

Mistletoe



A novel by
R.C. Kerr

Copyright © 2020

Mistletoe

A novel by R.C. Kerr

Cover and book design: Sharpfire Design

Copyright © 2020 by R.C. Kerr

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any other storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the author or his publicist, except where permitted by law.

For book review opportunities, press information, speaking and signing engagements, and book reproduction information, please contact R.C. Kerr's PR representatives at:

The Mayfield Group
amayfield@mayfieldpr.com

Printed in The United States of America

First Edition

ISBN:
9798600932890

Magic is everywhere,
but you have to be present to see it.

~ Anonymous

Patricia Ruby Kerr
1940-2000

1. COMING HOME

HOW IN THE HELL did we end up here?

I remember mom saying once that you never know what you've got until it's gone—one of those nuggets of parental advice that passes like a summer breeze through one ear and out the other just as quickly. Well, right about now I'm starting to think she was right. Funny, the things you start to miss once they're gone. I miss the acrid fumes of Manhattan. I miss the sensory overload of Times Square. I miss the creepy character actors who swindle tourists out of five bucks to take a selfie with them. I miss the crabby cabbies yelling at each other in a melting pot of accents. I even miss the

toothless beard monster on the corner of 14th and 5th with the B.O. that takes two blocks to shake. I miss mom and dad.

We're a million miles from Saks, a million miles from Starbucks, and Sweet greens, and Grand Central Station. A million miles from the life that I blissfully took for granted.

"Not too much longer, kids," a voice boomed from the front seat of the rented Camry we were traveling in.

Glancing up from the soiled mat, I locked eyes with Mr. Schultz in the rearview mirror. I had grown to detest him: his fat jowls, the puffy oysters under his eyes, his grating Brooklyn accent. And now, here we were, stuck in a sweaty car together for three hours in the middle of Nowheresville, Georgia, on the way to meet my uncle. I hated him too, even though we'd never met.

Who rents a black car in the middle of the summer?

"Doing okay back there, Logan?" Mr. Schultz chirped.

My brother hadn't spoken since the accident and Schultz knew it. I'd wipe that self-satisfied smirk off his face if I were a shadow of the girl I was a year ago. I resolved instead to place a comforting hand on Logan's thigh—silent permission that it's okay not to answer the insincere jerk.

Logan is six years younger, and significantly less emotionally equipped than I am. The accident hit him like a jackknifed truck. But, somehow siblings can communicate volumes, even in the complete absence of words. Poor soul—my heart bled for him. His gaze held firmly out the fogged-up

car window, shuffling a melancholy deck of playing cards. They were part of a cheap magic kit he got from Santa last year.

I wonder if he still believes in all that crap: Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, happily-ever-afters?

Damn it. Now I'm going to have to be the one that breaks it to him that Santa isn't real, and the Easter bunny. True love, while we're at it.

I softly retracted my digits and passed the time searching for a silver lining in the ancient oaks that lined the dusty red clay road we were rumbling along. I remember from a photography class that they call this time of day magic hour. I'm not quite sure why, but I found comfort in the shafts of light that were filtering their way through the twisting canopy overhead—Spanish moss dripping from the gnarled limbs like molasses.

OMG! Why is it so freaking hot?

The car slowed as we approached two very proper women on horseback. The first was sitting high on a pretty brown and white dappled horse. It had the appearance of a Navaho war pony I had read about in a book about the Plains Indians in history class. A Pinto, I think they call the breed. The second girl rode an elegant chestnut brown mare. Its flank shimmered in the sunlight, giving it an almost jewel-like luster. If I knew anything about horses or horse-breeding, I would have sworn that it was a thoroughbred.

Horse husbandry? I think that's the correct term for horse-breeding.

I wonder if my uncle owns horses? I've always liked the idea of them, although I never had much reason to take up equestrian pursuits in the city.

I'm sure the reality of a horse is different from the fantasy. They probably stink to high heaven in this heat. I can all but guarantee they have flies buzzing around their faces too. Don't get me started on what comes out the other end.

One of the girls, not much older than myself, gave Mr. Schultz a friendly nod as we crept past, tapping the neck of her handsome chestnut steed. The friendly gesture was quickly cut short when her high-strung mare spooked, rearing up on its hind legs.

