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ABDICATION

Juliet Nicolson

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On a gloomy February afternoon in 1936 a young woman, nineteen years old, brought a dark blue Rolls-Royce slowly to a halt. Managing the mahogany steering wheel with surprising ease for someone so slight, May Thomas parked the car outside the country home of a middle-aged man and his married mistress.

The journey from London to Sunningdale had taken about an hour and shortly before reaching the town May edged the car along the boundary of Windsor Great Park before turning off the road into an unmarked opening. She was enjoying the unaccustomed feeling of stylish authority given to her by the new chauffeur's uniform of blue trousers, jacket and matching navy-blue cap with its shiny patent leather peak. Driving through a pair of wide open and crisply painted white gates, she took the car slowly up a rising avenue of plump-trunked oak trees and thick rhododendron bushes. There were signs that substantial clearances had been made within the undergrowth but in some places, where the tangle of branches at the top formed a thick canopy, the snow had failed to make its way down into this melancholy landscape.

As the sand-coloured house – although no one could actually call it that – appeared round a bend, lit up by an ingenious series of concealed electric floodlights, May was relieved that she was only dropping off her passenger and would not be required to

stay the night. The series of battlements surrounding the central tower that protruded from a mass of crenelated buildings were very un-house like; and yet its diminutive size made it ineligible for the status of castle. May was reminded of a picture she had seen in one of her brother Sam's old cowboy books, a turreted fort out of which an invading Red Indian leapt, complete with bow and arrow.

A woman in a slim fitting and tightly belted black dress with long sleeves and a white collar was standing at the front door. She looked a bit like a nurse or a school matron. As May eased the car slowly alongside her, the woman stepped forward and opened the car door.

'Evangeline, my dear!' said the woman in a hard-edged accent that sounded like coins rubbing up against each other in a pocket. 'You have no idea how pleased I am to see you!'

May's passenger was struggling to get out of the car. In fact, Miss Evangeline Nettlefold was wedged between the back seat and the back of the front passenger seat and the harder she struggled to get free the more stuck she became. A little dog, a Pekinese that had been sitting on his owner's lap throughout the journey, appeared to be having an asthma attack and when May ran round to the other side of the car to release her passenger she saw that the dog had drooled onto a patch of Miss Nettlefold's grey wool skirt, leaving a black stain on the front panel.

After an awkward tussle between May, Miss Nettlefold and a now frothing dog, the large woman found herself suddenly catapulted into the open air.

'Oh, Wallis, you know me! Too many delicious English cookies for my own good!' she apologised, in a surprisingly unflustered and rather beautiful voice. Her chubby cheeks resembled pink gobstoppers. 'But how *divine* it is to be here at last.'

And with a wave to May, she turned towards the front door,

her fur coat flapping open in the wind. The two women immediately fell into conversation, glancing briefly backwards in May's direction before vanishing inside. Miss Nettlefold's arm had been tucked tightly into that of her hostess, a woman with an unnaturally wide smile, a doll-like body, high shoulders and an enormous head. She reminded May of someone, although May could not quite identify the memory. After several deep breaths of cold winter air May returned to the car, removed her cap and shook her hair free. She was about to resume her place at the wheel when she noticed the flat package on the front seat. The brown paper parcel was imprinted with a store logo, a sharp edged four-leaf clover separating the letters H and K.

'I brought this all the way from Baltimore,' Miss Nettlefold had told May when they set off from St John's Wood that afternoon. 'Can you put it somewhere safely for me? Knowing my luck, if I find a space for it here in the back with me and Wiggle, I will probably sit on it, and records have a funny way of snapping when sat on, don't you find?'

With the parcel safely under one arm May returned to the front door and pulled the bell. A black-suited butler answered the ring. He was as compact and elegant as a Russian Sobranie.

'Sorry to trouble you, Sir, but Miss Nettlefold has left something in the car.'

'I will make sure she gets it immediately,' he replied with unequivocal authority. But May felt uneasy. From early on in her life she had discovered that trust must be earned.

'If you don't mind,' she said, raising her voice to a level beyond the tremble that threatened to unseat her resolve, 'Miss Nettlefold left the package in my care and I would like to make sure she gets it myself.'

