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THE CHRISTIE AFFAIR

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NINA DE GRAMONT

Nina de Gramont

THE CHRISTIE AFFAIR



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For Liza Jane Hanson

Part One

Here Lies Sister Mary

A LONG TIME ago, in another country, I nearly killed a woman.

It's a particular feeling, the urge to murder. First comes rage, greater than any you've ever imagined. It takes over your body so completely it's like a divine force, grabbing hold of your will, your limbs, your psyche. It conveys a strength you never knew you possessed. Your hands, harmless until now, rise up to squeeze another person's life away. There's a joy to it. In retrospect, it's frightening, but in the moment, it feels sweet, the way justice feels sweet.

Agatha Christie had a fascination with murder. But she was a tender-hearted person. She never wanted to kill anyone. Not for a moment. Not even me.

'Call me Agatha,' she always said, reaching out a slender hand. But I never would, not in those early days, no matter how many weekends I spent at one of her homes, no matter how many private moments we shared. The familiarity didn't feel proper, though propriety was already waning in the years after the Great War. Agatha was upper crust and elegant, but perfectly willing to dispense with manners and social mores. Whereas I had worked too hard to learn those manners and mores to ever abandon them easily.

I liked her. Back then I refused to think highly of her writing. But I always admitted to admiring her as a person. I still admire her. Recently, when I confided this to one of my sisters, she asked me if I had regrets about what I'd done, and how much pain it had caused.

'Of course I do,' I told her, without hesitation. Anyone who says *I have no regrets* is either a psychopath or a liar. I am neither of those things, simply adept at keeping secrets. In this way the first Mrs Christie and the second are very much alike. We both know you can't tell your own story without exposing someone else's. Her whole life, Agatha refused to answer any questions about the eleven days she went missing, and it wasn't only because she needed to protect herself.

I would have refused to answer, too, if anyone had thought to ask.

The Disappearance

One Day Before
Thursday, 2 December 1926

I TOLD ARCHIE it was the wrong time to leave his wife but I didn't mean it. As far as I was concerned, this game had gone on far too long. It was time for me to play the winning hand. But he liked things to be his own idea, so I protested.

'She's too fragile,' I said. Agatha was still reeling from her mother's death.

'Clarissa died months ago,' Archie said. 'And no matter when I tell her it will be beastly.' *Fragile* was the last word anyone would use to describe Archie. He sat at the great mahogany desk in his London office, all pomp and power. 'There's no making everybody happy,' he said. 'Somebody has got to be unhappy and I'm tired of it being me.'

I faced him, perched on the leather chair usually reserved for financiers and businessmen. 'Darling,' I said. My voice would never achieve the genteel tones of Agatha's, but by then I had at least managed to wash away the East End. 'She needs more time to recover.'

'She's a grown woman.'

'A person never stops needing her mother.'

'You're too indulgent, Nan. Too kind.'

I smiled as if this were true. The things Archie hated most in the world were illness, weakness, sadness. He had no patience for recuperation. As his mistress, I always maintained a cheerful demeanour. Light and airy. The perfect contrast to his not-quite-fooled and grief-stricken wife.

His face softened. A smile twitched the corner of his mouth. As the French like to say, 'Happy people have no history.' Archie never enquired after my past. He only wanted me now, beaming and willing. He ran a hand

over his hair, smoothing what was already perfectly neat. I noticed a bit of grey at the temples. It made him look distinguished. There may have been a mercenary element to my relationship with Archie but that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy him. He was tall, handsome and in love with me.

He stood up and crossed the room to kneel before my chair.

'Archie,' I said, pretending to scold, 'what if someone comes in?'

'No one will come in.' He put his arms round my waist and laid his head in my lap. I wore a pleated skirt, a button-up blouse, a loose cardigan and stockings. Fake pearls and a smart new hat. I stroked Archie's head but gently pushed it away as he pressed his face against me.

'Not here,' I said, but without urgency. Cheerful, cheerful, cheerful. A girl who'd never been sick or sad a day in her life.

Archie kissed me. He tasted like pipe smoke. I closed my hands on the lapel of his jacket and didn't object when he cupped his hand around my breast. Tonight he would be going home to his wife. If the course I'd planned so carefully were to continue, it was best to send him to her thinking of me. A sponge soaked in quinine sulphate – procured by my married younger sister – stood guard inside me, protecting against pregnancy. Never once had I encountered Archie without preparing myself in this way, but for the moment my precautions proved unnecessary. He pulled my skirt modestly back into place, smoothing over the pleats, then stood and walked back round his desk.

