

THE

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MUSEUM

A Journey Backwards

MAKERS



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ONE



THE BOXES UNDER THE BED

One day, in the dusty summer of 2015, I missed my train. I was in a town where I'd never been before and, having nothing else to do, I made my way to Christchurch Mansion, the local museum. Museums take me somewhere else in time. All my life I have been past-obsessed and have always wanted to be anywhere else in time but here.

Through the park I went, past ice-cream vans and cartwheels and candy-coloured bedding plants, and into a dark, Jacobean mansion where, having wandered down many silent corridors, I found myself in a small room whose walls were covered from floor to ceiling with wooden panels. Each wooden panel was painted with a symbol: giant skulls that nestled in a green forest, a

disembodied hand, a skeletal mermaid, trees like parasols, a globe carried on the back of a crab, a man in a white ruff and black breeches, a wizard smoking a long pipe, an eagle.

Around the top of the room were Latin sentences saturated in despair and self-denial: 'Trust is never assured'. 'I had hope and I have perished'. 'There is no rest for me'. I assumed that the paintings were recent until I looked at the labels and saw that a Lady Anne Drury had painted them, who had lived not far away from Ipswich in Hawstead House 400 years ago. It was a time when England was full of Puritans and revolutionaries and witches and fairies.

These paintings were in her private closet, a small secret space where, like many wealthy women at the time, she went to read and write and meditate and pray. Most closets were sparsely furnished: a chair, a small table, a Bible, a prayer book and a single key held by the lady of the house. Lady Drury's Closet was also furnished by these dreamlike paintings that drip with grief. She came from a high-minded Puritan family and was famous, like her mother and her grandmother before her, for her learning and seriousness. But when she painted these pictures she was probably living alone, her husband Robert away soldiering as usual, and her last child Elizabeth having recently died. Her chaplain was the Puritan teacher Joseph Hall, and it was almost certainly on his instructions that she sat here alone for hours on end, painting and meditating on the sadness and the dreariness of the world.

I wondered if her husband had been frightened of his clever and forbidding wife? Was she lonely in the big house when the deep Suffolk nights swallowed it up? And how did it feel to give away her heart to her now-dead fifteen-year-old daughter, the last person she ever loved?

What's wrong with me? I think. I never used to be this soft-hearted. Things never used to get to me like this. I only came here

to pass the time, and now I have been kidnapped by a 400-year-old grief.

That summer I had been working in museums for more than ten years, and was part of a team – though we ran ourselves as a business – making exhibitions and masterplanning museums. We worked in Cairo and California, and gave workshops in Chile and Singapore and on the edge of the Andes. My job was to interpret the objects and tell their stories. The process of museum-making is part imaginative and story-ish (because what else are museums if not collections of things and their stories?), and part spreadsheets and emails and workshops and funding requests and client meetings. And though I was secretly romantic about museum-making – I believed in the rights of objects to survive, was profoundly shocked by the destruction of the past – a lot of our time was spent on revenues and budgets, because it was always the money (or the lack of it) that was the hardest thing to solve; everything else was easy by comparison. But the day I stood in Lady Drury's Closet I forgot all those spreadsheets and budgets. Instead my brain went whirling down the years, back to Lady Drury's griefs, and to mine as well.

So where do you keep the memories and the secrets of your past? Both the big pasts that connect us all to cities and countries, and the small pasts that are our own and no one else's, and that we remember through clothes and jewellery and recipes and gossip and storytelling?

Lady Drury held her memories in her private closet.

As for me, and having nowhere else to put it, I kept my past under the double bed – in rows and rows of cardboard boxes – plus in several leather suitcases, a huge trunk and a smaller tin one, the latter being stacked up together in one corner of the attic

where we sleep. The tin trunk has a curved lid still stamped with all its journeys. The big, brown trunk has cross ribs and a tattered label saying, 'Luggage in Advance – Belfast Steamship Co. Ltd'. Every box contained a jumble of lives, and not only my own family's but my partner's as well, so that missionaries, hippies and poets mingled with immigrants and businessmen.

I didn't always lead a lucky life. The partner, the children, the museum-making work that I loved – all these I acquired in adulthood and wrapped around me like a coat to keep me warm. Behind them I carry other memories, darker, half-buried and more turbulent, which I confined to the cardboard boxes under the bed. Those boxes have followed me through the student rooms and travels and restlessness of my twenties; through my thirties when I was having children and the boxes gathered dust (although the children looked alarmingly like their ancestors; all those faces coming back to haunt me); and then through my forties when more boxes came to join the ones that were already there.

