

ONE LAST TIME

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

That writer my great-grandson Rex loves, the one with the book about green eggs and ham. Dr Seuss. He once said, *'Sometimes you'll never know the value of a moment, until it becomes a memory.'* Well, I'm 89 today and I can tell you that's true.

The train hurtles through the countryside, and I wonder what I'm doing. Why did I decide to board the commuter service in rush hour, of all things? I remind myself I had to escape before my nurse Fiona arrived and tried to stop me.

I've always known I'd go back to Carleigh Manor. I could have asked my daughter to drive me, but I must do this alone. It takes my breath away to realise she's nearing retirement herself, and I twist my wedding ring as I imagine what Ernie would have said. *'What in heaven's name are you thinking, Hettie old girl?'* He'd raise his wild, snowy eyebrows and flash a long-suffering smile, two front teeth blackened by tobacco-chewing. But he would have come along with me all the same.

My eyes accidentally meet those of the slick, suited chap opposite and we both glance away in embarrassment; he down at his laptop, and I towards the window. My cheeks redden as I imagine him wondering where an old biddy like me is going at this hour, invading the commuters' inner circle. I remember when everyone shook hands and talked in train carriages, but now they're glued to their devices. Some might be reading, but I can't see the soul in a Kindle, myself. I remember the feel of the books in the Carleigh library, the crack of the leather spines and the Christmas-morning-crinkle of the gold-edged pages, keepers of stories and dreams.

I jump as the conductor strides into the carriage. I was terrified of train conductors as a child, though I'd never travelled without a ticket. Wouldn't have dared. We were in awe of authority

back then. Oh, I'm not one of those old codgers complaining about 'kids these days', not really. I fumble in my handbag for my ticket.

'Getting off at Carleigh? Someone meeting you?'

'I'll get a taxi from the station. I'm going to Carleigh Manor,' I croak, my voice rusty with disuse.

'Oh, lovely old place.'

I moisten my lips, suddenly desperate to tell someone that it's my birthday and I shall gorge on an orchard of memories, that I, little Hettie Wells, lived on the manor grounds - my father the groundskeeper, my mother the governess. That my youth was a patchwork of secret passages, Fleur de Lys ceilings, and endless summer days. That I miss it. But the conductor has already moved on.

I drift into a reverie, absorbing the herbaceous comfort of the Carleigh lavender and the blush of Maytime cherry blossoms. I close my eyes, and the breeze kisses my cheeks as I dart through the kitchen garden, giggling as I play with the other children. Florence with her burnished bronze pigtails and bright red shoes, Lavinia with her muddy hands and smudged frocks that infuriated her mother. Though I was the daughter of their staff, I always belonged. Even in the fullness of adult life, I've never forgotten my memories of that place, anchoring me during hard times. The day I left, I promised I'd come back and visit. But then I blinked, and three quarters of a century had slipped away.

I check my watch. Fiona would have found my note by now. I feel guilty as I picture her raising her eyes skyward, the look she gives when I fall over trying to do housework. *'At your age, Hettie!'* she coos. When she leaves, she says, *'Bless up, Hettie. Inna di morrows.'* She told me it means she wishes me a good day, and she'll see me tomorrow. That woman has the patience

of a saint. I'll miss her when I go to the care home. I wonder if she'll mind much when she gets a call later to collect me after my adventure. Adventure. It's been a while since I've seen life that way.

The train stops and I heave myself up, leaning on Ernie's gnarled stick, feeling the grooves his hands made. A wave of humanity sweeps past, and I hang back until they've gone, then shuffle to the taxi rank. *'Got someone to meet you at the other end, love?'* the driver asks. Everyone under 40 thinks I'm ancient, but surely it was only yesterday that I was young. I raise my eyes to meet his in the rear-view mirror. *'I'll be alright. I used to live at Carleigh Manor.'*

He doesn't believe me, thinks I'm a mad old bat, but I don't care. He pulls into the drive, and I drink in the sight of the ivy-choked towers rising like fortress pillars. I spy the outlines of the kitchen garden to my left, the cherub-edged fountain. The groundskeeper's cottage is still tucked under the embrace of a watchful oak, just as it always was. The delicate lavender fragrance is a time machine, gently erasing my aches and pains until I almost feel I could run again.

Dr Seuss was right, you see. Sometimes you don't know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory. There's a new family here now. Dust motes dance in the sun-shafts drifting through unused rooms, stories of the past – my story, too - wrapped in dust sheets like dormant furniture. Past and present merge, and through the glitter of my joyful tears, I catch a glimpse of a young girl peeking out from behind a cascading wisteria, her laughter echoing off the stone walls as she plays hide-and-seek. I'm startled by the sudden staccato call of a blackbird bursting from a bush. When I look back, she's gone. I know this place, my place, will never truly leave me. I just wanted to see it again, one last time.

Melissa Ganendran writes eclectically, from young adult mystery/adventure to Victorian cosy crime. She ghostwrites for a true crime podcast and co-authored a book about a wartime murder, coming in 2026. She enjoys exploring different writing forms and themes and has been shortlisted for several flash fiction and short story competitions.