

An excerpt from “Meeting Odette” by Jessica Duchen

The wind began to rise in the night. By four the rain had started; by six the storm had worked itself into a frenzy that shook the house. Mary, awaking to unearthly rattles and shudders, opened the curtains to gaze, disbelieving, at tobacco-coloured clouds scudding by, twigs and litter bowling down the pavements and the chestnut tree bending as if under a dead weight, its branches reaching out for help.

The radio news admitted that the weathermen had underestimated the gale, while the editor of *Nature Now*, when Mary phoned, was late for work and breathless after cycling against the wind.

Mary had one day to finish her articles. The first needed little research beyond the Internet; at least she didn't have to venture outside. At two, the raindrops hitting her window like paint flung by a furious artist, she prepared to make her calls for the corporate journal. She had to talk to the managing directors of Cygnford's top three accountancy firms about their favourite holiday destinations – just a ploy for advertising revenue for the magazine, of course, but it would pay for her groceries for a month.

“Farmers, White and George, how can I help you?” The receptionist sounded bored.

“This is Mary Fairweather, from the Jones Brothers house chronicle. Could I speak to the managing director please? He's had a message from my editor to expect a call.”

“I'll see if he's free. Please hold the line.”

“And could you tell me his name, please?”

“It's Peter Haddon.”

Mary nearly dropped the phone. She knew exactly where Peter Haddon liked to go on holiday.

Together, once, they'd enjoyed four days in Rome, tripping over history on street corners, wandering in the shade of ancient archways in the Forum, savouring the evening air by the fountain in the Piazza Navona with a bottle of Chianti and two plastic mugs; then five days in Florence soaking up pictures, statues and churches; finally Venice, with long days of walking, eating and sightseeing, and nights in which sleep wasn't a priority.

Paralysed, while the phone piped Tchaikovsky into her left ear, she wondered whether to ring off. Before she could, he was there. “*Mary – !*”

“Sorry, Peter. I didn't know it was you. I'm doing an article and, believe it or not, I need to ask accountancy MDs where they go on holiday.” She forced laughter.

“Good heavens. Mary Fairweather. Well, well, well.” Peter was chuckling.
“How on earth are you?”

“Fine. Chugging along. And you?”

“Well, thanks. A little hectic, but very well indeed. Good to hear your voice! How’s life? Got a nice bloke?” He’d have heard on the grapevine within hours if she’d found another relationship.

“You’re married, aren’t you?” she said, instead of answering.

“And guess what?”

“Expecting – ?”

“It’s a boy – he’s due in early August.”

“Great,” said Mary. “That’s wonderful. Really wonderful. Look, I’ve got to ask you about your holidays...”

When she met Peter, who was ambitious and ten years her senior, he had everything, except a wife, ideally one who would put him before all else. Mary, twenty-five, cooked him dinners, brought him coffee in bed, let him choose the weekend outings and did the shopping on her own. Then one evening her father, who had finally agreed to medical tests after losing a stone in weight, called to tell her the diagnosis.

She’d wept on Peter’s shoulder time and again after visiting first the hospital, later the hospice, watching her father grow thinner, weaker, then insensible as the morphine dose was increased. Peter came to the funeral and held her hand. A month later he told her he had fallen in love with a new colleague, so she’d have to find somewhere else to live.

“Sue’s a sun-worshipper, and I’m so busy that all I want to do when I get a break is crash out.” He sounded older: an edge of liveliness had gone from his voice. “So we found this little Greek island, perfect in April or September...”

Mary, holding her voice recorder to the loudspeaker, half-listened, numb.

“Will that do?” he finished.

“Perfect, thanks.” She had barely taken in a word.

“It’s great talking to you. Let’s not leave it so long before next time, Mary – why don’t you come round for dinner and meet Sue?”

“That’d be really lovely,” Mary lied.

“Oh – and Mary? You can say one more thing. You can say Italy is my Mecca.”

Mary's innards flipped a bruising somersault. "I will, Pete. Thanks."

"Bye, Mary. See you soon."

She'd thought she was 'over' him. Had she idealised him? Even after all the hurt? Her book of fairy tales lay face down on the sofa. She sat beside it, watching the clouds racing by and the rain hounding her window; the flat was starting to smell damp. She needed to calm down before the next call. Deep breaths, five counts in, five counts out. Calm and focus. In and out.

Beyond the road and the river, something was flying in the wind – a curious shape, pale as paper, expanding by the moment. A bird. A large bird, in trouble. Its wings, which must have been six foot from tip to tip, were offering no resistance; its black webbed feet were pressed back against its belly; its long neck was stretched, straining forward. Mary recognized the yellow and black beak of a Bewick's swan, not the musty pink of the Mute swans that lived on the local waters. Beyond the chestnut tree, it flailed, flapping – then, as she watched in disbelief, it turned its back on the wind, set its wings, pointed its beak and dived, in control and with phenomenal acceleration, straight towards her house.

Mary leapt up, shielding her face with her arms, as the swan struck. The window imploded, the wind roared in with a geyser of glass and rain, and the swan thudded onto the table, blood trailing crimson in the rainwater across its splayed wings. Its head lolled to one side. Unconscious? Dead?

Shaking, her legs like slush, Mary forced herself forward, navigating step by step across the broken glass towards the creature. With one finger she touched the down on its neck, soft as fur. Crimson-stained whiteness filled her mind. Spots swam in front of her eyes and nausea gripped her – it's shock, she told herself, casting back for the sofa and slumping, head on her knees. Think, concentrate, remember: kitchen cupboard, scissors, broken window. Patch it up, fast. Fighting to control her breathing, she lumbered to her feet to hunt for packing tape and black bin-liners, which she slashed along their folds. Rain lashed her while she forced the improvised sheets against the gaping mouth of the window frame and the invading elements it was spewing into her room. In her panic, she fancied the storm was pursuing the unfortunate swan.

