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Something Wonderful

JO LLOYD



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FOR BARBARA AND ALAN

After sunset, there are the lights, fixed, flashing, coloured,
and white, in place of the prospect which night has blotted out.

Contents

<i>My Bonny</i>	1
<i>The Ground the Deck</i>	23
<i>The Invisible</i>	53
<i>Ade/Cindy/Kurt/Me</i>	77
<i>Deep Shelter</i>	103
<i>Work</i>	123
<i>Butterflies of the Balkans</i>	139
<i>Your Magic Summer</i>	163
<i>The Earth, Thy Great Exchequer, Ready Lies</i>	195

My Bonny

James

LESS than a year into their marriage, James—who had always, in his brief visits ashore, been tilted and clumsy, startling every four hours to interior bells, twitching to get back to the harbour and slide out on the falling tide with not one look, not even one thought for his loved ones left at home (You will be sorry, Agnes, her mother had told her, if you marry a man with clean fingernails)—passed over the visible edge of the world a final time and was lost (not, as it turned out, completely lost), his ship gone down far out to sea, witnessed only by spider crabs and hagfish and other untalkative actuaries of the deep.

Agnes would not marry again. John, not yet six months old, would be her first and last child. She would live another sixty-eight years a widow, sixty-eight years of relentless, erosive work, the cuckoo hunger gaping in her ribs. Had she known this when they came to her door with their heads bare and their eyes sideways, she might have knelt on the fire and waited for death, as widows were said to do in more fragrant corners of the Empire.

Both native to this Scottish port, they had been living, since their marriage, in a narrow cottage on the north side of its harbour. A good spot to watch the boats come and go, James always said. To watch the storms sweeping in, Agnes said. To see the waves blooming above the breakwater, the tattered sails of spray hanging in the air. The small boats staggering like crane flies, the ships listing and turning, helpless as leaves in a weir. The silent processions winding up the hill.

James would laugh, tease, finally lose patience. He remarked only those who made it through. The seven pulled from the water when the packet ran aground. (Sixty lost, Agnes said.) The master of the *Simeena*, saved within sight of the harbour. (And the rest of her crew drowned.) James held the sun's unquestioning belief in his return. As if wind and sea wove a downy pallet that he could nestle into, safe as the kingfisher's brood. When he was away, Agnes would try on his faith, pull it over her head like his Sunday shirt. She tried to imagine him fixed and solid among the flying ropes and scurrying men. The wind broke on his broad face, cleaved north and south of him, combing his hair smooth. His mouth was white with salt, his eyebrows frosted. He narrowed his eyes to the east, looking for Goteborg or Riga, Helsingor, Konigsberg, Drammen.

She preferred to render the watery section of his journey negligible. His destination lay just below the horizon, and the ship was even now safely tied up among surly Norwegians or Balts or Russians, the crew packing her holds with flax and timber and hides and thick black balsam spiced with aniseed and tar. After days of stacking and stowing, there would be another quick

voyage, the moon pressing a pale track into the water, the waves humming sweetly. If Agnes stood a little straighter, if she went up the hill a short way, she might be able to spy the tops of the masts.

James had gone to sea as a boy of twelve. Back then, he had told her, he would watch for the long smudge of pearly cloud that would gradually clump and fray to reveal the moors behind the town, then the tower of the ruined abbey, then the smaller spires of churches and the low streets beneath them. Now, after twenty years of industry and innovation, of the harvests of the Empire flowing in and out of the harbour, the first thing he saw would be a wintery forest of tall chimneys. So many chimneys—a new one each time he came home, it seemed—marking the very flax mills and jute mills, the sailcloth and rope factories that his cargo would feed. The chimneys reached higher than the church spires, higher even than the abbey tower. From every one, smoke streamed straight up, then bent and set in thick, grey horizontals across the town, like a hundred signposts pointing in the same direction, as if just over there, out of sight, was something wonderful.