'I assure you, Miss, that if you give the package to me it will be delivered safely to Miss Nettlefold.'

But May kept her composure, holding onto the parcel tightly and wishing she had remembered to put her cap back on her head. A short silence elapsed between them.

'Oh well, you better follow me,' the cigarette-slim butler snapped, before moistening his lips with a thin tongue.

Walking a pace behind the stiff back ahead of her, May followed the butler into a short passageway which billowed out into a high-ceilinged hall painted white, the starkness relieved by eight bright yellow leather chairs positioned in each of the octagonal corners. May's hard-soled driving shoes clicked in echoing reply to those of the butler as they crossed the black-and-white marble floor. A pretty maid in a pink uniform, a lace-edged hat perched on her blond hair, put her head round a corner.

'Excuse me, Mr Osborne,' she said, 'Miss Spry is on the telephone and wants to know whether it would be convenient to come over later and do the flowers for the weekend?'

'Tell her to check with Mrs Mason if that will suit. We don't want the housekeeper upset. You know what she's like,' Mr Osborne replied abruptly and crossed the hall ahead of May.

A cloying sweetness came from the vases of lilies that sat on plinths at every few feet. A faint sound of barking could be heard from behind a closed door far away. May felt unnaturally hot. There was no warning, no time to ask for a mirror to check her newly bobbed hair, no time to think before she found herself at an open doorway and saw two faces turned towards her in surprise.

'Why May? Whatever are you doing here, my dear? Is something wrong?'

But the butler spoke before May could answer.

'Forgive us the interruption, Madam. Your driver *insisted* on bringing this parcel to you herself.'

'Please bring her in, Osborne,' Miss Nettlefold's friend instructed. 'And by the way, have you ordered a car to meet the hairdresser from the train?'

The butler's previously impassive expression reflected irritation. 'I have of course,' he retorted, adding 'Madam' in afterthought.

Bending over a tray laid with china cups as thin as eggshells, he poured out the pale tea before offering Miss Nettlefold a plate of miniature salmon sandwiches.

May wondered what sort of impression she was giving in her dark suit, her fringe still clamped damply onto her forehead. While reminding herself in future to remove her cap when driving, she struggled to place the familiar face of Miss Nettlefold's friend. Had she seen her in a famous painting, maybe? Miss Nettlefold took a step or two nearer.

'Waaaah-llis,' Miss Nettlefold began in her long-vowelled, slanted voice, 'I would like to present my driver, Miss May Thomas, a most unusual young woman who I dearly wanted you to meet. You know? Remember I just told you how, like me, she has recently crossed over the sea to England?' Turning to May with a reassuring smile she said, 'May, I would like you to meet Mrs Simpson.'

'Most delighted to meet you,' said Miss Nettlefold's friend with her mesmerising symmetrical eyebrows. But she did not sound delighted at all, and shook May's hand with an aggressive grip. 'You are very young,' she remarked, in a tone of accusation, her face close enough for May to smell the strangely pleasant combination of musky perfume and eucalyptus that scented Mrs Simpson's breath.

'I am nineteen, Madam.'

'Nineteen,' Mrs Simpson repeated, rolling the word around her mouth like a boiled sweet. 'Nineteen. I was married at the

age of nineteen. First time round, mind you. I was far older and more prepared for the second attempt!' Laughing at her own youthful absurdity, she turned her attention to the package in May's hand. 'Is this really meant for me?' she asked, looking at Miss Nettlefold.

'I think you might be able to guess what it is!' Miss Nettlefold replied with a little excited clap of her hands, 'I hope your dancing shoes are in need of a little exercise!'

'Oh David, do come over here and have a look.' Mrs Simpson glanced over in the direction of the window across which yellow velvet curtains had been drawn.

A man was sitting on a sofa next to a grand piano, a couple of sleeping terriers lying at his feet, their heads resting on his shoes. His own head was bent over a tapestry canvas that he was poking at rhythmically with a needle threaded with green wool, but at the sound of his name he looked up.

