and slump into a very old, tired, and yes, frail man. Somehow, and without explanation, as he knew at this point it would be entirely unnecessary, Jamie discovered the courage to return to him the photograph of a young girl who'd come crashing into all their lives. His father silently accepted the unexpected gift, smiling in inconsolable recognition. For what seemed like lifetimes, they listened to the insistent clicking of the early evening cicadas, and the faintly imperceptible fluttering of a butterfly's translucently filmy iridescent wings.

'Why her?' Vasili finally asked, presenting a question requiring

multiple answers.

'How could it be anyone other than her?' Jamie was sure that this was the sufficient, the correct, answer.

Then he told his father the other piece of information he needed to know; the only thing that could truly matter, because in the end, Mina herself was negligible. Upon hearing these words, the trajectory of Vasili Vasilievich Novikov's life finally reached the precise point where every pattern wove itself into a fabric of the most sublime, the most perceptibly cruel, yet the only possible recovery of all that had been lost. He visibly began to shake with the comprehension of what could never have been, but miraculously, was exactly as it should be.

'I never knew,' his father mumbled, and then turned away from his son, concealing his face with those large, bulbous, twisted hands.

There was nothing left for Jamie to do but rise, turn, and walk away, because the one thing he could not bear to see would be the image of his father weeping. He left the garden gate unlatched, knowing his mother observed his departure from behind the safety of her kitchen window, and that after Jamie vanished, swallowed up by a future she refused to consider, she would step out into the garden and firmly shut close and bar the gate. And all the while his father would be wandering through his pain and his delight at the nascent thought of his new world, his new fabrication of the truth. It would be a brilliant and ambiguously candid configuration of intricate reflections that doubled and perhaps even tripled the smashed, splintered and scattered fragments of his heart. This, Jamie knew, would be the last of his father's fictions.

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