

# Havenshold

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It was late on Saturday afternoon in the middle of one summer or another. The small room where he sat aimlessly on the bed was depressingly familiar, just like all the other country pubs he'd inhabited over the years. Same acrid smell of other people's sweat, same stale air. The usual dresser with its fly blown mirror. A shonky wardrobe with some other bloke's detritus left behind in the bottom corner, grimy sash window dangling a frayed cord. Outside in the dusty backyard the washing was hanging limp and grey in the heat of the afternoon and a choko vine crawled halfheartedly over the dunny roof. He'd seen it all before.

Later on he might go down to the bar, have a few beers and a bit of predictable conversation. He didn't much like company, but it was better than sitting alone, ruminating.

Not much of a life this, moving on from one small town to another, but he knew no other way. Ever since 1919 when he'd come home from the war, he'd had a irresistible urge to keep moving, felt uneasy if he stayed anywhere too long. It had become a lifetime compulsion. He didn't like to become too friendly with anyone or get too close. Too many goodbyes to mates over there, and now he preferred to keep friendship at arms-length.

Before he enlisted he'd been okay. Had a good job with the Parks and Gardens, lived comfortably with his mother and little brother Bert. She had favoured Bert a lot, he was the apple of her eye, but life was pretty sweet all the same. Been part of a gang of mates who roamed the streets and got up to no good sometimes, nothing serious, mind. So many laughs! They'd joined up together, full of eager anticipation. Some of them had not made it home, some had come back but were what the Repat called 'changed men'. He never got as much as a scratch.

Bert had enlisted later, little fool lied about his age of course. Lasted two months before being blown to bits. His mother never got over it – well how could she? When he finally got back and knocked at the door he hardly knew her – so small, so shrunk into herself. She was no match for the awful flu thing that swept through that year, just blew her away like so much left-over dust.

Then there was his girl, Maisie, with the brown hair and cool blue eyes – he'd told her not to wait for him and she took him at his word. Married with two kids! He could laugh about it later and thought it for the best. The way he had become with his restlessness, it would never have lasted. So, he sold the family house, along with the bits and pieces of his life, and packed all he needed in one small case. He'd hitched his way out from the city – nothing there now to keep him – and set off on his solitary journey. Been on his own ever since. No wife or child to worry over, no special mate. That was the way he liked it.

When he was younger he worked in mining camps and shearing sheds in the company of other men who were transitory like himself. They all moved on when the job was over and that suited him fine. This went on for ten years or more until he thought he'd try his luck in Tassie and ended up at a timber mill. He found it great there in the wilderness, just his sort of place. Then came the day when a rope snapped without warning and a log bigger than himself went swinging above his head. He could still remember looking up, mesmerised as it swayed to and fro, wondering where it would land. In the end he was too slow to move and it spiralled down on his leg. Lying there, he screamed both with the pain and the certain knowledge that his working life would never be the same.

They patched him up, but of course he could never get back to what he was. No more hard, demanding work that you could lose yourself in for hours at a time. Limited now to odd jobs and a bit of gardening. Never short of work these days, now this Second War was grinding on. Lots of women on their own needing help about the house and garden. He sensed they might have welcomed his companionship in other ways. Well, he wasn't a bad-looking bloke for his age. Getting a bit thin on top, but still quite fit and strong, apart from the wretched limp. But there always

came the time when warning bells told him he was getting too involved and that it was time to move on again.

On the rickety dresser behind him an official-looking brown envelope sat unopened. He'd put it aside for a few days – probably bloody Repat trying to cut his pension again. Now he turned and reached for it reluctantly, turning it over in his hands before slitting it open with his knife. The letter began with an apology for the lateness of the notification but there had been trouble tracking him down. Well, that was no surprise as he kept his whereabouts as vague as possible.

He read on, and they informed him that, as the appointed next of kin for Private Ray Earnshaw, date of birth 20 November 1922, they regretted to notify him of Private Earnshaw's death from wounds in Egypt, six months prior.

They've got that buggered up, he thought. He knew no-one of that name. Then, something began jostling around in his brain, and after a while it came back to him.

He had not heard the name in 20 years, but the memory was now as clear as day. There he was, standing on a darkened verandah with the sun blazing outside. Waiting, hat in hand. Youngish, lots of wavy dark hair. (Unconsciously he passed his hand over his head.) Two sound legs and in pretty good shape.