Almost the moment he returned to his chair, in walked Agatha. She rapped lightly on the door and at the same time pushed it open. Her sensible heels made the barest sound on the carpet. At thirty-six, she was much taller than me and nearly ten years older. Her auburn hair had faded towards brown.

'Agatha,' Archie said sharply, 'you might have knocked.'

'Oh, Archie. This isn't a dressing room.' Then she turned to me and said, 'Miss O'Dea. I wasn't expecting to see you here.'

Archie's strategy had always been to hide me in plain sight. I was regularly invited to parties and even weekends at their home. Six months ago, he would at least have made an excuse for my presence in his office. *Stan's loaned Nan to do some shorthand*, he might have said. Stan was my employer at the Imperial British Rubber Company. He was a friend of Archie's but never loaned anybody anything.

This time Archie didn't offer up a single word to explain me, perched where I didn't belong. Agatha's brows arched as she realized her husband couldn't be bothered with the usual subterfuge. She gathered her composure by addressing me.

'Look at us,' she said, pointing to her outfit and then mine. 'We're twins.'

It was an effort not to touch my face. I was blushing furiously. What if she had come in two minutes earlier? Would she have pretended ignorance despite all evidence, just as doggedly as she did now?

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, it's true, we are.'

That season nearly every woman in London was a twin, the same clothes, the same shoulder-length hair. But Agatha's suit was authentic Chanel, and her pearls were not fake. She didn't register these discrepancies with any disdain, if at all. She wasn't that sort of person, a virtue that backfired when it came to me. Never once did Agatha object to the daughter of a clerk, a mere secretary, entering her social circles. 'She's friends with Stan's daughter,' Archie had told her. 'Excellent golfer.' And that was all the explanation she ever required.

In photographs from this time, Agatha looks much darker, less pretty than she really was. Her eyes were sparkling and blue. She had a girlish sprinkling of freckles across her nose and a face that moved quickly from one expression to the next. Finally, Archie stood to greet her, taking her hand as though she were a business associate. And I decided – the way someone who's doing something cruel can decide – it's all to the good: she deserves better than Archie, this pretty and ambitious woman. She deserves someone who'll collect her in his arms with un-abashed adoration and be faithful to her. As guilt crept in to discourage me, I reminded myself that Agatha was born on her feet, and that's how she'd always land.

She told Archie, likely for the second or third time, that she'd had a meeting with Donald Fraser, her new literary agent. 'Since I'm in town, I thought we might go to luncheon. Before your weekend away.'

'I can't today.' Archie gestured unconvincingly towards his empty desk. 'I've a mountain of work to get through.'

'Ah,' said Agatha. 'You sure? I've booked a table at Simpson's.'

'I'm certain,' he said. 'I'm afraid you've come by for nothing.'

'Would you like to come with me, Miss O'Dea? A girls' luncheon?'

I couldn't bear seeing her rejected twice. 'Oh, yes. That would be lovely.'

Archie coughed, irritated. Another man might have been nervous, faced with this meeting, wife and lover. But he'd moved past caring. He wanted his marriage over and if that came about from Agatha walking in on us, so be it. While his wife and I lunched he would keep an appointment at Garrard and Company to buy the most beautiful ring, my first real diamond.

'You must tell me about your new literary agent,' I said, getting to my feet. 'What an exciting career you have, Mrs Christie.' This was not flattery. Agatha's career was leagues more interesting to me than Archie's work in finance, though she wasn't well known at this time, not in the way she would come to be. A rising star not quite risen. I envied her.

Agatha put her arm though mine. I accepted the gesture with ease. Nothing came more naturally to me than intimacy with other women. I had three sisters. Agatha's face set into a smile that managed to be both dreamy and determined. Archie sometimes complained about the weight she'd gained over the past seven years, since Teddy had arrived, but her arm felt thin and delicate. I let her lead me through the offices and out onto the busy London street. My cheeks turned pink from the cold. Agatha released my arm abruptly and brought a hand to her forehead, steadying herself.

'Are you all right, Mrs Christie?'

'Agatha,' she said, her voice sharper than it had been in Archie's office. 'Please call me Agatha.'

I nodded. And then proceeded to do what I did every time she made this request – for the bulk of our time that afternoon, I didn't call her anything at all.



Have you ever known a woman who went on to become famous? Looking back, you can see things in memory, can't you? About the way she held herself. The determination with which she spoke. To her dying day Agatha claimed not to be an ambitious person. She thought she kept her intensity secret, but I could see it in the way her eyes swept over a room. The way she examined everyone who crossed her line of vision, imagining a backstory she could sum up in a single sentence. Unlike Archie, Agatha always wanted to know about your past. If you didn't care to reveal it, she'd create something of her own and convince herself it was true.