Stewart

Stewart Doig, master and, on that morning, sole crew of the fishing boat *Clio*, was idling towards shore, dwelling on the recent death of his mother, which had brought to mind also the more distant death of his father, and the sermons addressing this subject that he had sat through, sometimes dozing, sometimes

thinking about fish, and what he had nonetheless garnered of death and burial and that surely still far-off day when the graves would crack and the saved would come forth riotous and laughing like a holiday parade (Would they be clothed in flesh, he kept wondering, or would they be just shinbones and clavicles and broken-toothed skulls?), when the body that had been James bumped at the *Clio's* hull, sodden and swollen, as if in dark answer to Doig's questions.

Wrecks were common. Every winter there were four or five on the Great Rock alone. Dozens on all the reefs and sandbanks and rocky shores around the coast, dozens more in deep water. James was one of hundreds who drowned during that year of 1829, whalers, soldiers, fishermen, a whole consignment of convicts, cooks, doctors, farmers, labourers, emigrants and immigrants and deportees, men and women and children and pigs and sheep and cats and rats and dogs. The unexplained fate of James's ship—swamped by a freak wave, consumed by fire, holed by a rock or a vengeful kraken—was common, too, even in the increasingly crowded shipping lanes of the Pax Britannica. The sea was a veritable soup of dead people, whispering sedition and blasphemy and wrapping their cold fingers around the fisherman's heavy nets.

The body floated face down, and Doig had no reason to suppose it was the boy two years his junior that he had once pinched and pulled and knocked to the ground until James grew tall and stout enough to break young Stewart's nose. What he did know was that it would be twice the weight of a body on land, unwieldy, waterlogged, slippery.

He thought of his mother, how her face shrank in the instant of death and her mouth fell open as if in surprise.

By the time the thing was hauled over the transom, Stewart's hands were nearly as white and bloodless as it was. When it landed, he recognised James, even without the eyes. They had seen, perhaps, too much horror to come back to this upper world. Or been taken. There were other signs on the face and hands that needy parishioners below had profited from the occasion. Doig drew a piece of sacking over the head, as if to show respect, and put up all the sail he dared.

It was time, he thought, to leave the sea. Enterprises were springing up all over town: boatyards, mills, foundries. He would take a wife. There were new widows aplenty in the port this week, handsome young widows who knew how to keep a good house and look the other way when it was called for. Not James's widow, her waist still thick from the child dragging round her neck. No, he would choose a woman free of encumbrances, with a sweet figure and laughing eyes, and enough put aside to set up a man in his new life ashore.

Euphemia

By a combination of intelligence, thrift, and reluctance to bestir so much as one finger except to her own immediate advantage, Euphemia Symon had kept the small general grocery on Muir Street for three decades, first with her husband, and then without. After his death, she had a low upholstered chair

carried into a corner of the shop, and there she sat, comforting herself with liquorice and coconut ice, sugared almonds and candied violets. As the years went by, Euphemia expanded to fill the chair and gradually to spill over its edges. Sugar draped crystalline, frosty webs across her memory, so that the details of her earlier life softened and receded. She found fault with the girls nowadays, who were no better than they should be, marrying too young and squandering their pennies on collars and China tea, with the wives who skimmed on mending and with those whose husbands wore patched clothes, with the mothers who kept their children in school and with those who sent them out into the blighted sea fogs of autumn to risk scarlet fever, whooping cough, and measles (the disease to which, some twenty-five years earlier, she had lost both her children in the space of a week).

Euphemia was James's cousin by marriage. He had been a man poor in relatives, at least local ones, so when she heard of his death she expected his relicts to turn up, and so they did. Agnes, with the baby thrashing in her arms, stumbled through routine flatteries and pleadings, while Euphemia, not mentioning the very recent departure in disgrace of her moon-eyed maid-of-all-work, looked the pair over. She listened to the child's furious roars and thought it unlikely to be struck down by any of the thousand poxes. She saw that Agnes, although short, was sturdy and determined. She judged her not so pleasing as to distract the gentlemen, nor so displeasing as to tire a mistress's eyes. With a happy synergy of kinship, charity, and economic considerations, she offered Agnes a roof and employment.

