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Opening extract from

The Double Shadow

Written by

Sally Gardner

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THE DOUBLE SHADOW

Also by Sally Gardner

I, Coriander
The Red Necklace
The Silver Blade

The DOUBLE SHADOW

SALLY GARDNER

Indigo

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To Jacky, the mistress of memories, with all my love.

In the flicker of memory's smoky light
Down corridors of forgotten places
I saw the door we should not open
That brought us to
The wasteland.

Ezra Pascoe's diary, 19 May 1943

WASTELAND

Once there was a girl who asked of her reflection, 'If all I have is fragments of memories and none of them fit together, tell me then, do I exist?'

There was no answer, only the silence of the room and the hum of the green light that oozed from the television in the corner. She had no idea how long she had been standing there, maybe an eternity. Her name, her age, beyond recall. All she knew was there would be no tomorrow if she couldn't work out the riddle of yesterday. She wondered often if she was going crazy, but it was hard to remember what crazy looked like. In the apartment, on the windowsill before her, lay a dead butterfly. Its wings and its beauty disturbed her. It was familiar, it had an echo of another time.

Softly, she sang a few words, her breath misty on the cold night-time glass, her reflection the only silent proof of her existence.

If you go down in the woods today
You're sure of a big surprise.
If you go down in the woods today
You'd better go in disguise.

She was certain there were more verses but, like so much, they twinkled on the brink of things lost.

High up in a dark tenement block, the girl looked out of the window to a wasteland. In the middle stood one building. A picture palace. She imagined that once it must have been fabulous, with its mirrored facade built of thousands of reflective squares. How it came to fall into such decay was a mystery. As so much here was. The girl could see that the movie house had three grand silvered steps leading up to diamond-paned glass doors. Now all smeared with the grime of neglect. The place looked haunted, having scared away every other building that might have kept it company, leaving it isolated. There, at the very edge of the world, the other buildings formed a protective circle, shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm, joining with rows of tall houses and one black tower to make an impenetrable wall, a mix of apartment buildings and tenement blocks whose fronts were laced with a spider's web of fire escapes, water tanks and balconies. Behind this barricade she could see skyscrapers turning their Venetian-blinded eyes away. There was no way out. This was landscape with no colour, no trees to break the endless monotony of grainy black and white, just the ever-present eerie hum of the green light. It was this light that, in the darkness, filled her nightmares. Perhaps it was the sound of crazy, perhaps it was the end. How was she to know?

The wasteland was a rippling sea, its tides rushing in on waves of things remembered, sucked out by waves of things forgotten. Here, once, a city stood. All that was left was rubble. Here, once, a burning airship fell from the sky. Then the tide changed again and the wasteland was awash with mud and

barbed wire, an empty pram that no one would ever collect. The flotsam and jetsam of memories.

It was now night in this eternal day, but there was no time here, no clocks to mark the passing hours. The dark a false promise of a future that would never come.

Snow started to fall, thick, fluffy, playful flakes. The girl watched a magic of sorts unfolding as the wasteland began to turn white.

From an adjoining room, a man said, 'Do you want tea?'

She didn't answer.

'I always like my tea strong, builder's tea, proper tea,' he said. 'I know it's sweet enough when the teaspoon stands upright in the mug. Made two cups. I always make two cups. Made one for Bernie after they blew his arm off.'

The girl heard him come shuffling into the room. He was wearing a dressing-gown over a soldier's shirt and trousers of the Great War, his calves still wrapped in putties, his boots muddy. Carrying his tea to the armchair he sat down, quietened by the green flickering light from the television.

If he talked at all, he talked only of tea, toast and the trenches. He said he'd seen ghosts on the wasteland, seen the dead of Passchendaele rise, young men again.

The girl, too, had seen things on the wasteland, been tempted to go out there and investigate. But she was afraid the boy might not find her. She had searched one apartment, one tenement block after another. Now and again it struck her like a body blow that perhaps the boy wasn't there. Only the child, and she would be happy never, ever to see her again.

Then something strange happened. The sign over the front of the picture palace lit up. It read:

Vervaine Fox starring in *The Night of the Tiger*

She turned to the man in the armchair.

'Look, look,' she said. 'The picture palace is coming to life.'

The soldier said nothing, his tea untouched, the spoon still standing upright.

Now the girl stood in front of him, trying to get his attention.

'Come and see, just once, look out.'