'Come on, Cora, move off. And you too, Jaggs,' he said, shifting the dogs off his feet and onto the floor. Putting the embroidery down on the sofa he reached for the silver monogrammed box on the table beside him and, lighting a cigarette, came to join the others. May had seen photographs of him, of course. In fact there was one hanging in a gold frame in the schoolroom at home, a cigarette in his mouth. But, for the second time in a month, it was a shock to see that black-and-white picture not only in colour but moving and breathing. He looked thinner than he had in the photograph and even smaller than the mournful figure he had presented to the crowds at the recent funeral of his father. His face was the colour of a plum and his left eye drooped a little as if halfway towards a wink. He was wearing a grey-and-red kilt with black checks and a thick blue jersey. A couple of small burn marks on one of the sleeves were just visible beneath a dusting of cigarette ash. He was clearly as unprepared for introductions as May was.

'So, Miss . . . ?'

'Thom-Thomas' she supplied, stumbling a little over her own name before adding, 'Sir, I mean Your Royal. King. Sorry, Your Majesty, I mean.' She tapered off.

But he appeared troubled neither by her confusion, nor by her wobbly attempt at a curtsy and turned to watch Mrs Simpson open the brown paper parcel.

'What *have* we here, my dear Evangeline?' Mrs Simpson exclaimed in her jangly voice as she removed the flat slipcase from the wrapping paper. 'Oh my! I do declare it *is* something to get the foot tapping!' And then, 'But Evangeline, darling! How clever you are! A foxtrot from Handy's Memphis Blues Band,' she exclaimed, reading the words of the record sleeve. 'Oh my! David, do you see?'

Mrs Simpson held the bright yellow disc out to show him. Printed along the bottom of the record were the words 'Manufactured for Hochschild, Kohn and Co.'

'Oh, Evangeline! Hochschild's! Our favourite store, the lipstick store, the place of refuge from our mothers! Were we all of sixteen, even fifteen years old I wonder?'

Her eyes shone at the recollection. But Miss Nettlefold was not quite finished with her surprise.

'And Wallis, there is a rather divine coincidence that I think will surprise you.' Miss Nettlefold pointed to one word denoting the record label that was imprinted on the top of the disc. Belvedere. Just the same as Fort Belvedere, the house in which they all stood.

'*Well!* I do declare this is quite the best gift I ever did see! What about it, David? Do you see what a clever, imaginative, generous friend I have brought to stay with us? We will quite forget all our worries when we start dancing to Handy's Band. It will be quite like the good old times before you became . . .'

But she stopped herself mid-sentence and ran over to the gramophone, the record in her hand.

'Come here, Evangeline darling! Let's listen to it at once. And let's have a martini! Whoever said it was too early for a martini? It's never too early for a cocktail, is it, Vangey?' Her hands were as expressive as her smile, opening up and outwards as she spoke.

The King appeared startled by this girlish gush of reminiscence and, spotting May dawdling uncertainly in the corner near the door, went over to speak to her. May had been trying to edge out of the room, with its soft lamplight and its glossy furniture, without anyone noticing.

'I believe Miss Nettlefold mentioned that you learned to drive in the West Indies?' the King began. 'A most glorious place! I know it myself: travelled all through that area by ship just after the war! Such friendly people aren't they? Which one exactly is *your* island?'

'Barbados, Sir,' she murmured, but his attention had returned to the figure of Mrs Simpson, who was gliding round the room to the sound of the music. As she passed by the King's hand brushed her cashmere elbow. He was unable to take his eyes off her.

'Just imagine, darling. May is from Barbados. One day, *soon*, darling,' he said, raising his voice to compete with the bluesy crooning coming from the gramophone, 'I promise *WE* will go and find some sunshine.'

On hearing the emphasis the King put on the personal pronoun, Mrs Simpson put her purple-polished finger to her lips in a sign to him to say no more. Her face was abnormally pale, and apart from the mole on one cheek her skin was as smooth as the inside of a seashell. Whirling away from the King's touch, Mrs Simpson turned her back on them and May could see her

wide jawbone jutting out from either side of her head like the back view of a cobra. The King pulled a cigarette from a leather case that was tucked into the silver sporran hanging from his waist and lit the end from the burning ember of the one he was about to extinguish. The intimacy of the little procedure unnerved May further and she was wondering how much more of this unexpected encounter she could manage.

