OPEN, HEAVEN

A NOVEL

SEÁN HEWITT

AUTHOR OF ALL DOWN DARKNESS WIDE

Open, Heaven

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For Cecelia O’Callaghan

every Flower

The Pink, the Jessamine, the Wall-flower, the Carnation,
The Jonquil, the mild Lily opes her heavens; every Tree
And Flower & Herb soon fill the air with an innumerable Dance,
Yet all in order sweet & lovely, Men are sick with Love

—William Blake, *Milton*

2022

Prologue

Time runs faster backwards. The years – long, arduous, and uncertain when taken one by one – unspool quickly, turning liquid, so one summer becomes a shimmering light that, almost as soon as it appears in the mind, is subsumed into a dark winter, a relapse of blackness that flashes to reveal a face, a fireside, a snow-encrusted garden. And then the garden sends its snow upwards, into the sky, gathers back its fallen leaves, and blooms again in reverse. The faces smile at me, back there, at the far end of the reel; they are younger, more innocent, lighter. If, now that I am in my adulthood, time seems like a silted riverbed I cannot wade through, I find, more often than before, that I can spin it backwards, can turn it into a flow of waters – warmer, sweeter, washing the years away, carrying me with them.

And if one day, perhaps, sitting at my desk, puzzling over a photograph or some snatch of memory, I start to float down that river, I might go past the meadows in season, hear laughter coming like a clear bell from somewhere, someone, or maybe a sharp voice raised against me. There are intervals of light and dark overhead, like the sun breaking through willows, and it always brings me back here: one year, when I am sixteen years old. And I see, in this dream, or this imagined reversal, a family standing there, and sometimes, on the other bank of the river, a lone boy, who might nod to me in recognition, or who might just as easily turn his back and walk across the fields into the sunrise, into the morning, and be gone.

Invariably, I see those years as a sort of morning – the pink sun lifting over the village, mist burning off the canal, off the fields, which are damp with dew; the sound of birds waking with song, the clean streets empty of people, who are only just beginning to rouse, the sun's light just starting to slant through the bedroom windows and across their closed eyes. Of course, I am here now – in a future of sorts – and I find that I cast all of those images with my shadow, watching them replay, skipping over a day, or a week, or a month, to find the moment again when the scene joins up, becomes significant – which is to say, it begins to mean something to me now.

Sometimes, the years spin like this all of a sudden. I might be walking along a street and notice a smell, or see a stranger and mistake them for someone else, and

then I am back there, in the village. Or else I will find myself in a long chair, in an office, spinning time back on purpose, searching for something, like a detective going over and over the gathered evidence in search of some missed clue. Often, back there, when the spinning stops and I find my family gathered at the dining table, or my mother in the garden, sunbathing, or Eddie knocking at my bedroom door, calling my name, I might ask myself if these people are alive, and what they are thinking. Of course, they think they are alive. And they cannot tell that I am here, in the future, watching them. They do not know me now – years beyond them – still waiting for one of them to sense my presence in the room, or in the garden, or beside the bed, and to turn their gaze on to me and smile.

Not long ago, I was at home, alone, and I was searching online for images of the village where I had been born. I had been doing this more often, recently: hoping to find the answer to something unfinished, some thread of my life that was unravelling, all these years later. I was clicking through pages and pages of photographs, items of the local news, and this time I saw the lot on an auctioneer's website and, before I knew what I was doing, I was dialling the agent's number. *Late 18th century farmhouse, four bedrooms. Including outbuildings and six acres of land. Green Lane, Thornmere*. The words were like a talisman: just seeing them, I was back there in those deep lanes, the towpath by the canal, the smell of the hawthorn blossom, and that potholed path down to the old farm where I had used to wait, decades ago, for him. I had thought it would be painful to be reminded, but what I felt instead was a sort of collapse in time, or a possibility: a curious but strong sense that my old life might still exist there, that if I went back I might find those people, that summer, all going on there still, unharmed and unchanged.

When my marriage fell apart, my husband said that he had realised I could love him but not desire him, and the moment he said those words, I knew they were true. It was like my whole self had been exposed as a fraud, and I broke down, because I did not know how I had got here, and I thought that I had wasted my life.

During the bewildered weeks that followed, when I could not bring myself to go to the library in which I worked because I could not bear silence or good manners, I had begun thinking to myself about what had happened. Eventually, I had been given leave from work – doctor's orders – and I had spent those days in thought, going over my

life, and sometimes I would sit at home for hours, and other times I would go to auctions, markets, never quite sure what I was searching for. But, in the end, I realised that I kept coming back to Thornmere, to my family and, as usual, to Luke. It was twenty years since I had seen him, and nearly as long since I had been back to the village, but I had thought about him every day of my life. Really, that is the wrong way to put it: he had never left; or, rather, I had never let go of him. He had transcended himself in my life, and had become the pattern of all my subsequent longings. Every time I looked into a lover's eyes – even, I think, my husband's eyes – I wanted to see Luke's eyes, green and urgent, holding me.

