

THE ECHO

Only Yannis Andrax witnessed the accident. He remembered each frame vividly, unable to escape the crystal clear images ingrained in his memory, yet always in slow motion: the stomach-punching whinny as Griffie reared without warning, threw Tor Hammerdean to the verge and bolted down the drive before swerving left into the woods towards the perimeter fence that hugged the furthestmost corner of the estate. Pride before a fall, isn't that what they say? Smugly Yannis congratulated himself. Lady Christabel Hammerdean's tea party had provided the perfect alibi. He knew Tor would be exercising Griffie at noon and if he tied red balloons to the trees as welcome decorations, they would spook the filly out and shake Tor up. He wasn't going to lie. He disliked Tor intensely. For all the right reasons.

In the distance, the recognisable outline of Hammerdean Manor and grounds shimmered in the afternoon sun as sophisticated and reassuring as a hazy watercolour painted on a Somerset Sunday. Yannis peeked out from behind the trunk of an ash, convinced Tor would dust himself off, mutter a few obscenities and saunter through the woods to the stables where he would send for either Charlie or himself to find Griffie. But when no movement twitched from his body, Yannis grew alarmed and stole around the tree to further examine the young master, aghast to observe Tor's normally ruddy face resemble a nondescript marble. Moreover, his neck appeared to be hooked at an awkward angle. Then quite suddenly Yannis panicked, irregular for his insular nature, and began to run towards the house, rapidly circling two bean-pole legs through the daisy field, round and round like a whirligig, his reedy cries for help met by the afternoon's thick, dry air and the uncanny stillness of his arch enemy lying in a mush of mud and leaves in the lane.

He sounded croaky and confused, his syllables lacked definition. One side of his face had drooped. "What happened? Where's Griffie? Who was shouting? Don't just stand there. Help me up... for God's sake! Stop dilly dallying."

Before Yannis could stretch out a hand, Tor had spasmed back down clutching his sides, his chubby features whittled in agony. "No, get off! Don't touch me. Fetch help. Something's broken. Quickly!"

THE ECHO

“I already did,” panted Yannis urgently. His heart was pounding more out of fear than guilt. “Griffie’s found her way home. Charlie’s coming with the truck. Best not move. Might be worse than you think.”

It was a lot worse. Tor’s fall had cost him his mobility and almost his life.

Things had been fine, if fine is what pretty awful familiarity means, up until the accident. In recognition of his dedication to the horses, Charlie Timpkins, the estate’s no-nonsense manager had promoted Yannis to oversee the stables.

“Nothing you don’t know about these steeds now, young Yannis,” said Charlie gruffly, thumping the sixteen-year-old on the back. A stalwart man of few words, Charlie was not easily pleased. “You keep up the good work. I’m proud of you.”

The praise fell like drops of heaven into the unexplored crevasses of Yannis’s mind. A high school drop-out, he’d finally found his feet looking after the Hammerdean’s three thoroughbreds. In fact, he’d never left home.

His father, Mr Andrax, a tall, kindly Greek, worked as butler to Lord and Lady Hammerdean. His wife, a sweet buxom lass, assisted with the housekeeping, both having mastered their trades as a domestic couple for a private household in Mayfair. The Andrax’s were given the gatehouse on the grounds as their home whilst in service, and this is where Yannis was born. His innocent arrival into the world had been deathly turbulent. All gangly legs and arms he’d eventually been scissored out after a horrific labour. It was tragic, the villagers said sorrowfully shaking their heads. Such a terrible fate. She’d lost too much blood. Poor Jemima Andrax. Curiously enough, a few locals didn’t join in with the subjective pitying and merely pursed their lips and cast their noses to the wind instead.

THE ECHO

What Yannis didn't know he didn't miss. But disaster followed disaster. Devastated without his childhood sweetheart, Mr Andrax passed away of a broken heart in his sleep a year later, whereupon Lady Hammerdean took it upon herself to raise the orphan at the manor alongside her only child, Tor, then three years old, without ever making it official.

But life was far from plain sailing. Despite being doted on in luxury by a gracious, if somewhat emotionally haphazard foster mother, (lofty Lord Hammerdean rarely made an appearance) Yannis was most afraid of her son. Tor was a feisty, chubby boy with masses of auburn curls. As cherubic as he appeared, the boy-heir could barely contain his vindictive streak of jealousy upon watching his dearest mother pour attention onto baby Yannis. He had to stop it, stop his mother from sharing her love! Surely he was more important! So he began to bully the younger boy, always behind closed doors. It was the only power he had to win back his mother's approval. As long as Yannis was hushed, Tor could shine. Yannis never bit back. Even as a tot, he recognised his place and refused to show Lady Christabel the meanly pinched bruises on his thighs. Tor would swagger his namesake's association with ghastly gusto, making sure Yannis bore the brunt of anything he broke on purpose or went missing. Play breaks outdoors were the worst. "Dirty little servant boy, dirty little servant boy," Tor would tease, splattering Yannis with mud. "Now look at you. Going to run crying to *my* mummy again? You know she doesn't love you. She only took you in because there was nowhere else for you to go. It must be really weird to have to *borrow* parents. No-one loves you!"