He was at a place called Havenshold, in the country, a long, low, white house, shaded all around. There for a job as gardener, being scrutinised by a sharp, dark-haired woman who introduced herself as Miss Edie Earnshaw. 'And this is my cousin Miss Amy'. It was hard to see in the shade, but he made out another, younger, woman sitting in a cane chair, book open but unread on her lap. A pale woman, with a rather undefined face and fragile fair hair. She acknowledged him with a small, cursory smile. Miss Edie went on: 'We can't afford to pay more than a moderate sum, but you will find the work is not too arduous and the conditions fair.' He had twisted his hat and thought 'Why not'. He'd been working rough for a time and it would be okay to have a soft billet for a while, just a couple of months, though he wouldn't tell them that.

So, he took the job and it was fine at first. He had good quarters, plenty of tucker and, as promised, the work was light. It was all good apart from the trees – a close-planted ring of huge old elms which surrounded the garden. Must have been planted when the house was built, now standing like formidable guardians. They made him feel hemmed in, surrounded, gave him a vague sense of apprehension. The rest of the front lawn was taken up with large rose beds arranged in different shades of blooms, all of which seemed to be thriving in the sun. Most of his work took place there, watering, deadheading, keeping the weeds in check. Pleasant enough, for a little break.

He didn't know much about the two ladies except that they were cousins, living on their own. They kept a small staff: the cook who he only saw in the vegetable patch, a stout housemaid, gangly stableboy with a lantern jaw. The house seemed far too big for the two of them. The older one, Miss Edie, was an angular person, everything about her sharp and to the point. But Miss Amy was something else entirely. So pale she looked insubstantial, skin almost translucent, hair like the fairy floss you got in carnivals, only a pale, watery gold. He thought at first she would be too delicate to go outside, but in fact she was the one he always saw in the garden while Miss Edie busied herself inside or took herself off to town in the pony trap.

Late in afternoon he would be suddenly aware of her presence and turn to see her silhouetted against the low sun, her hair like a wispy halo. She was much taller than he had imagined, rather long limbed, and a little awkward. There was always a basket on her arm and she would murmur quietly to him.

'I'm just going to cut some more roses, Beddowes. The ones I got yesterday have drooped already'.

'That's all right, Miss.' He lifted his head and added, 'Probably best to get them in the morning before the heat gets to them.'

She smiled a little. 'Quite so, but I'm afraid I am a late riser'.

This pattern went on for quite some time and he often thought that there must be no more room left in the house for flowers. Her presence was beginning to make him feel a little uncomfortable so he decided it might be wise to keep out of the way in the vegetable garden for a while. It was quiet round there and the cook who came to collect the produce was quite terse, which suited him. But after a few days he heard the back door opening and turned to see Miss Amy coming out with the vegetable basket.

‘Could you get me some carrots please, Beddowes, and some butter beans?’

She stayed with him while he pulled up the young carrots and snipped off the soft yellow pods. As he put them in her basket her hand brushed against his and she gave him one of her little smiles.

‘That’s all for now, thank you.’

He found himself watching her and before she slipped back inside, she turned and frankly returned his gaze. He spun around quickly to his work. What was it with her, he thought. He couldn’t work her out. So straight and proper, but in other ways, quite forward and bold.

She began to emerge quite often from the kitchen door. A few tomatoes, a little mint, a sprig or two of rosemary. He decided then that the rose beds had been a safer, more discreet area after all and went back round to start deadheading the blooms spent by the sun.

The weather, which had been warm and dry, grew hotter. One stifling day she was in the pink bed picking buds and he thought of warning her that the heat wasn’t good for her, but maybe it wasn’t his place to say. As she put down her basket and came across to him, he saw that she had loosened her collar and that there was a little pool of moisture at the base of her throat. He hadn’t thought that a lady like that would sweat a lot, but when he looked up her face was flushed and damp.

'Would you mind getting me some buds from the climbing rose, Beddowes? They are too far up for me and it's very thorny'.

'Righto, Miss'. He picked up the basket and she followed him to the sprawling climber which covered the side of the shed. She stood beside him while he nipped off the pale pink buds.

'That enough, Miss?'

As he went to give her the basket she stumbled slightly on the ground and fell against him.

'Careful, Miss.' He steadied her. He let her go but she left her hands on him for a while, longer than she needed to. He found himself colouring and she let him go.

'Thank you so much, Beddowes. They will look lovely in the drawing room.'

The weather continued hot. He would have liked to take off his shirt but didn't dare in case either of ladies appeared. However, one day when he reckoned the temperature way above a hundred, no-one was about. He stripped it off and hung it on a bush within easy reach. He went back to working, so when she came up so quietly behind him he was unaware until it was too late. Her hands were on his naked back, stroking him gently. He knew then why she was so often in the garden when he was working there and amazed, he realised what she wanted from him.