Sometimes, walking through the city, I realise I have fallen into a dream, and have an utter conviction that I will see him coming around the corner, or hear him as I used to hear him, calling my name. When I first met him, it was as though the sun had risen on my life. Every part of me, every part of my world, moved towards him. His light, his warmth, were so strong that they seemed to cast everything else into shadow; and no matter what happened afterwards, I knew I could never feel entirely at home anywhere again. I had given up so much to be close to him, and there were things, people, I could not recover. I think that, in the light of him, my mind and my body were remade, were cast sometime that year, and now they bore his imprint, the shape of his hand. And I never knew, not now or then, whether he was even aware of how indelible those marks were, or how, in the deepest marrow of my body, all I had wanted through the intervening years was to find him again.

After a few moments, the agent – a young-sounding woman with an elocution accent – picked up the phone and told me that there was an open house happening the following Tuesday. I gave her my name, James, and spelled out my surname by instinct – *L E G H* – pronounced *lee,* but she understood straight away. She said, 'As in "North Legh"?'

I smiled. 'As in "North Legh", that's right. You must be local.'

'Born and bred,' she replied, and I told her I would see her in a week's time.

I made an early start, before the rush hour, right up the spine of the country, and saw the landscape begin to mellow and roll into wooded hills and valleys where the summer sun began to break above me through the young leaves. The limestone buildings, as I drove, gradually petered out and then gave way to that deep familiar red

of the sandstone. In the south of the country, I found navigation difficult, but I had no need for a map here – the names of the towns and villages were some of the first words I ever knew, and their order seemed as natural, as ancient, to me as the order of the books in the Bible, or the words of a prayer.

I had driven for four hours, and was already slowing and indicating when I saw the sign marked *Thornmere.* As I pulled off the slip road of the dual carriageway, there was a queue of cars, and I noticed piles of earth surrounded by workmen, two red diggers, and a rectangular sign (*Diversion*) pointing me down one of the narrow lanes towards the village. There was a break where the old hedgerow had been torn out, and I could see the deep tyre tracks of trucks leading into one of the long fields. I remembered it – that field. It used to be bright with yellow rape flowers at this time of year, almost glowing under the sun.

There were makeshift traffic lights that seemed to be broken, and a man in a high-visibility jacket was standing in front of them, holding his hand in the air. The cars ahead of me were ushered through, and I waited then at the front of the queue and turned the radio down. I made eye contact with the workman in front of the lights, and he nodded at me, and I looked away, unsure if the nod was one of acknowledgement or recognition. It was only then that I realised I must be apprehensive about returning. I thought I had built a new life, all on my own, but it was undoing me, this going back, making me newly aware of the fact that I hadn't really left this place behind at all.

After a minute or so, the workman beckoned me forwards, pulling his hand through the air towards his chest, and I pushed the handbrake down and rolled slowly into the lane, past the traffic lights and the cones, as though I were leading a procession. I looked across the green hawthorn hedge, full of pink-and-white flowers, and saw that the field beyond it was dark with earth that was being churned up and levelled. There were birds wheeling in the air, swooping at the soil, which must have been fresh with worms. Another housing development, I thought – all those new people, all that change – and I could have seen it as a desecration, but instead it felt like something had been freed, something set in motion again in that old place that had seemed, once, almost timeless.

I drove down the steep lane into the village, deep between the high hedgerows, lush and green, and glimpsed in the breaks the yellow fields. From the bend, where a

stile led into the woods, I slowed and saw the seam of trees where the canal was, and then the church tower, and I followed the lane down over the bridge where the view of the schoolyard was still the same, and then, on the other side of the bridge, I felt the car shudder, familiarly, as the tarmac turned to cobblestones. Nothing here had changed, at least – still the Threshers Arms, still the school, still the church and the path to the churchyard with the wooden gate, still quiet, still hardly anyone around. It was just past half ten in the morning when I turned down Green Lane, along the canal, and I found there that the village was the same as well: the gated houses, the tall, lush trees, the red-brick barns still in much the same state of disrepair. The gate to the farm was open, though, and it felt strange to turn into the farmyard and not hear the dog barking, or the geese hissing, or to have that breath-clenching mix of apprehension and hope I had used to feel when I came here. Instead, I felt a void, not so much in the place as in myself, as though there had been this emptiness inside me all these years, and only now had I arrived at its source.