Agnes scrubbed, swept, swilled, roasted, carried, boiled, rinsed, scoured, emptied, mended, scalded, blacked, starched, polished, while Euphemia sat in her corner, offering occasional advice or criticism. You are fortunate, she told Agnes often, and no one would have disagreed, even as Agnes's heart withered like a rosehip. In Euphemia's own veins, small threads of remembrance wormed forth and then burst, and she knew this, too, was fortunate.

Euphemia took a special interest in John. He had the same broad face as his father, the same far-sighted blue eyes, even—one would swear—the same tilt to his walk. She would tempt him with sugar mice and marzipan pigs, and as he stood at her knee with sticky face and fingers, she would tell him about the press gangs that ranged up and down the coast when she was young, parents hiding their children in trunks and cellars and pot cupboards. She told him the fates of the boys who were taken, of those, more foolish, who ran away to sea. The beatings, the sickness, the stench, the never-ending work, the dry tack soaked in coffee until the weevils formed a scummy layer on top (John testing with his tongue the melting nose of a pig). The boys who crashed from rigging to deck or had their bones peeled clean by chains and ropes or were ground like meat between boat and dock. The boys who died, the boys whose bodies were twisted to cages of pain so that they begged for death.

She described the death of his father, which she had seen for herself in the bare acidic reaches of the night. The groans and shudders of the vessel, the planks folding underfoot, icy water waist- then neck-high, men sliding unstoppable through the

splintered decks, cursing and screaming and then silenced as the ship, like an overturned cathedral, plummeted into glacial blackness. Up on the surface, the unlucky few who had jumped or fallen clear floated for an hour or more in the moonlight, calling to each other, their limbs growing first cold then insensate, their voices failing as beside them, dripping salt and phosphorescence, rose monsters with the faces of angels and huge, uncurious eyes.

If Agnes disliked Euphemia's idea of education she did not say so. She took John to the sailcloth factory at the age of nine. If John had other ambitions he did not voice them, remaining silent through the transaction and afterwards taking up his new responsibilities without protest.

When Euphemia died, Agnes was fortunate again, quickly finding employment in the newest flax mill, and a room for her and John in the shadow of its chimney. The wind and the rain seemed to visit that corner of town with especial interest. Agnes slept with her hands over her ears. Sometimes she still dreamed, as she had since she was a child, that the sea did not stop at high tide but kept rising up the hill, until it lay all around in a rippling, hushed mass. This time, she thought every time, it is not a dream.

John

The people of the port raised their eyebrows over John, shook their heads. He spoke English as if it were foreign to him, went

through his days widdershins. He would loom up without warning, like a hearth ghost, then be gone again, even while you were looking at him.

Where he went, alone and unnegotiated, was along the cliffs, over the beaches, up into the moors behind the town. He scabbled down rocky valleys to the sea, clambered into caves and gullies, scaled bluffs and crags, waded through streams and becks and slacks and pools. He collected feathers, birds' eggs, skulls and leg bones, claws, teeth, mermaids' purses, the spiny pink carapaces of crabs, shells curled protectively around their moonlit inner floors. He sat in the rain for so long that they exchanged properties, his cohesion for its gleam, its velocity for his resistance, to form a new element, silvery and glutinous. He breathed through his skin, the water beading on his brows and lashes, fattening and trembling and finally spilling in heavy, white drops that rolled down his face and fell to the shingle, displacing the small arthropods that mined the intertidal zone. Invisible, he watched plovers, knots, goldeneye, skuas, redshank bobbing their anxious heads, oystercatchers, kittiwakes, ospreys, otters, porpoises, seals. Up on the moors, partridge, grouse, chats, ouzels, merlins, hare, deer, owls, ptarmigan, eagles with wings longer than he was. And in the cold, black tarns between the highest ridges, divers in their funerary best, singing the tuneless songs of the dead.