"A swan can break a man's arm," her father used to say when they watched them together. Their aggression was unparalleled when they felt their young threatened, he told her. An injured bird might become frantic even if you were trying to help it. Other people said birds were flea-ridden. Mary risked the fleas and stroked the unconscious swan's head. It had to be alive; she couldn't bear it if it were dead.

If she'd found a wounded cat or dog in the street she'd have known what to do – but a swan? There was a vet's surgery on Richardson Road, just a few minutes away. She looked up the number on the Internet.

The receptionist sounded as confused as Mary felt. "A swan?" she echoed. "I'm sorry, I'm new here, I only started last week... I suppose you'd better bring it in. Surgery starts at four, but Henry might fit you in earlier. It doesn't sound exactly – well – usual."

"It's not," said Mary. "Thanks."

That's right, just bring it in. A swan with a six-foot wing span. Assuming it was alive and would let her touch it, then it might let her pick it up; it would probably be too weak to resist. Mary pulled on her raincoat and gloves and prepared to lift the splayed out bird off the table.

She hadn't expected its weight, or the flop of its wings to each side, dwarfing her. She managed to manoeuvre it out of her door and step by step down the stairs. The swan's neck and head drooped over her shoulder, the wings spread across her body; it felt animal, living and warm. A surge of relief washed over her: its heart was beating.

But it was unwieldy to carry like this; in the hall she admitted defeat and put it down. It lay, helpless, in front of her. She pushed gently at one wing, encouraging it to fold; then she repeated with the other one. Now she could tuck the bird under one arm, supporting its lolling head with her other hand.

Out in Richardson Road, bicycles and cars tossed giant puddles over the curb; Mary caught vignettes of astounded faces as people spotted her swan.

"Couldn't find a bigger pet?" a man muttered, walking past her too close. She pressed on, head bowed against the wind. She must look odd. A leggy blonde in a purple raincoat, hair and face drenched, carrying a swan. A trickle of blood was seeping from one of its cuts onto Mary's sleeve, towards her hand; she felt a horror, as if the bird would be committing itself to her, becoming part of her, if its blood touched her skin. She averted her eyes; she didn't want to feel faint again.

By the time she reached the surgery, the swan felt as heavy as a box of encyclopaedias. But thank goodness, Mary said to it, pushing the door open with one foot, thank heavens you're not dead.

The receptionist gasped. "Oh, wow! Oh my God!"

"It's a big bird." Mary made for the nearest chair.

"Oh my God, you're soaked through... Wait, I'll find something to put it down in – gosh, it is poorly, isn't it?" The girl disappeared into the office while Mary waited in the warmth, thankful, stroking the swan. She glanced at her wrist where a smudge of blood was beginning to dry.

"Here you go." The receptionist placed a broad cardboard box at Mary's feet and fussed about, arranging a blanket patterned with paw-marks for the swan to sit on. "Henry will see you in a minute."

Mary lowered the bird onto the fleecy softness. It was regaining consciousness at last, but showed no sign of panic; instead, it adjusted its wings, then kept still. She backed away, fearing it might lash out.

“A swan can break a man’s arm, you know,” the receptionist remarked.

“This one broke my front window.”

The receptionist’s mouth formed into a perfect O. The swan sat, impassive.

“Ah, the lady with the swan.” Henry emerged, striding over to shake her hand. Mary recognised him: a couple of years ago he’d had to put her cat down after its encounter with a Ford Fiesta, and the memory still smarted. He had a kind face, though, and a touch that animals seemed to trust by instinct. She’d seen an injured pit bull terrier grow meek and compliant when he handled it.

“Let’s get her in here...” Henry lifted the swan in its box and led the way into the surgery.

“It’s a girl, is it?”

He set the creature on the surgery table, where it stared back at him. “The females tend to be slightly larger than the males, in which case this one would be no exception... All right, let’s have a look.” He took a gentle hold of each of the wings in turn, extending them while closing his other hand firmly around the beak. “Good, nothing’s broken. Remarkable, really. We’ll give the wounds a good clean, make sure there’s no glass in there. Did you notice anything else when it came in?”

“Concussion?”

“That’ll sort itself out.” Henry swabbed the gashes in the swan’s neck and shoulders with cotton wool soaked in antiseptic. At the first stinging touch the bird flinched; but perhaps Henry’s vet magic was working. Apparently understanding that it was being cared for, it settled back, cross yet accepting.

“Now, Mary, what are you going to do with this young lady?”

“What do you suggest?”

“Tricky. Sometimes parks tag them for identification, but this is a wild girl. She must have been blown off course in the storm.”

“I hope my front window wasn’t in her scheduled flight path.”

“Unusual, though.” Henry sized up the bird. “She’s a Bewick’s Swan and you don’t see many around here. They’re more common in eastern Europe, Russia, Scandinavia. So, what to do next... she’s been concussed, but she’s quite conscious now and, if I may say so, remarkably compliant.”

"I do get the feeling she knows exactly what's going on," Mary remarked.

"Several possibilities. I'd offer to keep her here, but our residential quarter is full up at the moment. We could call the RSPB, which might be able to look after her til she's better. Or, if you can bear to, you could keep her at your place overnight; make sure she's safe until she's over the shock, then just pop her over the road to the river. I'll run you home with her if you like, and we'll give you some bird feed that should sort out her breakfast." He filled a syringe and injected the swan. "This is a tranquillizer, so hopefully she'll sleep it off..."

As the drug kicked in, the swan tucked its head under its wing to go to sleep. Mary followed Henry out to his car; loading the box into the back, she glimpsed the scared eyes of the receptionist peering after them.