I watched her wrestle to regain control of her mount, pulling tight on the reins, before slowly fading into the distance through the rear window of the rental.

I wonder if horse B.O. stays with you as it does from the hobos outside 33rd Street station?

The rest of our journey was mind-numbingly boring, for the most part. Nothing but trees and red dirt as far as the eye could see. At one point we passed a rotting possum laying spastic on the scorched asphalt. I'd never seen roadkill in real life, never mind a possum. Even if there wasn't any life left in this particular one. Its fur was matted with blood, its guts busting out of its bloated stomach and its toothy jaws locked in an eternal scream. We definitely weren't in Manhattan anymore.

Mr. Schultz filled the silence by dictating memos on his phone and flirting with his stupid secretary. Of course, I had no idea if his secretary was simple-minded or not, I just had a feeling that she would be. If I had to

guess, she wore embroidered sweater vests and owned a Rottweiler or a pit bull. Still, my ears pricked up when I heard my uncle's name coming out of Schultz's gob in that annoying Brooklyn accent.

"Mr. Crowley? David Schultz from Lawrence, Messer, and Schultz. I'm calling to confirm the arrangements for the children. Yes, we landed at four o'clock and my secretary arranged for a car to be waiting for us. So, barring any traffic, we should arrive around seven-thirty tonight."

A pregnant pause, then he had my full attention.

"Yes... I'm sure they're excited to meet you too. And again, I am very sorry for your loss, Mr. Crowley. Thank you. Goodbye."

He hung up and tossed the phone on top of the neatly folded jacket that was riding shotgun in the passenger seat. He tugged on his clammy shirt collar and briefly checked on us in the rearview mirror.

I quickly pretended to type feverishly on my cell-phone to avoid any attempt at conversation. Logan didn't need any pantomime; he was lost in the reflections of trees passing by his window like silent sentinels.

"WE'RE HERE," MR. SCHULTZ announced, with a thinly-veiled air of relief.

I glanced up from my phone as we approached a seemingly endless wall that was crumbling and suffocated by prickly vines and ivy. At first, I had simply been trying to avoid conversation with the lard-ass lawyer, but now I was attempting to return the countless well-wishing texts from my girls. I

had plans to catch up on my Insta' too, but we seemed to be going through a patch of bad reception. Funny how things that consumed your world a few short weeks ago could seem almost pointless now.

I lost all my bars the instant we slowed to turn into the estate, so I turned my attention to the imposing gateway. The gatehouse was built in the style of a Gothic castle, pointy turrets and all. I imagined it was a grand entrance back in the day, with a uniformed footman keeping watch and welcoming socialites and foreign dignitaries to extravagant balls. But now, the gate was curiously missing from its rusted hinges and briars choked their thorny way around the wrought-iron gateposts.

I knew he had sold some books, but nobody mentioned our uncle was this rich. The man barely has a Wikipedia page.

I could only just make out the words on the brass sign that announced the name of this stately mansion. "Mistletoe," I muttered under my breath.

Once we passed the old gatehouse, we found ourselves on a winding gravel driveway, flanked with dark twisted oak trees that reminded me of the haunted forest where the flying monkeys attacked Dorothy on the way to the Emerald City. That scene scared the crap out of me when I was a kid. It wouldn't have shocked me to see a flying monkey or two crouched in some dark crevice between one of the limbs.

As hard as I tried, I could not get a single bar on my phone. A sinking feeling punched me right in the gut—what if this place has no cell reception? Or WiFi? My concerns were quickly forgotten when our new

home came into view on the horizon.

Holy crap.

Logan pressed his clammy palms against the window, gawking at the imposing Gothic mansion ahead of us. His breath fogged up the glass as the car crept past a lonely gray mare, nibbling sweet grass in a vast open field.

"I guess that answers that question," I mumbled to myself.

"Hmm?" Mr. Schultz blustered.

"Nothing," I seethed. I wonder if he had any clue how much I actually despised him?

I soaked up the surroundings: overgrown ornamental gardens, neglected topiaries, and what looked like might be a thorny hedge maze in the distance. Then, out of nowhere, a bejeweled peacock flashed across the driveway with an eardrum-piercing screech.

Logan kept one eye on the feathered jaywalker as our car inched past.