The irony that Yannis's only refuge was in the arms of his beloved Christabel, fuelled Tor's personal grudge with yet more ire. Not a day went by without a damaging remark or poke. It wasn't just Yannis who suffered. The staff quietly tolerated the hoity-toity backlash of the lad's spite. 'This will come to no good,' they'd murmur in the kitchens, shrewdly nodding to one other as the once bright orphan slowly retreated into himself.

After seven years of fielding off Tor, two pointed events marked both new and old beginnings. Yannis was bundled off to the local day school and returned to live

THE ECHO

back at his birthplace, the gatehouse, pleasantly nestled in a dell by the edge of the woods. Here, Lady Hammerdean arranged for a governess to mind the child during the day. The household rolled their eyes. ‘That poor orphan being pushed around like a toy,’ they hushed. No-one objected but everyone muttered and moaned she was going mad, none more blunt than Charlie who’d also been ordered to move in and care for the child at night. Already pushing seventy-five, the widower was grumpily resentful of this new set-up. Animals and agriculture ruled his life not kids and crisps. His mood was certainly not challenged out of respect for the deceased Mrs Andrax either. Quite the opposite. That was a sore, sorry secret he was forced to carry around.

As for Yannis, he was silently relieved to be out of Tor’s range but infinitely grief-stricken to lose Christabel’s cuddles. Why had she sent him away? What had he done so wrong? ‘It must be because I’m unlovable,’ he concluded tearfully into his pillow. Tor was right, no-one loved him, not even Christabel. The mantra echoed hauntingly throughout his dreams and upon waking. Now left in the charge of a bitter old dame, his new governess Miss Gay, cared slight for her sulky, skinny charge, preferring to knit disgusting fingerless gloves and rock in his father’s old chair by the fire, heaving sighs of exasperation each time the occasion demanded she lift a finger to do anything other than please herself.

Thus starved, Yannis gravitated towards Charlie in search of whatever scraps of joy he could feed from. It was a bleak ride. Both characters were moody and dysfunctional in their own way. Charlie was frank and particular about most things whilst Yannis inwardly yearned to be accepted and succeed at given tasks which, in his mind, equated to some sort of reward. Aggrieved by his ‘unlovable’ echo he found himself physically aching to do anything for attention. This seemed to annoy Charlie who expected a man to be a man no matter what their age. Yet it hadn’t gone unnoticed that despite the boy’s angst he possessed an unusual empathy softly brushing the sullen surface, that blossomed whenever he spoke to the horses or scattered food for the pigs and chickens.

Little by little the unlikely duo began to look forward to the evenings. Governess Gay was long gone by this stage, minding to leave a pot of broth on the stove

THE ECHO

and milk and cheese in the fridge for the morning. If Charlie's gout wasn't playing up, they'd occasionally indulge in a laborious game of backgammon. And Yannis was a keen learner and eager listener, bony shoulders stretched forward over his soup, a lump of bread in one hand ready to be dipped, his inquisitive, pointed face utterly absorbed by Charlie's monotone one-liners in response to questions about the farm. Yannis wanted to know exactly how to train the horses, how many eggs the chickens had laid, what fences had blown down in the wind. In return, he found a way of correcting Charlie's spelling, teaching him basic arithmetic, and sharing whatever curious fact he may have learnt at school that day, noticeably intense to discuss the adventures of King Arthur.

For the next few years, the balance held firm, given weight by the absence of Tor. Sent to a boarding school on the north coast, a lightness grew about the place, enhanced by Lady Hammerdean's flowered elegance and soft tread. Even the horses gathered and snorted gently as she approached the stables upon visiting Yannis after school. Those were the moments Yannis was certain his heart would positively spring open with joy, tarred by her sudden departure or forgetfulness to hug him on her way out.

Half-terms and holidays came and went and with them came Tor, the tormentor. His private education and status had worsened his jibes.

"So you reckon you can educate old Timpkins to read and write then servant boy? Who do you think you are? Einstein?" Tor would sneer and flick at the fleshy part of Yannis's nose or rip out pages from his books and trash them in a bucket of manure. "Don't get ideas above your station, scallywag, which by the way, isn't even *on* this planet. I'll soon be Lord of the estate when Papa dies. And trust me, you'll be the first idiot without a job."