By 1841, the year of Euphemia's passing, he had been working three years at the sailcloth factory and would soon graduate to a full twelve-hour day, six days a week. Already, the times when he could wander were rare. He saw the sea more often by night

than day. In the darkness it was a deeper darkness, a black pelt rolling beneath the stars. Even above the noise of the mills, he heard its sighs, low and private at his ear, the shudder and give of the waves as they reached the shore. Day after day, hour after hour, they kept coming in, whiter than snow or blackthorn blossom, brighter than the sky. It was impossible to believe there could be anything corrupt in them. Where did the dead go to leave such clean water?

Isabella

Orphaned at seventeen, her inheritance a Bible, a blanket, and an ornate comb, Isabella would have been wise to accept John's offer even if she hadn't been watching him from under her lashes for months. They had the banns read on the other side of town and, after an austere wedding (no guests, no feast, only the minister's fee to pay), he brought her to the two-room sandstone cottage he shared with his mother. For the first month, Agnes would not speak to Isabella. Then she would not stop.

A densening tide infiltrated the cells of Isabella's body. She would know where John was by its rise and fall. It became a private joke between them, snatching an embrace as Agnes measured oatmeal or stirred a pot. Isabella would be darning in the last light and John would come to her quietly, kiss her ear, her throat, her breast, his hands searching beneath her clothes. While the older woman slept, muttering, beside the fire, John and Isabella studied the articles of marriage long into the

night, provoking sometimes a cry that would jolt Agnes from one dream to another.

Agnes was not used to seeing John smile.

Skinny Isabella, with her blackbird bones, produced child after child. That's enough, Agnes told her, after six. That's more than enough. How will we feed them?

Isabella, with the sated breath of the new baby at her ear, said nothing. This is gold, she thought. This is all the silk and spices anyone could need.

The seventh child fought against coming into the world and broke its mother. Isabella turned whiter and waxier by the day, and then she died.

Agnes would not have the baby put out to nurse. She carried it with her, fed it like an orphan lamb on thin cream sweetened with honey, scalded milk filtered through four layers of muslin. She kept it in her bed, slept and woke with it at night. It had the face of Isabella, the same small eyes and delicate bones. It stared unblinking at Agnes, with something like a frown, as if it could see the unseeable, where Isabella had gone, the lives of its father and grandmother and brothers and sisters unfolding over the years. Agnes sang to it, and it worked its mouth like a mute, flightless bird. The other children, who had never heard Agnes sing, crowded round, sucking at their fingers. Her voice was silty with disuse. She sang hymns and carols and old ballads of faithless lovers. When she forgot the words she substituted whatever came to hand: cup, bannock, mitten, roof, harbour.

No one expected the baby to live, and it did not.

Another James

By happy coincidence, Isabella's death came during a brief upturn in the manufacture of the coarse brown linen for which the town was known, and soon it was employing the whole family. John was a stoker in the boiler room. The girls worked as flax dressers or at the looms. The small children did the jobs to which they were suited, scrambling over the machinery to replace the bobbins and running beneath it to clear the clogging waste. It was not uncommon for the inexperienced to sacrifice digits or limbs or heads to the hundred-foot run, bent double beneath the carriage, and in this way the youngest boy, William, was lost. He lived an hour laid out on the floor of Mr. Doig's office, with his siblings praying over him, but never showed any sign that he heard. The other boys worked their way up to maintaining the looms and other machines. Agnes, with her prematurely bent back and crabbed knuckles, descended through ever more unskilled work, eventually demoted to sweeping up.

As the oldest boy, another James, approached adulthood, his broad face showed furrows of discontent. He looked at the chimneys reaching to the sky, at the processions passing beneath them each morning before the sun rose and each evening after it had set, at his father sitting silent at the end of the day, and he frowned. He looked at the proud, grand buildings gone up in recent decades, three and four storeys, with arches and balustrades and pillars twined with grapevines and palm leaves and monkeys and parrots and elephants, at

the new shops with their exotic spoils set out in windows for everyone to see.