THE RENTAL CAR CRUNCHED to a halt on deep gravel in front of a colossal set of timeworn steps.

I exited the car first, with Logan following gingerly on my heels. It felt good to finally stretch my legs, but the heat was all but unbearable and I could sense a pool of sweat dripping down the back of my neck, soaking into the collar of my blouse. I quickly loosened a couple of buttons, hoping it might offer some relief from the wall of humidity. No such luck.

I made one last ditched effort to get cell-phone reception, raising my

hand to the heavens for any glimmer of a signal.

“You’re wasting your time,” a voice said, cutting through the sticky air like a whip.

I turned around smartly to address an elderly black matriarch, resting her bones on a stone balustrade at the base of the steps.

“There’s no towers ‘round these parts,” she added, fanning herself with a large manila envelope. “Your uncle owns the land as far as you can see and he doesn’t much care for distractions.”

She had my undivided attention, but all I could muster for a response was an audible dejected sigh.

Mr. Schultz exited the driver’s side, his buy-one-get-one button-down drenched in yellow sweat. He wiped his wrinkled brow with a monogrammed handkerchief before hailing a friendly salute. “Hello there.”

The woman eyed him silently from head to toe, like a big cat waiting to pounce on a newborn gazelle who has just taken its first triumphant steps.

“I’m David Schultz from Lawrence, Messer, and...”

“I know who you are,” she hissed, her response laden with sass.

The slimy lawyer gathered up what was left of his dignity and continued. “Right. Well, this is Logan... and Ravyn.” He rubbernecked the highest windows in the enormous mansion. “Is C.R. Crowley home?”

The crone pushed her aching body to its feet. “Mister Cameron sends his regards. Unfortunately, he’s on a deadline and isn’t to be disturbed. I’m Missy, Mister Cameron’s house manager.”

Schultz snorted to himself. “A pleasure, I’m sure,” he said dryly, opening the trunk with a tinny clunk and reaching deep inside. “There’s not a lot of luggage. Although this one is... a bit of...” He paused to catch his breath before wrestling a cumbersome trunk onto the gravel driveway. “...a handful.” He turned his attention to me. “Your uncle is quite the author, you know?”

I was genuinely interested in this intelligence, but I wasn’t about to let the jackass know it. I pretended to be preoccupied, gazing up at my new home. The towering mansion had seen better days. The shutters were battered and broken from years of inclement weather and neglect. Paint that was once bright and cheery was now faded and cracked. Ivy crept in every nook and cranny, sprawling up the deteriorating stone walls. Unfortunately, Schultz was too dumb to take a hint.

“Even had...” grunting an overstuffed suitcase from the trunk, “...a New York Times bestseller.” He removed the last of our luggage: Logan’s suitcase and our school backpacks. “I was quite looking forward to meeting him. I don’t suppose...” he hinted in Missy’s general direction.

Missy stretched the envelope towards him. “Mr. Cameron asked me to deliver these to you.”

Schultz reluctantly snatched the envelope from her frail fingers.

“I haven’t read any of his books. Horror isn’t really my thing,” he quipped nonchalantly. With that, the plump lawyer wiped his sweaty forehead and slammed the trunk closed.

I'm sure he hoped that I hadn't seen the paperback he brought along to get signed, sitting in the trunk, next to our luggage.

He approached Logan, who was still lost in the overwhelming scale of our new home and placed a clammy mitt on his shoulder. "Well. Here we are."

Now that the heavy lifting was done, he finally allowed himself a moment to marvel at the monumental residence. Then, he suddenly remembered something of critical importance, reached in his pocket and handed me a moist business card. "Just in case."

SMH.

Mr. Schultz could barely fake enough enthusiasm to spit out more than a parting word. "It's going to be great. You'll see."

He couldn't slither into the rental car fast enough. One last disingenuous smile before he was off, leaving us in a cloud of red Georgia dust.

I hated him with every fiber of my being, but at this very moment, I would have given anything to be roasting in my own juices in the back seat of that Camry.

You never know what you've got until it's gone.

Logan glanced at the suitcases, then up at Missy.

"Well, they aren't going to pick themselves up," she offered.

Lightning rumbled in the distance as if to punctuate her facetious wisdom.

"Storm's coming. I'll have the handyman see to your trunk," Missy noted

as she labored the first worn step up to the house.