He turned and stammered 'No, Miss. Please don't.' He moved back but she approached him again and he could see in her eyes that she knew exactly what she was doing. She put her thin, eager arms around his neck, pulled his head down and gently whispered 'It's all right, I've done this before.' When she sank her sharp little teeth into his earlobe, he backed away, clutching the side of his head. He knew he should run to escape the trap she had set, but his thoughts were scrambled and confused. He didn't want to reject her, that would be cruel. But it was asking for trouble. Perhaps just once. After all, she was offering him something he'd never dreamed about.

Afterwards, lying with her on the grass, he apologised profusely, but she said it was all right and she would never tell. He felt a strong compulsion to run away from all this, but also a strange sense of uneasy excitement that made him want to stay.

At first it happened only when her sister was away to town for the day and there was no-one else around to interrupt them. But, as the hot days passed, she began to get bolder and she would come out to him on any day. She seemed to know all the shaded places behind the elms where they would not be seen.

So, it went through the height of the summer. Fevered meetings in hidden places, which both aroused him and filled him with a terrible unease. She didn't speak much, and he never knew what to say to her. Once, carried away, he told her he loved her, but she just smiled and murmured 'that's nice'. He knew that it had to stop but felt too guilty to just run away. Perhaps she would tire of him. He reassured himself that in the winter there would be nowhere for them to go so surely it must end then.

Late in February a day came when heavy clouds moved in from the North and the air grew thick. As it began to rain they sheltered under the elms, keeping dry at first. But then large drops began falling from the leaves, splattering on their heads. She pulled herself up with little shrieks and he hurried to put his shirt over her head as they ran towards the house. Halfway they halted, knowing there was no longer any pretence of innocence. What he saw next stopped him in his tracks. Miss Edie had come out on to the verandah and down the steps with an open umbrella. Amy let go of his arm and ran quickly towards her cousin and shelter. The women capered up the steps, giggling as they went. As she closed the door behind them Miss Edie looked back and sent a knowing smile in his direction. It dawned on him then that none of this was a secret. That nothing had been by chance. That it might have happened before to some other unsuspecting bloke, maybe more than one. He had never felt so used and trapped in his life.

That night he wrote a letter in his best schoolboy hand, thanking the ladies for their kindness, but he had a job lined up in the north and was obliged to go, and so on.

Sorry for the short notice, but... Early in the morning he pushed in under the wide, stained glass front door, gathered up his things and was gone, without his pay.

He felt bad for a long time, confused and ashamed for being taken in, but also guilty for running away and leaving without seeing her. But there was nothing to do now but resume his wanderings from job to job, town to town until time dimmed the memory and it no longer seemed real. It felt as if it had happened in a different world, to a different person. And the only women he had known since were the hardy kind well used to the lumpy mattresses in rooms at the back of the pub. He had eventually come to think that it may not have happened at all and was just the fevered remnants of a dream on some sultry night. But now, so many years later, it was back with him, as if it had happened yesterday.

He pored over the letter again. So many questions. She must have given birth to his child. She had given the boy his Christian name. Had she known about it when he there with her and let him go regardless? How had she coped with the shame of it? Her sister would have managed it all of course, in her brusque, capable way. Then a thought struck him – perhaps this was what the women had wanted all along. A child to rear as their own, together. And after he'd played his role they had no more need of him.

Had Amy told the kid about him? The boy had known that he was his next of kin after his Mum. And if that was true, it would mean she had passed away. He couldn't bear the thought of that: Amy, so warm and eager, lying alone somewhere in the cold ground.

Of course, the boy would have been comfortable growing up. They would have looked after him, educated him, loved him in their way. He would have had a good start to his pitifully short life.

Who would he have looked like? Fair and delicate like her? Dark like he had been. Probably tall. Damn and blast these wars – they had taken the best from his own life and now deprived him of the son he would never know. His mind raced and he was finding it hard to breathe.

Forcing open the window, he gulped in the air. Outside were the same scraggly gums and browned-off grass. But that was not what he saw, and not where he was.

He was back lying on the soft lawn under the elms at Havenshold, sated but not quite at ease, stroking her hair and watching her gentle breathing as she drowsed. There was just a small breeze stirring the elm tree leaves and in the rose bed the bees droned on among the late blooms grown full and blowsy with the waning of summer.