On winter evenings after work, he and his brother Thomas went to the night school, where they studied writing, arithmetic, and navigation. This would, it was implied, help the students' children to lead lives free of want, although in every other way very much like their own. He frowned at this, too. The brothers began to argue over trades unions, electoral reform, the proper education of the poor. In these discussions, increasingly heated, Thomas was the more conservative. James seemed to gaze beyond the horizon and see impossible futures. Even the most optimistic of these seemed, to his family, unwelcoming. Change, they suggested, although desirable, should surely stop when it reached its natural conclusion.

James joined a discussion group in which he learned the value of speaking his thoughts in a particular order. He made new friends, men with visions of their own. He became involved in organising Sunday schools at the free church on Mary Street and preached there sometimes. He observed that people outside his family welcomed the opportunity to hear his opinions. He began to talk to his fellow workers about the conditions of their employ. He openly criticised certain practices, some legal and some not, that were common in the factories of the port.

In the next downturn, he and his visionary friends were the first to be turned out, and he could not afterwards find anyone to take him on. He left to seek work elsewhere. A letter came from Bradford, then one from Manchester, where he had found many working men who took the betterment of their

lot seriously, as did even some of the manufacturers. Life in that city was hard, he wrote, and dark. He did not see a green thing from one week's end to the next. He missed the clamour of the harbour and the smell of tar and the great flocks of white gulls soaring overhead on long summer evenings and of course his family.

They did not hear from him again. But sometimes, when change and rumours of change rolled into the port, someone would wonder what James might think of this or that proposal, or suggest that, in its expression, a careful listener might detect the inflections of his voice.

Jessie

Jessie was a rectangular girl with a wide smile and bumptious red hair that caused her all manner of bother. She had been teased about it as a child and had become very conscious of its inappropriate energy. At the mill, where the air swirled tawny with lint and fly, her hair was tied up in a handkerchief and had no choice but to do as it was told. But at the end of the day, when she set it free, it seemed to bounce up with renewed vigour, as if it couldn't wait to get out into the world and make trouble. The pennies she had left for herself, after handing the bulk of her wages over to Agnes, were spent on ribbons and hairpins. Sometimes, when Agnes was in a good mood, she would sit Jessie down in front of her and cluck with disapproval as she combed the damp hair into even, flat locks and rolled them up in long

strips of brown paper that would transform them overnight to meek and lustrous ringlets.

As Jessie entered her twenties, she had been contributing to the family budget for more than a decade, and while she never for a moment questioned the broad principles of diligence and endurance embodied by her father and grandmother and older siblings, she saw no reason to allow them control over the finer grain of her life. When she started walking out with Alexander McKinnen, she made no effort to hide it, and tossed her head at Agnes and John, who judged him too young and irresponsible. Jessie thought him the handsomest thing she had ever seen. He had dark hair soft as spaniel ears and dark eyes and a delicious, dark voice like the slow morning waves on the beach.

It was a bright, wet spring. The rain fell halfway to earth and then hung in a fine, refractive mist that turned the air white. Under it, the sea shone, too dazzling to look at. The moisture penetrated everything. Jessie and Alexander sheltered under arches and porches and in barns and sheds and once or twice in Alexander's bed when his family was gone. By August, when the sun was blazing and the fields were turning gold, Jessie was beginning to show and Alexander had disappeared, rumoured to have taken a boat for foreign parts.

There had been no promise to break, his family said, no talk of marriage. As for the child, Jessie could appeal to the parish all she liked. No one knew where Alexander was. If the parish wanted to go through his pockets, it was welcome to try to track him down in the wilds of Cape Breton or the cellars of Philadelphia.

The child was born with no will or means to take a breath. Jessie kept to her bed afterwards, and never got strong enough to return to the mill. She died in March, just as spring was starting to brighten the hills once more.

Clementina

After John's death, his remaining children scattered. The girls married and moved away. Thomas took his wife and son to India, leaving only his small daughter behind with Agnes. Clementina was thin and wheezy, prone to coughs and fevers. The Indian climate, everyone agreed, was no place for her. Nor, they added silently, was the Scottish one.