For years I never looked inside them. I was busy living my life forwards, working long days, and because I loved my job and because anyway my memories were painful, for all these reasons I forgot the past. But then – and maybe this was because the children were growing up or I was getting older or there was less work in the office or maybe there was more work but it all involved collecting up memories – words like time, ghosts, memories and last chances were starting to slip through my mind. I was beginning to think that I needed to make sense of my past, needed to keep the memories – and all those people – alive, needed to pay my dues before I died (though I had no reason to suppose that was any time soon). In short, I needed to look in the boxes under my bed.

And so one day, not long after I first saw Lady Drury's paintings and driven by all these feelings, both vague and urgent, I

crawled on my stomach under the bed, pulled out all the boxes, dragged the trunks from out of their corner, and opened them up. Inside were love letters, poems, diaries, bookmarks in the shape of Christian crosses, knitting needles, more letters asking for money or telling terrible truths, unfinished novels, children's drawings, Victorian samplers, rings and books and necklaces; each item a life, an adventure – a deluge of things and their stories.

You can tell that I am a museum person because my first instinct – I can't help myself – is to believe that in the past lie both the secrets and the answers. Also very typical was my next response, because without even thinking I began to slide all these things into groups on the carpet, to take a guess at what belonged to whom, to match up photographs and handwriting to memories and names – in other words, to sort and classify.

And as I did so I had the revelation – simple and obvious when I write it down – that in what we do with our memories and the stuff that our parents leave behind, we are all museum makers, seeking to make sense of the past. Museum-making is about sorting often quite ordinary objects to make meaningful patterns out of the muddle and confusion of the universe; thoughtful, beautiful patterns that have something to say. Museums are where we go to make sense of the world and the pasts that have gone. And what we do in museums we also do with our own histories.

And so there I was, kneeling on the floor, trying to put order and sense into the flotsam and jetsam of my lost past. I might not be making a big, national museum full of valuable objects, but I was certainly making the equivalent of a small town museum, the kind that is full of bits and pieces of everyday lives. Between the small pasts of each of us and the big past of all of us there is not such a large gap as you might think. We share with museums the habit of hoarding the things that matter most to us, and exactly the

same quarrels that break out in museum-making – ‘What does that object mean? And whose history are we telling anyway?’ – break out also at the smaller scale, in the questions we ask our brothers and sisters and parents – ‘Who am I? Where did I come from?’ – and of ourselves – ‘If all that will remain of me are a few things and a few stories, what should these things and these stories be?’

My partner came up the stairs and, seeing me kneeling there surrounded by the detritus of my family’s past, he asked, ‘What are you doing?’

‘Making the Museum of Me,’ I told him.

He looked at me doubtfully. It’s true that I was past-obsessed, but that was always for other people’s histories, not for my own. All these years I’ve never wanted to think about my past, why would I want to think about it now?

TWO



GRAN

I was brought up on the far edges of the known world – or so it felt – in a remote Essex village, where every summer green nettles and cow parsley grew so high that they drowned out cottages and lanes that wouldn't be seen again until the winter. There were five of us, myself and my two brothers, our mother and our grandmother. Somewhere along the line the grown-ups had lost our father. Dimly I could remember him in a room in London but that didn't help because I couldn't find my way back to that room, and when I asked where he had gone no one could tell me. Other things, as well as a lost father, marked us out as different: we had no curtains at the windows (there was no money); I always came top of the class; and our mother wrote poetry and spent long periods of time in hospital.

The poems fell from her like drops of water. She worked in a bookshop in nearby Saffron Walden and in the evenings she shut herself away to write. She didn't talk to me and I was shy of her. My brothers loved her but I loved Gran best.

It was Gran who saved us when our mother couldn't look after us any longer. Gran was a little, fast-walking woman who had once been delicately pretty – a short nose, a wide mouth, big, brown eyes – as I knew from the photographs that I sometimes found in drawers around the house.

In one she was wearing a big 1920s coat, broad on the shoulders, tapering delicately past her knees, a cloche hat pulled low over her forehead and from under which her eyes looked out at me, very dark and level. Back then she had been at the height of her beauty, but when I knew her she had lived a long, hard life and she had a headful of demons and grief, though also of books and poetry, and the beauty was all gone. Gran stood like a mountain behind us and frightened my friends – but, even so, Gran was my country. Other people came from towns and cities, but I belonged to Gran, body and soul.