Still the soldier sat, hypnotised by the light from the television. She went back to the window. The picture palace had undergone another transformation. No longer derelict, its mirrored face reflected the snow, shimmering with a glamour that made her long to be a part of it.

She saw a man throw open the double doors. The foyer glowed, honeypot golden, the light spilling on to the carpet of virgin snow, all crisp, all even.

The girl's heart beat faster.

A white tiger walked through the foyer, out of the picture palace, and moved languidly towards the apartment block. The closer the mighty animal came the more the girl felt alive, the more she was aware of a sensation beyond herself, within herself, a stirring, a clue of what yesterday might have been.

This majestic creature, conjured from an alchemist's book of spells, walked with measured steps, its paws leaving a map of prints in the snow. The girl felt certain that if she were with the tiger she would be safe. Safe was not anything she

remembered, safe was nothing she knew, except for a snapshot of brown stripes against white fur.

She left the apartment, closing the door carefully behind her so as not to disturb the soldier in his slumbers. The corridor was deserted, green light seeped from under each of the many front doors. She looked down the thirteen storeys of the stone stairwell and started walking. On the ground floor, by the entrance, she stood gazing at the white tiger, fascinated by its beauty. It prowled back and forth, weaving between long-deserted swings and roundabouts, stopping every now and again, its blue eyes seeing right into her.

She will never find the boy, it's been too long, she's sure it's been too long. Only the child is waiting for her and she wishes she would leave her alone.

She pushes open the door. Snow flurries into the passageway and turns to water on the concrete.

She will follow the tiger, come what may. His tracks make stepping stones across the wasteland to the picture palace. The man is waiting, watching.

He bows to Amaryllis. 'I'm Silas. It's good to see you again.'

Again?

At the top of the grand staircase stands an apparition dressed in a satin evening gown, a rippling waterfall of fabric.

The girl has seen her before. She has a name.

The white tiger prowls around this goddess of the silver screen.

Suddenly there is a noise, a sharp shaking of a door, a

clattering of brooms and brushes, and from a small panel in the mirrored foyer a young man tumbles backwards into the light.

'I'm Ezra Pascoe,' he says, scrambling to his feet. 'Do you remember me?'

'You're the cake boy,' the girl says.

A BASIC EDUCATION

The year 1937

Miss Amos sat, shaken, in her study. A bluebottle buzzed round the wood-panelled room. It was lined with framed photographs of row upon row of identical-looking girls, a paper chain of pupils down the years. Solemn faces in dull uniforms, supervised by teachers who never aged. The room smelled of beeswax and boredom, time measured by the footsteps of frustrated young ladies.

Miss Amos was the perfect picture of an uninspiring headmistress. Dressed in different tones of drabness, she had lardy skin given to moles. Tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses were the only definition in her featureless face.

Clarrington School offered a basic education; nothing that might lead any of the young ladies to aspire to ideas above their station. They were taught only what was required to become good wives and mothers, without the inconvenience of learning the facts of life. Matron gave a wholesome talk on cleanliness being next to godliness and this was considered to be more than enough. As for the nitty-gritty, they could always observe Mr Willis's sheep in the neighbouring field.

The reports of Amaryllis Ruben's behaviour from her

previous school and a child therapist in Switzerland had been dismissed by Miss Amos as codswallop. This was a simple matter of a widowed father who had overindulged his only child. Yes, it was a misfortune for the girl to lose her mother at such a young age, but Miss Amos believed, with the conviction that would please a saint, there was little that a routine of exercise and discipline couldn't cure. Better the girl be broken on the wheel of education than on the wheel of life, for in her considered opinion a wilful young woman was of no value to a man. Miss Amos had corrected many a headstrong girl, reshaping her in the image that the school prided itself on. Tame, malleable girls. The backbone of the Empire, wives for the nation, bearers of sons for the future.

It never occurred to Miss Amos that grief and a lie lay at the heart of Amaryllis's troubles, that she was a girl walking on thin ice, a girl for whom there was no solid ground. Neither was she aware that her pupil was extremely clever – and extremely lonely.

Advancing on the bluebottle with a fly-swat in her hand, Miss Amos had to acknowledge that the wretched girl had defeated her. Amaryllis's catalogue of crimes had led the headmistress to wander into a puddle of thought, muddy and unclear as it was, about the nature of original sin.