But Clementina kept on living. Knocked down every winter by this illness or that, she got up every spring a little longer and stringier, a stalk of honeysuckle winding up through a thorn bush. She had strong, prominent teeth, like a goat's, and the hair of one accustomed to storms.

Thomas sent money, regularly at first and then not so regularly. There were more children, a new wife, yet more children. News came less often.

Although Clementina was not simple, as some had suggested, she was scatty, easily distracted. She could not be trusted to boil milk or turn a heel. But she was tough and willing and would do whatever work she was given. She laughed often, a big laugh that showed her teeth. (Cover your mouth, Agnes would say, wincing.) She could not remember her mother and showed no

interest in the family expanding in India. She brought Agnes violets and seashells and pink stones and sat at her feet crooning nonsense songs in a low voice, more jackdaw than blackbird.

When the mill let Agnes go, she went out charring, took Clementina with her, taught her the limited mysteries of the skivvy. The ladies she worked for—Mrs. Doig, Mrs. Finlay, Widow Reid—would not look Clementina in the eye but made no objection to her scrubbing their floors.

In the year of Agnes's eighty-ninth birthday, Thomas's second wife took to her bed, and he sent for Clementina. It was time for his daughter to take up her duties, keep house, look after the little ones.

No, said Clementina.

She felt nothing for Thomas or her older brother. She couldn't recall the names or even the number of the other children. India she thought of as a faerie land of scarlet trees, bejewelled frogs, holy men puffing at intricately carved pipes, lions and tigers and giraffes ambling through the streets and pushing their heads into people's kitchens. (Although in the photographs Thomas had sent, studio portraits of the family smartly dressed and holding one another's shoulders as if to form a fence, it resembled nothing more than Mrs. Doig's elegant morning room.) Clementina imagined Thomas's wife (her stepmother, Agnes reminded her) as something like Mrs. Doig must have been when younger—quick and sharp and pale and always trying to catch people out.

Thomas had paid for her passage. But he couldn't put her on the steamer.

Agnes explained what an opportunity this was for a girl like her. Although yes, undeniably, in a frightening, alien land. How Clementina would have brothers and sisters for the first time. Albeit strangers. How well Thomas was doing—the manager of a jute mill—and how comfortable her new home would be. Even if it was in a town of foreigners. The family had, Agnes added in a hushed tone uncommitted to admiration or disdain, a servant. (Also foreign.)

What is he like? Clementina asked, meaning her father.

Agnes tried to remember. He was tall, she thought. Was that right, or was he the shorter one? He was quiet and patient, she seemed to recall. He had a little dog once. He named it Tip and taught it to sit on its hind legs and take scraps from his hand.

Clementina considered this. I would like a dog, she said.

Conversations, Agnes found, were longer and more convoluted than they used to be. She found herself always lagging a step or two behind.

I would call him Stanley, Clementina said.

If they even have dogs in India, Agnes said.

Would you miss me? Clementina asked. If I were to go?

Agnes

Agnes seemed to need less and less sleep. There was a small window next to the bed she had shared with Clementina, and she would lie awake listening to the wind and the rain and the mice in the walls and the noise of the sea that never stopped.

People said it was like breathing, but Agnes heard no ebb and flow. It was constant, a sigh that went on forever.

When she did finally doze, she felt a temporary ease, as if the fossilised debris lodged in her joints had been replaced by a kindly, elastic element. As if she could kneel without pain, walk without pain. As if she could swim or dance or do whatever she wished.

And then her old dream would return again, the dream of a tide that never fell but only kept rising, over the harbour, over the boatyards and mills of the foreshore, over the shops and churches and grand buildings of the town. And still on it came, surging up the hill, flooding through the streets, encircling the house, lapping at the walls. It rose all the way to the upper window, and slid into the room, cool as the moon and dark as the starless sky.

This time, she said, although there was no one to hear her, it is not a dream.

For a moment, the tide paused, just long enough for her to snatch up a blue ribbon she had once been given, and an old peg doll dressed in salvaged scraps of cloth, then it lifted her in its hundred soft hands and carried her on.