I quickly shouldered my backpack and helped Logan on with his. We grabbed our heavy suitcases and started to toil up the endless steps. Somehow I knew that Missy was not someone to be taken lightly.

FLANKING THE ENTRANCE TO the mansion were two colossal planters with the arid withered corpses of what I guessed were Hibiscus at some point in time.

Mom loved flowers and our house was always filled with sweet and mysterious fragrances year-round. I used to love tagging along to Cristoff's—her go-to florist in the city, and I got pretty good at identifying which blooms were which.

These poor plants were a million miles from Cristoff's much needed TLC.

Logan, in a rare moment of bravery, ventured through the squeaky door first. It was massive like you might find on an ancient cathedral or castle—studded with heavy nail heads. I was curious about our new home, but for some reason, I was a little obsessed with a shield carved into a large flat stone above the door. It was a boar's head, surrounded by three funny-looking crosses. I wonder if that might be our family crest? I should research that the next time I get online.

INSIDE THE MANSION, I was abruptly confronted by a monstrous boar's head mounted on a wood-paneled wall in front of me. Its snout was long and black—much longer than I imagined a wild pig's would be. Its tufted ears and shallow eye sockets were also black, but the rest of the head was covered entirely in stiff brown bristles, giving it more than a passing resemblance to a big raccoon. Except, Rocky the raccoon never had tusks like this—four jagged ones, jutting from the boar's dead lips. I wouldn't want to meet this pig in a dark alleyway.

I took a moment to gather my bearings and soak in the surroundings. The neglected halls seemed like a shrine to some bygone aristocracy who once lived there. Life, however, had left this place a long time ago. Faded oil paintings of hunting dogs and prize horses adorned the labyrinth of mahogany-paneled hallways. Oriental vases covered in cobwebs sat on dusty antique furniture.

I wonder if any of this stuff is worth anything?

Then, there it was—the grand staircase. It was a sight to behold, for sure: intricately carved with oak leaves, foxes, and cardinals, stretching into the heavens. Its panels seemed to be covered from top to bottom with a battery of unusual medieval weapons: round studded shields, daggers, basket-hilted swords, dueling pistols, and crossbows.

Missy has already begun the long slog upwards.

Logan reached in his pocket and sucked a vaporous puff from his inhaler. The poor thing was diagnosed with Asthma last year. Mom was

adamant not to make a big deal out of it—so we wouldn't give him a complex, or something like that. I think it secretly killed dad inside, as big of a Jock as he was. He went from being a walk-on to starting quarterback his junior year at Brown. Unfortunately, the team was a dumpster fire, going 0-7 and getting blown out by Yale. But, we're talking about the Ivy League—not exactly fertile recruiting territory for the NFL. Still, it was an athletic achievement that Logan would never be able to accomplish now.

I'm sure the fact that the air was thick with dust wasn't helping Logan much either. Or, the pollen that had started to make my nose run like a faucet. It's no coincidence that when you search "Deep South," the first result that pops up is allergies, followed closely by videos of redneck's doing dumb stunts.

Without so much of a whisper, I relieved Logan of his cumbersome suitcase and picked up mine while I was at it. It actually helped balance me out, even though my forearms were on fire. I scanned up the stairs and they seemed to go on and on forever. I took a deep breath and then my first step.

MISSY FLIPPED AN ANCIENT wall switch, flooding the room with harsh yellow light. It was the grandest bedroom I had ever seen, with walls that were covered in fine silk wallpaper in golden-hues. It looked incredibly expensive, and for some reason, I assumed it was from Paris. The ceiling was painted a delicate shade of yellow, embellished with white plaster relief molding in intricate patterns of vines and leaves. Sprinkled here and there

on the walls were faded watercolors of songbirds—probably native to the area, I guessed. Finches, and blue jays. Hummingbirds, too.

I read somewhere that, scientifically speaking, hummingbirds shouldn't be able to fly. Something to do with their weight and wingspan. And yet, they're the only bird that can fly forward, backward, up, down, sideways and upside down. They just flap their wings harder than all the other birds.

If I were a hummingbird I'd fly myself back to Murray Hill.