At Simpson's Agatha and I were escorted upstairs to the ladies' dining room. When we were seated, she removed her hat so I did too, though many other ladies wore theirs. She fluffed her pretty hair back into place. The gesture seemed less one of vanity than a way to comfort herself. She might have asked me what I'd been doing in Archie's office. But she knew I'd have a lie at the ready and didn't want to hear it.

Instead she said, 'Your mother's still living, isn't she, Miss O'Dea?'

'Yes, both my parents.'

She stared at me frankly. Assessing me. One is allowed to say it in retrospect. I was pretty. Slim, young, athletic. At the same time, I was no Helen of Troy. If I had been, my relationship with Archie might have been less alarming. The modesty of my charms indicated he might very well be in love.

'How's Teddy?' I asked.

'She's fine.'

'And the writing?'

'It's fine.' She waved her hand as if nothing mattered less. 'It's all a parlour trick. Shiny objects and red herrings.' A look crossed her face, as if she couldn't help but smile when thinking of it, so I knew, despite her dismissal, she was proud of her work.

An enormous bang erupted as a white-coated waiter dropped his tray of empty dishes. I couldn't help but jump. At the table next to us, a man dining with his wife covered his head with his arms in a reflex. Not so long ago loud crashes in London meant something far more ominous than shattered dishware and, of course, so many of our men had seen the worst of it.

Agatha took a sip of tea and said, 'How I miss the calm before the war. Do you think we'll ever recover, Miss O'Dea?'

'I don't see how we can.'

'I suppose you were too young to do any nursing,' she said.

I nodded. During the war it was mostly matronly types who tended the soldiers, by design, to avert the bloom of unsuitable romances. Agatha had been assigned to a hospital dispensary in Torquay. It was where she learned so much about poison.

'My sister Megs became a nurse,' I said. 'After the war, as her profession. In fact, she works now at a hospital in Torquay.'

Agatha did not ask more about this. She wouldn't know someone like my sister. Instead she asked, 'Did you lose anyone close to you?'

‘A boy I used to know. In Ireland.’

‘Was he killed?’

‘Let’s just say he never came home. Not really.’

‘Archie was in the Flying Corps. Of course, you know that. I suppose it was different for those in the air.’

Didn’t that sum up the whole world? Always the poor ones carrying the world’s scars. Agatha liked to quote William Blake: ‘Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night.’ In my mind, even at that moment – lunching at Simpson’s while her husband shopped for my engagement ring – I considered Agatha the former and myself the latter.

An expression kept rising to Agatha’s face that I could see her actively pushing away. As if she wanted to say something, but couldn’t bring herself to. She had brought me to luncheon, I’m sure of it, to confront me. Perhaps to ask for mercy. But it’s easy to postpone the most unpleasant conversations, especially if confrontation is not in your nature.

To do so, and because she meant it, Agatha said, ‘What rubbish, war. Any war. It’s a terrible thing for a man to endure. If I had a son, I’d do whatever I could to keep him away from it – whatever the cause, even if England was at stake.’

‘I think I’ll do the same. If I ever have a son.’

Our meat was carved tableside and I chose a piece that was rarer than I liked. I suppose I was trying to impress Agatha. The richer the people, the bloodier they liked their steak. As I sawed into the meat the red oozing made my stomach turn.

‘Do you still think of the Irish boy?’ Agatha asked me.

‘Only every day of my life.’

‘Is that why you never married?’

Never married. As if I never would. ‘I suppose it is.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘you’re still young. And who knows? Perhaps he’ll turn up one day, recovered.’

‘I doubt that very much.’

‘There was a time during the war that I thought Archie and I would never be able to marry. But we did and we’ve been so happy. We have, you know. Been happy.’

‘I’m sure that’s true.’ Clipped and stern. Talk of the war had steeled me. A person who has nothing might be excused for taking one thing – a husband – from a person who has everything.

The waiter returned and asked if we wanted a cheese course. We both declined. Agatha put down her fork with her meat half eaten. If her manners had been less perfect, she would have pushed her plate away. 'I must start eating less. I'm too fat, Archie says.'

'You look just fine,' I said, to soothe her and because it was true. 'You look beautiful.'

Agatha laughed, a little meanly, derision towards herself, not me, and I softened again. It gave me no pleasure to cause anyone pain. The death of her mother was dreadfully timed, too close to Archie's leaving. I'd never planned on that. Agatha's father had died when she was eleven, so in addition to the loss of her mother she now found herself in her family's oldest generation at far too young an age.