The first of her misdemeanours, as Miss Amos called them, had occurred shortly after Amaryllis had arrived at the school. The girl had made a tidy sum of money giving midnight lessons in the dormitory on the art of lovemaking. This had only come to light when a junior had fainted after being shown

a collection of Parisian 'Naughty Nudes' from the 1900s. The idiot creature had fallen off her bed and broken her arm. On coming to she had given the game away.

Amaryllis had said, without an ounce of embarrassment, that she had found the postcards in an old shoe box of her father's. As for the facts of life – that was simple: she had sent away for a copy of Marie Stopes's book on married love. Much more informative than Mr Willis's sheep.

Thinking of it now made Miss Amos shudder. The misdemeanour was serious enough to get the new girl expelled and she would have been had it not been for the charm of her charismatic father.

The second misdemeanour was of more significant proportions. Amaryllis had burned down the Biology Laboratory. On purpose, so she said, to see if an experiment with a magnifying glass would work.

On that occasion, Miss Amos and the school governors had been forced into forgiveness by the size of Arnold Ruben's cheque. His gift enabled the building of new Science and Art wings. But Amaryllis's latest escapade could not be classified as a misdemeanour. It was impossible to keep her at the school a day longer.

Last night, the headmistress's call to Mr Ruben had been put through to a Mr Silas Molde.

'I regret to report . . .' Miss Amos could hardly bring herself to say the girl's name, '. . . went missing on a school trip to London.'

Mr Molde remained calm. He asked her not on any account

to involve the police or the press. Miss Amos, shocked by his casual tone, was stunned into silence.

What, asked the remote voice at the end of the line, did she intend to do when Miss Ruben returned to school?

Miss Amos didn't hesitate. 'She will be expelled.'

There was a silence that seemed no more than a click of a pen cap.

'Is there . . . a sum of money that might make you reconsider?'

Miss Amos pursed her thin lips and beads of sweat formed above them. The school motto stared down at her.

To serve one's country, to do one's duty,
to obey the word of the Lord.

'No, this must be the end of the matter.'

There was a long pause in which the line crackled and Miss Amos was on the point of thinking she had been disconnected when Mr Molde said in a disinterested tone, 'A car will be sent for her tomorrow.'

'But,' said Miss Amos indignantly, 'what if she doesn't return?'

The phone went dead.

That morning, just after assembly, a handsome man in evening dress entered her study unannounced, followed by a dazzling beauty of a woman. Full lips, hair perfectly coiffured, she was wearing a silver dress, a mirage shimmering into a mermaid's tail. The vision, for there was no other word to describe her, quite discombobulated Miss Amos.

The business card the man handed her read:

Maurice Sands
Entrepreneur

Miss Amos turned the card over.

'How can I help you?' she asked.

'Brought the wanderer back.'

His accent was so unexpected she hardly listened to a word he was saying.

'The wanderer?' queried Miss Amos.

'Oh, come off it – Amaryllis.'

Miss Amos, unused to being addressed in such a familiar tone, was quite at a loss as to what to say when the bluebottle noisily made its entrance into the room and headed straight for her. Flapping her hands, she tried in vain to swat it away.

The young woman was gently swaying back and forth.

'This is Miss Ruben,' said Maurice Sands.

Miss Amos was still unable to join together the dots that would make this goddess form a picture of a humdrum schoolgirl.

'What is your name?' she asked.

The goddess burped. 'Amaryllis Ruben,' she said.

And finally the drawing was complete and the full outrage of the situation hit Miss Amos so hard that she started to tremble.

'Do you realise, Mr Sands, that Miss Ruben is just sixteen years old and a pupil of this school?' She made to lift the phone. 'I am going to call the police and have you arrested for the abduction of a minor.'

‘I think,’ said Maurice Sands, taking a cigarette from a gold case, ‘you will find that to be very ill-advised. I am sure Mr Ruben wouldn’t be pleased if you involve the police. He doesn’t like scenes.’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘I suppose I am,’ he said, blowing a perfect smoke ring.

Miss Amos let go of the receiver.

Amaryllis, still swaying slightly, suddenly burst out laughing.

Maurice Sands, despite himself, began to laugh too.

‘The girl is drunk,’ said the headmistress, stating what had been obvious from the start.

‘High-spirited,’ said Maurice Sands. He put his arm round Amaryllis. She turned and vomited all over him. He jumped back, horrified. ‘You little cow! My dinner jacket’s ruined . . .’