Gran was still passionate and rocked by strong emotions – love, hate (though she was ashamed of this), intellectual curiosity, restlessness, a craving for travel. She found it hard to talk to anyone in the village and was often intensely lonely. When she was young she had travelled all over the world. This Essex village was simply where she'd been when Mum's tragedy struck and the grown-ups' will to move on ended. And because we had no car, no television, no computers and no money, where we'd washed up was where we stayed, marooned beneath the huge white Essex sky.

Not surprisingly, I was consumed by a ferocious longing to escape. At eight I had a running-away streak and often tried to escape by walking somewhere, anywhere, but in whichever

direction I left the village I couldn't get anywhere interesting before my legs gave out. Once a postcard arrived from our long-lost father saying that he would be coming shortly to take us to Paris, but he never appeared.

After that I had no choice but to read my way out of my childhood, consuming the contents of the Saffron Walden Library. I read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the bitter novels of Émile Zola, the life and death of *Anna Karenina*, the stories of the *Arabian Nights*, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and especially H. Rider Haggard's *She* (which was written in the 1860s about a mysterious African queen, 'She-who-must-be-obeyed' – and because I was young I saw none of the Victorian imperialism in it, I just loved it and thought every word was gospel truth).

In October, when they ploughed the fields around our village, we picked up fragments of Roman Samian ware, which we polished with our sleeves until they turned the same burnished red as the sinking autumn sun. From this I deduced that the Romans had been this way, although why they should have bothered I really couldn't see. One summer when I was fifteen I worked on an archaeological dig in Saffron Walden and not long after that I lost a necklace in a field of corn, and though I searched from end to end I couldn't find it. The Samian ware had come out of the earth and the necklace went back into it.

Another whisper of foreignness came one day when Gran brought home what looked like a pilgrim's flask, made from pottery and painted with roses, from the local junkshop. It had an Islamic look, though I couldn't have said that then, just that in some way it was connected to the *Arabian Nights*. I was charmed. I know now that it was a nineteenth-century English copy, but in my narrow Essex childhood it was the strangest, prettiest thing I had ever seen, and a fragment from another world washed up

on our desert island. Gran, who could chant poetry by the mile, looked at it and quoted from Omar Khayyam:

Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter runs,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.

Not long after this a local man was killed in a car crash, leaving three small children behind – a tragedy that in my mind soon became entangled with our own looming disaster.

Gran both frightened and entranced me. I thought she was unique, that there would never be anyone else like her. I cannot say that she was warm and cuddly. For some the past comes down through family recipes, but it never came down to me through food – firstly because Gran couldn't cook and secondly because she wasn't comforting like that. And, oh God, she could be unreasonable – magnificently, gloomily, passionately so. She had her pride and sometimes took offence at small slights from shopkeepers and schoolteachers – in which case she would sweep out of the shop on a wave of indignation with me flying along on her coat-tails.

But she taught me other things instead. She taught me how stories are constructed and why *Jane Eyre* is about power – 'You mean, Mr Rochester's power over Jane?' I asked. 'No, no,' she said, 'hers over him. In the end he is half-blind and Jane has won.' She taught me how to ask the I Ching questions and how to fortune tell by reading people's palms (which upped my status gratifyingly in the school playground). And she wove together into one story the lives of all my ancestors, infusing that narrative with a mix of pride and bitter regret for all the wrong turnings we had taken.

Gran owned very little – just a few clothes, books and bits of jewellery – so that when the white Essex light flew in through our curtainless windows it fell mostly onto bare surfaces. Her jewellery box contained beads and necklaces picked up around the world, and sometimes when I played with it she would tell me stories about her past – sea journeys (she had been twice round Cape Horn in heavy storms and had once taken a tramp steamer filled with sheep along the coast of Uruguay) and occasionally, if I was very lucky, about lovers.

Gran was a good storyteller; but she was also telling stories for a reason. She was trying to understand why our family's lives had turned out the way they did and how it was that we had fetched up in this village. She wanted to understand the choices my family had made, the men they had left, the journeys they had taken, the deaths that had befallen us. And so she passed the rainy Sundays of my childhood lining up her memories. And in time she found a meaning and a story – and passed these stories on to me. She also passed on the idea that telling stories in order to understand the past is about making patterns out of the confusion of the world, nothing more, nothing less.