The furniture in the bedroom looked pretty pricey too. The bed was a massive four-poster king that was so high off the ground, it came with a stepping stool to climb up to it. At the foot of the bed was a hope chest, inlaid with exotic veneers that created a stunning bouquet in a vase. Sitting silently in the corner of the room was a plump silk armchair with a matching ottoman, next to a tall chest of drawers with dainty gold drawer pulls.

Seriously, why did nobody tell me that we had money?

I dropped the suitcases and my backpack with an audible grunt, before sauntering over to the only window in the room to check out the view. I'd never seen a window so antiquated before. Maybe in a fairytale book once, but never in real life. It was divided into tiny diamonds of glass, connected by lead caulking. I pressed a curious fingernail into the caulk. It was unexpectedly soft, like silver Play-doh. I got the sinking feeling that it was probably toxic as hell, so I quickly wiped my fingers on the leg of my vintage Levi's.

“Your uncle doesn’t get much company anymore,” Missy apologized as she plumped the pillows on the bed. “It’ll be fine once it airs out a bit.”

I glanced back out of the lead-caulked panes just in time to spy a chiseled yokel heaving my trunk towards the house. “Not bad,” I purred.

Leaves flit on a whipping wind as the mysterious hunk stopped to catch his breath and gaped up at the darkening sky above. I guessed he was a little older than me... twenty, maybe twenty-one. He was very tan, probably from a lot of time spent bailing hay, or whatever guys do in the middle of Trailer town, No-future county, Georgia. He flipped up his collar and continued lugging our trunk up the massive flight of stone steps.

I returned my attention to Missy who was expertly folding down the quilted comforter on the four-poster bed. She caught my eye and I immediately felt the need to answer, although I wasn’t sure what the question had been. “It’s fine. Thank you,” I blurted out.

Missy ambled silently towards Logan, who was looming in the doorway. “You’re down the hall, hon.’ Y’all can fight over who gets the bathroom first.”

Logan wrestled with his overstuffed suitcase.

“If you need anything, my quarters are downstairs, next to the kitchen,” Missy muttered. “Mister Cameron likes his dinner served promptly at eight. He usually makes it down by nine,” she continued as she herded Logan from the room.

I quickly glanced back out the window, but my bronze bumpkin was

nowhere to be found. Lonely raindrops began to spatter on the antique window panes.

I yanked the heavy crushed-silk drapes shut and strolled to my luggage. I didn't remember my suitcase being that heavy when I packed it. I counted to three in my head before gathering all the strength my feeble body could muster and manhandled the case up onto the four-poster bed. I've always loved the click-clack sound that suitcase latches make when they open. Dad would let me open them when he returned from one of his all too frequent business trips. It was not such a welcome sound now.

I blanked for a moment as I stared into what was now my entire life's possessions: a toothbrush, deodorant, and a few pairs of designer jeans. Shaking the cobwebs from my brain, I started unpacking items one-by-one but was suddenly stopped dead in my tracks. Under my favorite Led Zeppelin T-shirt was a dagger to the heart: a framed portrait of our family in happier times. I had forgotten that I had put it there, nestled between the soft folds of cotton for safe-keeping. But, there it was, staring back at me like some cruel joke. I gently picked it up and studied every detail. I had also forgotten how flawless mom's skin was, how ruggedly handsome dad was, and how blissfully innocent Logan once was.

Mom was raised just outside of Xi'an, China; the first of her family to go to college, never mind an Ivy League school in the U.S. of A. We always talked about going there someday to meet our relatives and see the village where she grew up. But, life always seemed to get in the way—a big court

case to prep for here, a health scare there. And there's always next year, right? Except, next year never came.

I found a suitable place on the nightstand next to the bed, gently opened the portrait's velvet easel and placed the family portrait next to an old china washbowl and pitcher, decorated with a faded oriental willow pattern. The irony wasn't lost on me.

As I turned my attention back to the task at hand, the hits kept on coming. I reached into a fold between T-shirts and pulled out dad's rose gold Rolex; one last memento of the life that had been so quickly and cruelly ripped from me. I'm not sure why, but I felt compelled to slip it onto my wrist. It was chunky and hung heavy on my arm, but it was somehow comfortable at the same time.

I sunk onto the bed and surveyed my new bedroom. Despite all attempts to push my emotions deep down into my gut, a hot tear rolled down my cheek.