We walked outside together after Agatha insisted on paying the bill. On the street she turned to me and reached out, curling her forefinger and thumb around my chin.

'Do you have plans for this weekend, Miss O'Dea?' Her tone insinuated she knew perfectly well what my plans were.

'No,' I said. 'But I'm taking a holiday next week. At the Bellefort Hotel in Harrogate.' Immediately, I wondered why I'd told her. I hadn't even told Archie. But something about sharing a woman's husband makes you feel close to her. Sometimes even closer than to him.

'Treating yourself,' she said, as if the concept did not appeal to her sensible nature. 'Lovely for you.'

I was thankful she didn't ask how I could afford such an extravagance. She let go of my chin. Her eyes held something I couldn't quite read.

'Well, goodbye, then,' she said. 'Enjoy your holiday.'

She turned and walked a few steps, paused, then walked back to me. 'You don't love him,' she said. Her face had utterly changed. From contained and still to wide-eyed and tremulous. 'It would be bad enough if you did. But since you don't, please leave him to the person who does.'

All my edges disappeared. I felt ghostly in my refusal to respond, like I might dissipate, the pieces of me floating off and away into the air. Agatha didn't touch me again. Instead she held my face in her gaze, examining my response – blood leaving my cheeks, the guilty refusal to move or breathe.

'Mrs Christie.' It was all I could manage to say. She was demanding a confession I did not have permission to make.

‘Miss O’Dea.’ Clipped, final. Returning to her usual self. Her name on my lips had prefaced a denial. My name on hers was a stern dismissal.

I stood in front of the restaurant and watched her walk away. In my memory she vanishes into a great cloud of fog but that can’t be right. It was broad daylight – crisp and clear. More likely she simply walked around a corner, or into a crowd.



I was due to return to work but instead I headed towards Archie’s office. My secretarial job no longer meant much to me as Archie covered more and more of my expenses. I knew he would be worried about my lunching with Agatha, and if he really did tell her he was leaving tonight, she might level the charge that I didn’t love him. So it was important to leave him feeling as though I did.

On my way I passed a bookshop that displayed a mountain of copies of a pink children’s book, a little teddy bear clutching the string of a balloon and flying off into the air. *Winnie the Pooh*. It looked so whimsical, I went in and bought a copy for Archie to give to Teddy. For a moment I considered giving it to her myself, as a Christmas gift. By then her parents might be living apart. Perhaps Teddy would spend Christmas with her father and me. Cosy, the three of us, exchanging gifts beneath a Christmas tree. Sometimes one did hear of children living with their father, after a divorce. And Archie always claimed Teddy loved him better. Though that was like Archie, wasn’t it, not only to say such a thing but also to believe it.

When I returned to Archie’s office I gave him the book to give to Teddy himself. He locked the door and drew me into his lap, unbuttoning my skirt and pulling it up around my waist.

‘It won’t be like this much longer,’ he breathed into my ear, shuddering, though I did believe he liked it like this. Didn’t all men?

I stepped off him and smoothed my skirt. My hat was still on my head, it had barely budged.

‘How did she seem?’ he asked, returning to his desk.

‘Sad.’ If she ever told him she’d confronted me, I’d deny it. ‘And worried.’

‘You mustn’t go soft on her,’ he said. ‘It’s kinder to plunge the knife quickly.’

‘I’m sure you’re right.’

I blew him a kiss and headed towards the door, hoping none of my protestations had made a dent in his resolve. My conversation with Agatha made his leaving her all the more urgent. I unlocked the latch.

‘Nan,’ Archie said, before I could step through the doorway. ‘Next time you see me I’ll be a free man.’

‘Not at all,’ I told him. ‘You’ll belong to me.’

He smiled, and I knew there was nothing for me to worry about, at least in terms of Archie breaking the news to Agatha. The man had a mission. Once he decided to do something, he did it with the coldness required of a pilot releasing bombs to cause death and havoc below. All the while sailing through the sky, untouchable.

The Disappearance

One Day Before
Thursday, 2 December 1926

IN THE HISTORY of the world there's been one story a man tells his mistress: he doesn't love his wife, perhaps never loved her at all; there's been no sex for years, not a whisper of it; his marriage is absent passion, absent affection, absent joy – a barren and miserable place; he stays for the children, or for money, or for propriety; it's a matter of convenience; the new lover is his only respite.

How many times has this story been true? Not many, is my guess. I know it wasn't true of the Christies.

That evening Archie made his usual commute from London to Sunningdale. The couple had named their home Styles after the manor in Agatha's first novel. It was a lovely Victorian house with substantial gardens. When Archie came through the front door Agatha was waiting for him, dressed for dinner. He never told me what she was wearing but I know it was a chiffon dress the shade of seafoam. I imagine the cut emphasized the swell of her bosom, but Archie only said she seemed so distracted he decided to wait till morning to tell her he was leaving. 'Emotions do run higher at night, don't they?' he said.