The estate agent – her name was Annie – came out of the porch of the house in a black skirt-suit when she heard the car. She had a bundle of papers in her hand, brochures with photographs and specifications, and she held them tightly to her chest as she reached out her other hand to shake mine.

'You're the first here, Mr Legh, so take your time.'

I thanked her, and though I had wanted to look into the barn, she gestured me into the house and began to explain the layout, and I listened and nodded and pretended that the layout wasn't as familiar to me as the layout of my own home – more familiar, perhaps.

'So you know the area?' she said.

I nodded. 'Actually, it's a funny thing,' I said, looking around at the old kitchen, where the view of the canal and the damson tree was still held in the windowpane above the sink. 'I had a friend who lived here once. Here, I mean, in this house.'

She laughed at me and smiled, and I thought I sensed a note of disappointment in the laugh, too. Just a time waster, she must have thought, a sentimentalist, nosying around.

'I bet it's changed a lot since you were last here,' she said, and I shook my head.

'Not at all. In fact, it looks exactly the same as I remember.'

She told me that the heating system had been upgraded, and the bathroom refurbished, and that, of course, the fields had been sold off to the developers, so it was a smaller plot now, but there was an agreement not to build within twenty metres of the boundary, and a new slip road was being installed from the motorway junction.

'Anyway,' she said, 'if you have any questions, I'll be down here.'

I walked around for a while, and began to forget why I had come at all. What was I hoping to find? Yes, the layout was the same, but as I moved through the house, that sense of time's irrecoverable passage returned – the rooms repeating an absence, a constant reminder that I could never return, that it was all over and had been for years. There was nothing here, none of the old pictures in the living room, and the beds were all made up with crisp white sheets, rather than the patterned green ones I remembered. Even the chair by the fire seemed to sit with its arms apart, as though conscious of its own emptiness. I had to duck my head as I climbed the narrow staircase, and found that the doorframes seemed smaller, and the windows and the shelves seemed lower, and the whole house looked like a model, like it had been reconstructed in a museum.

From the window on the landing, I looked out over the yard, the three outbuildings that flanked it, and could just make out the orchard to the left, where the apples were blossoming, and on the right the peeling red paint of the old barn door. I opened wardrobes and cupboards, stood silently in the rooms, as though I was looking for something, and after only ten minutes or so I walked back down the stairs into the kitchen, where Annie was sitting at the table in the slant morning light, her laptop open. She stood up when she saw me, and I offered some polite compliments on the house and the renovation, and I took the brochure she handed me, which had the date of the auction marked for the beginning of June.

'Perhaps I'll see you there, Mr Legh,' Annie said, and I said she would, though I had no intention of going.

'It was good of you to show me the place.'

Annie opened the porch door for me. After I shook her hand, I paused for a moment, and then turned to her.

'Do you think I might leave my car here, just for an hour, so I can look around the village?'

I had parked in the farmyard, next to the old barn.

'Of course,' she said, though I sensed a faint undertone of irritation. 'I'll be here until one o'clock.'

I didn't think I could bear to go back to our old house, but I thought I might at least go into the church in the village again, while I was here. It was a hot day already, and I remembered the cool shade of the building, its dark wooden pews and the soft red carpet down the aisle. My parents had been married there – I still have a photo of them, smiling under the lychgate, my mother slim in a lace dress with a light blue sash, and my father tall and already balding in his suit. Eddie and I had been christened there, too. I had held him up, with my father, in his little white gown, to pass him to the vicar at the font, and he hadn't made a sound the whole time.

I walked down Green Lane towards the village. The surface of the canal, to my right, was black, and the trees had shivered white and yellow pollen all across it. Once I reached the cobbled street, I headed to the church, which wasn't far at all, and I stood under the lychgate, staring down the path to the door. I was about to carry on towards the porch when I heard choral music coming from inside, rising and falling, and I closed my eyes for a minute, listening to the voices. They were singing 'Lord of All Hopefulness', and when the hymn ended, I left the gate guiltily and went instead into the Threshers Arms, which was empty except for a couple of elderly women drinking tea at the window table.

I took a seat at the bar and waited for someone to come, and eventually a man appeared out of the back room and greeted me, and I asked him for a brandy.

'Early, I know.'

'Some days call for it,' he said, and I wondered what he meant by that.

He pushed a small glass up against a suspended bottle attached to the wall, and the portion of spirit poured out. After he set it on the counter, he paused, looked down, and then looked back at me.

'You alright?' he said.

I smiled, flustered, and said I was. 'Long day,' I said, forgetting briefly that it was not yet noon. He held my gaze kindly, and it dawned on me then that I must have been crying.

‘My mum’s back there, too,’ he said, gesturing over his shoulder. For a moment I was confused, and then I realised he was talking about the churchyard behind the pub. I did not want to think about it.