Yannis learnt to walk away, his immediate comfort the velvet muzzles and solid warmth of Griffie, Bababoo and Hache. Sobbing into their manes, he'd pray his life would change for the better, his mantra echo never far away.

THE ECHO

His prayer was answered but in quite a vile way. It was the same day as Yannis's promotion. For the first time in his life he felt worthy, almost happy and allowed himself a light whistle as he manfully stacked bundles of fresh hay from the tractor into the loft, just the way Charlie liked them. For eighteen-year old Tor, it was the first day of freedom before university began. School was finally out. For both boys.

Alerted by a commotion in the yard, Charlie was first on the scene dragging his ankle crudely across the uneven stone slabs, appalled to see a group of well-dressed boys leap on top of Yannis and pin him to the ground. One of them began to kick him in the side jeered on by three others. Set apart from the huddle directing the blows, gloated Tor, casually pulling on a joint.

"What in the Lord's name do you think you're doing?" cried Charlie, trying to pull them off. "Stop that! Stop that all of you this instant! Leave the poor boy alone. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Disgusting behaviour!"

Tor shot one look at Charlie, and spat to one side. Taking a final drag he crushed the tab underfoot, smoothed back a newly grown forelock and began to repeatedly prod a finger into the old man's chest forcing him to stumble backwards.

"No-one tells me what to do round here any more, Timpkins, above all a low-class labourer like you. You'll be next if you're not careful."

Charlie growled. "You'll not be getting away with this, Master Tor! Wait until your father hears about this!"

Tor twisted his puffy face into an ugly grimace. "You wouldn't dare tell Papa. He'd never believe you! Who cares about the dirty Greek slave anyway?"

That was the trigger. The pair froze in position, ready to spar, both violently charged by their own point of view. About to lunge, Charlie stopped himself just in time. His angered strength would have killed flabby Tor in one fell swoop. As serendipity would have it, Lady Hammerdean was making her way down to the

THE ECHO

stables from the main house carrying an armful of Tor's hand-me-downs. Upon hearing the fracas in the distance she cocked her head to one side as a bird would do, blinked curiously several times then waited. The shouting didn't abate. She hurried forward, urgently now, the hems of her skirts swishing in time with her steps, the bundle of clothes tumbling to the ground as she stopped short upon viewing the scene: Charlie Timpkins knelt over Yannis's outstretched body, a row of rowdy boys including her son hanging off the five-bar gate, screeching at the chickens and pinging stones at the pigs.

Tor spotted her and rushed over. "Mama! What on earth are you doing here? Oh, Mama, come and meet my friends I've invited down from school for the weekend. You don't mind, do you?"

For once, Lady Hammerdean ignored her son, and swiftly rushed to Yannis's side, tenderly cupping his face in both hands and urging him to speak. His face was streaked with blood and filth, his everyday linen waistcoat and shirt ripped and sullied.

Charlie nodded soberly to the gate. "Sorry to say, he's up to no good Lady Hammerdean, him and his mates, and this young'un here will need a doctor sharpish."

Tor was quick. "But he started it Mama, I promise! We were just playing and he attacked me! With the pitchfork. See look! It's over there! I'm not lying. I thought he was going to kill me so my friends protected me and put him down to keep me safe. It was really scary."

Charlie flung him a thunderous stare and spoke sotto voce to his mistress. "I'm afraid Master Tor has been smoking, Ma'am. Best let me get the lad inside. I'll leave you to deal with the master."

Lady Hammerdean nodded and wordlessly held out a gracious hand to lead her son away. Showed up in front of his toff buddies, Tor's frantic explanations fell on

THE ECHO

deaf ears, his plummy cheeks pounding as hot as pulsating pillows of boiled beetroot as she grasped him firmly around the wrist. His friends elbowed each other, sniggering and scoffing like six-year-olds and bumbled together in an awkward bunch behind their leader. Charlie lifted a weakened, groaning Yannis over his shoulders and painfully shuffled down to the gatehouse, recognising this horrible affair heralded just the beginning.

Lord Hammerdean did not take kindly to the news. His son was given twelve bare-bottom lashes by the carriage lackey and locked in his room for four days without food. On the evening of the fifth day, it was not a changed Tor who entered the drawing room. Pretending to show humility in front of his parents, his body was riddled with sheer venom, secretly directed at Yannis.

“Papa, Mama, thank you for my punishment. I’ve decided I want to learn how to ride. Yannis can teach me. I hope you’ll be pleased with my decision. Then we can ride out together and hunt at weekends.”