Agatha, who knew the news was coming, resolved to do silent battle. Usually her little terrier Peter never left her side but tonight she had sent the dog to bed with Teddy so he wouldn't be an annoyance. She tried to exude the cheerful countenance her husband required.

I've sometimes thought Agatha invented Hercule Poirot as an antidote to Archie. There was never an emotional cue Poirot missed, nor a wayward emotion for which he didn't feel sympathy. Poirot could absorb and assess a

person's sadness, then forgive it. Whereas Archie simply wanted to say *Cheer up* and have the order followed.

Having decided to postpone the inevitable scene, Archie sat down to a quiet dinner with his wife, the two of them seated at opposite ends of the long dining table. When I asked what they'd discussed, he said, 'Just small talk.'

'How did she seem?'

'Sullen.' Archie spoke the word as if it were a great personal affront. 'She seemed self-indulgently morose.'

After dinner Agatha asked him to adjourn to the sitting room for a glass of brandy. He declined and went upstairs to see Teddy. Honoria, who doubled as Agatha's personal secretary and Teddy's nanny, was in the middle of putting her to bed.

The little dog dashed out the door as soon as Archie stepped inside and Teddy let out a wail of protest. 'Mother promised Peter would stay with me tonight!'

Luckily Archie had my gift, *Winnie the Pooh*, to offer as consolation. Once Teddy had torn away the wrapping excitedly, he told me, he read her the first chapter. She begged him to go on reading, so that by the time he retired, Agatha – never knowing this was her last chance to recover him – was already asleep. 'Like the dead,' Archie added.

But the following Saturday, when I arrived at Styles to return Archie's car from Godalming, I saw *Winnie the Pooh* on a table in the vestibule, still in its brown paper wrapping. And at Simpson's, Agatha had had the vague and scarcely animated look of an insomniac, feeling her way through the day after too many sleepless nights. She loved her husband. After twelve years of marriage, she loved him blindly and hopefully, as if in her thirty-six years of life she'd learned nothing about the world.

I know she wouldn't have gone to sleep before Archie came to bed. Here's what I think really happened:



Agatha was there to greet Archie when he arrived home. That much would have been true. The colour in her cheeks was high and determined. She'd resolved to win him back not with anger and threats but with the sheer force of her adoration, and so had dressed carefully. I know exactly what she

wore because on Saturday morning it still lay crumpled in a heap on their bedroom floor, the maid having been too upset to collect and launder it. When I saw it there I kneeled and picked it up, holding it against me as if trying it on. It was much too long, seafoam chiffon flowing past my feet. It smelled of Yardley perfume, Old English Lavender, light and pretty.

A silly garment to wear in the middle of winter but still. How lovely she would have looked, there to greet him. Freckles sprinkled across her nose and across her breasts, high and visible. Perhaps she had a drink in her hand, not for herself (she almost never drank) but to hand to him; his favourite Scotch.

‘A.C.,’ she said, stepping close to him, placing one hand on his chest, letting him trade his winter coat for the drink. Since their wedding night they’d called each other that, A.C.

‘Here.’ Archie did not return the endearment. Along with his coat he handed her the wrapped children’s book. ‘It’s for Teddy.’ He didn’t tell her I was the one who’d bought it, but she likely suspected. Archie wasn’t one for books – he hadn’t even read the novels she’d written, not since the first was published. Agatha slid the package unopened onto the table.

In the sitting room she poured water for herself. She was good at waiting things out. She’d waited years to marry Archie, then she waited out the war for them to live together. She sent her first book to a publisher and waited two years before they accepted it – so that by the time she received word that it would be published, she’d almost forgotten she’d written a book. She signed a miserable contract with Bodley Head for her first five novels, realized her mistake almost immediately, then waited it out instead of accepting their many offers to renegotiate. Now she was free and had moved on to a far superior publisher. A person *had* to put her mind to something and hope for the best. A person had to be willing to bide her time.

The house was too cold. Goosebumps rose on her bare arms, propelling her to stand closer to Archie. He had a hale and impenetrable mien, radiating warmth, not of the personal kind, but actual heat.

‘Where’s Teddy?’ he asked.

‘Upstairs with Honoria. Having a bath before bed.’

He nodded, inhaling the lavender. A man does like it when a woman tries, especially when she’s foreign to him, as his wife had become the moment he’d decided to tell her he was leaving. Agatha had instructed the