‘Only forty-three,’ he said, and by this point it was too late to change the subject, so I offered my condolences, and he breathed out a sigh and patted my shoulder and said, ‘Life, innit. A fucker.’

I smiled then, uncomfortable at this brief intimacy, and said, ‘Aye. It is.’

He paused, then looked upwards, resignedly. After a moment, he looked at me again and said, ‘I don’t know you, do I?’

‘Me?’ I said. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Not from round here?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said. ‘Lovely place, though.’

‘Has its charms, I suppose.’

He paused again, and looked at me, quizzing my face. I started to get uncomfortable, because I thought I recognised him, too, and perhaps he had known me at school.

‘You’re not off the TV or something, are you?’

I laughed. ‘I’m a librarian,’ I said, smiling at how square it sounded.

People never expected someone still in their thirties to be a librarian. I could tell that he didn’t quite believe me, and after a moment I said, ‘Well,’ with a note of what I hoped was finality.

‘Well.’

He turned around, picked up a steamy glass from its place on the bar, and started wiping it dry with a tea towel.

I picked up the brandy and found a seat in a corner of the pub which was dark and where I felt safe, or unseen, those things being just about the same to me now. I didn’t go into the church on the way back, or into the churchyard. The brandy had soothed me, but had left me slightly dazed. I thought it would be unwise to see those things again, and so I walked back to Green Lane to get the car.

There were clouds of cow parsley along the canal bank. It was May, and the flowers from afar looked like a pure white froth that swayed in the breeze. In the shade of the trees on the side of the lane, a bright sky-blue blanket of forget-me-nots was

ruched in the dappled light, and further down the road they had started to go to seed. I walked all the way slowly to the end of the lane, right down to the farm, and then hesitated for a moment, thinking again, and turned back. There was no one around; the school term was not yet over, and though I didn't want to stay, I didn't want to leave, either.

I had never forgotten this profusion, the smell of it, the bliss of summer in the cool lanes, and it seemed miraculous that it actually existed, that it wasn't some childhood dream. A magpie, in one of the high sycamores, scratted loudly, like a broken saw, and then flew off. I bent down at the verge of the lane and grabbed a tangle of the spent forget-me-nots, twisting and uprooting them. The soil was dry, and the roots came up easily, the earth falling off them and across my shoes. My mother had taught me to do this whenever the wildflowers were spent: to take them, turn them, and shake the dried flowers to scatter the seeds. I turned the small posy of forget-me-nots and shook them over the verge, and watched the shiny, perfect seeds fall to the ground, and my breath caught in my throat as I did it.

And I stared down at the little patch of earth for a while, and then turned once more up the lane. I walked again towards the farm, with the light breaking brightly through the leaves overhead, and it was only when I reached my car and needed to take out my keys that I realised I was still holding the stems of the plants tightly in my soiled hand.

2002

Autumn

I knew Thornmere was not like other places – the cities I saw on television, their buildings and roads rising and falling, or the towns around us gone ruinous after the factories closed. It was as though time had visited it just once, in the early nineteenth century. Like some industrious bird, it had busied itself there a little while, and then had flown the nest. In its wake, on its way to more interesting places, it had left the white cottages snug in a nest of canals and towpaths. The station house of the old railway, abandoned at the far edge of the village, stood now presiding over nothing but a narrow, submerged lane fragrant with buddleia and with elderflower. The village, in fact, appeared all the more swaddled for these occasional traces of industry, and from what could be spied beyond its southern perimeter: a power plant, a detergent factory, a twenty-four-hour supermarket. Thornmere's outer reaches were crossed over by two motorway viaducts – people were always passing by, but not stopping. As far as I was concerned, it was nowhere's junction and no one's destination. Only the vague hum of distant traffic, and the graffitied undersides of the far canal bridges, gave any hint of a more virile life beyond.

Most of Thornmere's five hundred or so houses were occluded by the treeline, so as the summer months came there was a sense that the village was slowly hiding itself, retreating stealthily into a lush covert. In those months, it was like a coin dropped into a field of tall grass – found occasionally by the winking sun, or stumbled across by an unlikely passer-by. No new houses had been built there for decades, and there had been no additions to the circular arrangement of the streets. Having lived there my whole life to this point, I knew all of its small passageways by heart. I could have walked from one side of the village to the other blindfolded. I knew each tree, each garden, each car on each street, each slipaway through the alleys and the broken fences. The canals, of which we had two, were my secret thoroughfares. I have never since felt so much like I owned a place; or, rather, like I was owned by it.

Time's flight, however, went some way to explain the stagnation of the people who lived there. The millennium had come and gone, but the people looked back over the past century and saw only the apparently glorious punctuations of the two world wars.