His parents looked up from their sherry. His mother shot a look to her husband then spoke, daintily at first before gathering speed.

“Why... I’m not sure. Perhaps. Yes, that’s a marvellous idea, darling. Yannis is an expert rider. You could take Griffie. She’s probably... ”

“But there is the question of your apology, young man.” Lord Hammerdean cut his wife short like a chopped banana. “And it will be done in public. In front of the staff. Your actions are unforgivable. How can I expect the future heir of Hammerdean to carry on my good work if these foolish, cheap actions constitute your *modus operandi*?”

That said, his father wasted no time in ringing the bell and commanding Maisie, the head housekeeper, to line up the staff on the steps outside. Tor was seething. That his father was taking the side of a simple servant filled his mind with

THE ECHO

aggressive and violent thoughts. He could generally blag his way through anything but this was not fair. There was no escape. Yannis appeared and awkwardly stood between the Lord and Lady whilst Tor fumbled to find the right words. To make it worse, Yannis was wearing Tor's favourite jacket, castaway by his mother in haste.

The following afternoon, Tor limped down to the stables. His wounds were still sore but nothing would stop him now. He knew exactly what he was going to do. It was a simple plan, fail-proof, hatched in his bedroom. No-one would ever find out. The thought thrilled him. This was revenge.

"Yannis? Taking a break," said Charlie. "Lord H has requested I instruct. Griffie's saddled up. Just be steady on her. Got a tendency to rear."

Tor's mouth settled into a hard line. This wasn't part of the plan. He couldn't back out because Charlie was a sneak. Besides there was nowhere to run. His determination and blame were reaching explosion point. Every day for a week, Tor turned up for his lessons, dying to take aim at his rival, dying to be as good a rider, fury churning when Yannis never showed, his painful posterior weals a reminder of his evil intent.

But Yannis hadn't gone away. Under Charlie's protection, he was hiding, watching Tor through a gap in the hayloft door, gladdened that Griffie was trying to throw the fat, bouncing pansy. At least riding was one thing Yannis could do well. But nothing would equate to forgiving Tor's attacks. It was on the seventh day when Charlie allowed Tor to trot around the grounds alone and the day of Lady Christabel's tea party, when the 'accident' happened.

They said he would never walk or talk properly again. A nurse was made to sit by his bed all day and another all night ready to help him with the bedpan and a saliva scoop. They'd shaved off his curls, saved his forelock in a glass, dressed him

THE ECHO

in a long, white gown and fed him liquids and mashed carrots through a clear, thin tube.

Lady Hammerdean was naturally distressed yet somehow distant and read to her son every day, patting his hand each time he gurgled in either appreciation or pain. She confessed to never being sure. She bought him a puppy who instead of staying on Tor's bed, followed her from room to room. Her husband rarely spent time in the sick room, preferring to engage in conversations about the estate with Yannis. Now that Charlie's gout was getting the better of him it was a weight off his mind that Lord Hammerdean and his sixteen-year-old protégé were finally communicating... and well at that. Surely the truth would come out now. Surely Lord Hammerdean would get round to putting a worldly arm around Yannis's shoulders and explain that *he* was his natural father and in light of Tor's plight, crown him future heir to Hammerdean. Charlie snickered to himself. The boy would be rewarded at last! But if he did, would Yannis ever forgive himself for putting his half-brother in a wheelchair and would he ever forgive Lord Hammerdean for betraying his father and in a round-about way claim responsibility for killing his mother and ultimately Mr Andrax? Charlie didn't know, the stress of hiding the honest facts for too long, riling his gout.

Yannis was once again split, this time with subdued guilt for the consequences of his deed mixed with questionable elation at connecting with Lord H. He hadn't been made to visit Tor and strangely felt no satisfaction at the bully's misfortune. In place hovered the same hollow echo, scratching at the surface. 'I must be unlovable, unlovable, unlovable.'

In time, life at the Manor shifted. Christabel succumbed to dementia and drifted over, cared for by her husband who carried on as Lord of the Manor after her death right up to the grand age of ninety-nine. Their gravestones can still be found on the brow of the daisy field under Christabel's favourite oak overlooking the Quantock Hills. Not long after the accident, Charlie's health rapidly deteriorated and he gratefully bowed out. As for Tor, he struggles on but for how much longer the nurses cannot say.

THE ECHO

And to this day, as reluctant owner of Hammerdean with a pretty gentle wife, and seven children, Yannis Andrax still doesn't know the truth and still hears his echo, as he gazes longingly down at his horses peacefully grazing in the pasture below.

Campbell Cooper

25-05-21