'I am most impressed to hear of your skill behind the wheel,' he continued in his semi-transatlantic accent. May could feel herself breathing hard. 'I love cars myself,' said the King. 'Matter of fact I'm thinking of ordering one of those new American station wagons. My own driver Ladbroke is a little sceptical. Perhaps you would care to have a turn in the machine when you next bring Miss Nettlefold to see us? You might be able to persuade Ladbroke that one must keep up with the times?'

But May found herself unable to supply anything more than a blush in return to this friendly line of enquiry. And suddenly it was all over. Mr Osborne had returned and was lingering by the door. With a barely discernible inclination of his head, he indicated to May that it was time to leave.

Past the yellow chairs, across the marble floor, and there at last was the February wind restoring some coolness to May's flushed cheeks. It was as if she had been released from a conservatory where rare plants were lovingly tended, unable to survive without careful nurturing. Outside felt like the real world. Inside resembled a hothouse of make-believe. She reached the car, inhaling the familiar leather smell of the seats. This strange house, about which she had already been warned in advance not to ask questions, had well and truly shaken her.

'Fancy that,' May murmured out loud settling herself back in her seat. It occurred to her that Mrs Simpson must be a very

good friend indeed of the King to be so in charge in the King's own house.

'Well, I must get back to my *proper* place where I belong, darling,' she continued out loud.

'Darling' mattered to May. Her father never uttered the word when speaking to her and she was glad of that. The term of endearment was reserved for rare usage by her mother alone, and its power to soothe always took her by happy surprise. May could not imagine ever using the word herself. It did not seem to fit anyone she knew. For a moment she wished desperately that her mother could be there with her now.

Pulling the door shut, and adjusting a small cushion that Mr Hooch the Cuckmere Park odd job man had suggested would give May extra height, she put the engine carefully into reverse. She was still feeling jumpy after the recent scene in the drawing room and as the car began to crunch over the gravel, her shoe became caught in a small tear in the fitted carpet on the floor below the steering wheel. As May tried to release her foot, she inadvertently pressed down hard on the accelerator pedal. The car jolted backwards hitting an object that May was certain had not been in the driveway earlier.

A prickling on her arms was coming from underneath her skin. The sensation, May's infuriating response to anything that made her nervous, travelled up towards her shoulders, then her neck and right into her cheeks as she fought the instinct to look round. *Take it slowly*, May told herself. *There is no need to panic*. Had Miss Nettlefold been carrying her handbag with her as she entered the house? May felt certain she had. And then a dreadful thought occurred to her. Still facing forward and sitting up very straight May was able to see the reflection of the back seat in the driving mirror. It was empty.

Just then Miss Nettlefold appeared at the front door of the

house. For a second or two she stood quite still, a large and in some ways absurd figure in her black fur hat, and her voluminous coat and her shoulders rounded and hunched forward, as if she was trying to reduce her height. Miss Nettlefold was smiling as, shielding her eyes with her hand against the surprisingly strong glare of a setting wintry sun, she searched the driveway.

'Wiggle!' May heard her call in a deep American voice, and then again, a little louder with an extended emphasis on the first syllable. 'Weeeg-le!'

Miss Nettlefold turned in the direction of the parked car, a woman happy in her ownership of a temporarily missing dog, as she scanned the gravel for the wag of a tail. But her glance fell quickly on a small, still shape just visible beneath a back wheel of the Rolls-Royce.

In an instant the Fort driveway filled up with several black-suited servants, alerted by Miss Nettlefold's agonised cry. Towered over by the straight-backed Mr Osborne, they hovered crow-like over the large figure that lay on the gravel, unsure how to lift the comatose Miss Nettlefold inside. In her thick-haired fur coat Miss Nettlefold resembled a bear that had lumbered out of the evergreen rhododendron bushes surrounding the driveway and collapsed in confusion.

Mr Osborne approached May and suggested that it might be best if she leave now, adding, after a theatrical clearing of his throat, 'And remove the instrument of death before Miss Nettlefold regains consciousness.'

A yard or two away, his outline just identifiable beneath a plaid rug, lay the motionless body of Wiggle.