‘Oh, whoops-a-daisy,’ said Amaryllis, ghostly pale.

‘I think you should leave,’ said Miss Amos, forcefully ringing a hand bell. Help was most definitely needed.

Maurice Sands was mopping his dinner jacket with his handkerchief when Matron entered, followed by a maid.

‘There has been an accident,’ said Miss Amos. ‘If you wouldn’t mind showing Mr Sands the cloakroom?’

Maurice Sands stopped at the door and turned to Amaryllis. ‘Better behave yourself. You wouldn’t want me telling Daddykins what a naughty little girl he has, would you?’

Miss Amos waited until the door was firmly shut and, returning to the safe fortress of her desk, never for a moment thought to ask what Mr Sands had meant. She felt there was no more proof needed: the girl was a bad lot. With a deep

intake of breath she began her well-prepared and seldom-used speech. Miss Ruben was a disgrace to the school. Before Miss Amos reached the *coup de grâce*, that Amaryllis was to be expelled, she had already picked up her silver tail and left the room.

Miss Amos was about to run after her and demand that she hear her out, but realised that what was left of her dignity would be lost. Instead she crossed the bare boards to a discreet cabinet and took out an old bottle of Christmas sherry, as sweet and sickly as cough mixture. She poured a generous glass and downed it in gulps.

Amaryllis stood in the clotted-cream-painted dormitory. On each of the regimented beds with their thin white covers sat a woebegone bear stuffed with the aching love of a neglected girl. She hated this place, this rich-man's orphanage. Her mind now crystal clear, she tipped the contents of her locker unceremoniously into her trunk.

Matron, having seen off Maurice Sands, was overflowing with an anthem of righteous anger. Amaryllis heard not one word of what was said. She had long ago learned not to listen; if you listen you can be tripped up. If you don't, you won't be. She was conscious only of an unholy din and Matron's cracked red-postbox lips going up and down. Finally, the woman, nearly beside herself with rage, grabbed hold of Amaryllis violently and shook her for all she was worth.

'Take your hands off me,' said Amaryllis.

The girl's unblinking violet eyes pierced right through her. Matron, recognising a force beyond her control, let go.

'You will come to a bad end. Girls like you always do,' she shouted as Amaryllis dragged her trunk out of the dormitory, her silver mermaid tail trailing after her.

Down the hushed corridors she went until she reached the main staircase. Bump, bump, the noise reverberated in Miss Amos's study. She shuddered and poured the last of the sherry. Amaryllis hauled the trunk to the entrance hall with its imposing front door and into the blinding sunlight. In the middle of the gravel drive, right outside the headmistress's study, she sat upright on the trunk and waited. Her head throbbed. All she wanted was to lie down in a darkened room with a cold flannel over her eyes. If it hadn't been for the fact that every girl in the school was watching her from behind the mock-Tudor windows, she may well have given in and slumped, but knowing she had an audience, hungry for drama, she felt it was her role to oblige. Standing up, she stretched, and as a curl of thick black hair came loose from its prison of hairpins, she emptied the entire contents of the trunk on to the drive. From her sewing kit she took a pair of scissors and for the next hour she cut up, with great care, her gymslip, her skirt, her tunic, her cardigan-that-couldn't-be-worn-without-a-blazer, and every other item on the uniform list from Harrods, making sure each piece was small enough to be of no use to anyone.

By the time the Bentley arrived every shred had been returned to the trunk. Longbone, the chauffeur, enquired if there was any luggage.

'None,' said Amaryllis imperiously. But seeing the eager eyes

of disbelieving girls and the mortified face of the headmistress peeping out from behind Victorian lace curtains, she said to the chauffeur, 'One minute.'

Returning to the trunk, she opened it, a magician performing a final trick. She had saved a box of matches from the nightclub. She struck each one in turn and dropped them in the trunk. Only when it had caught light did she return to the Bentley.

'Home, to the old mausoleum,' she said, 'where no doubt the fatted calf has been killed for my arrival.'

'Your father's abroad, miss.'

Amaryllis sighed. She turned and looked back up the drive. Her trunk was burning bonfire-bright, framed by dark rhododendrons. She rested her head on the back of the leather seat, closed her eyes and tried not to think about Maurice Sands, or what he had done. No, that memory she would wipe from her mind.

If you don't think about it, it can't hurt . . . but hurt it did.