

CHAPTER 1

JEM HAS STARTED FORGETTING our mother so I am going to write down everything I can remember about her and about our home, then I will read it to Jem to remind him.

I will start with the evening my mother buried our precious things. She wrapped them in pieces of yellow cloth cut from an old souwester and put them in a metal box. Carrying it, me and Jem following her, she went into the garden. I felt awed, my skin tingling with the thrill of what I recognised as a holy moment.

It was dark. There was no moon. My mother talked in whispers, as though there might be Germans listening.

‘We are like smugglers,’ I said softly and shivered with excitement.

‘I want to be a pirate, not a smuggler,’ shouted Jem, brave because of the tight grip he had on his mother’s hand.

‘Hush,’ said my mother.

That was a year ago when I was seven and I have grown up a lot since that evening. I realise now that my mother must have put on the whole show partly for our fun. She was always thinking up adventures for us. I don’t think she really believed Britain was just about to be invaded. Perhaps she partly did, but also she pretended because it gave our night-time adventure more reality.

The three of us dug the hole for the box.

‘It has to be deep,’ my mother said. ‘And we have to remember the spot so we can find all our precious things

after the war is over. Six paces from the pear tree and seven from the house.' I think that is what she said. I must remember, because at my first chance I must go back and dig up that box again.

Next day my father came home on leave. Jem, my mother and I rushed out to meet him as he came up the path. He wore his officer's uniform, with shining brass buttons and carried a polished swagger stick that he tossed from hand to hand, his blue eyes crinkled with smiling and happiness.

Jem and I clung to his legs all the way up to the front door and even through the hall while my mother, a drying-up cloth in her hand, watched half laughing and half crying. Later she had told me her eyes had not been full of tears because she was sad but because she was so happy to have our father back.

'How long are you home for, Charlie?' she asked.

'Weekend leave,' said my father, hanging his hat up on the coat hook and starting to look more like his usual self. 'Then I'm being sent abroad.'

'Where?' asked my mother, clinging to his arm.

'Military secret,' he said. He grabbed up Jem and me in a single hug and kissing us both at once, added, 'They haven't told even me.'

'How shall I write to you?' begged my mother and now her eyes started to become full of the other sort of tears.

'Come on, silly girl,' scoffed my father putting us down and grabbing her instead. 'Here am I, back for five minutes and you're already crying about me going.' He kissed her on the end of her nose and said, 'We've got the

whole weekend ahead of us and the first thing I'm going to do is to mow the lawn. It looks dreadful.'

'Sorry, Charlie,' whispered my mother.

'So you should be,' laughed my father.

It was not till later, after the lawn was mowed, when we were just about to sit down to tea, when he saw that the silver candlesticks were missing.

'Have we been robbed?' he asked in a horrified voice, and became even more horrified when my mother told him she had buried all our valuable things in the garden.

'Whatever could you have been thinking of, you silly girl?' he raged at my mother. 'All our silver out there in the wet? And the share certificates. And the children's birth certificates? The deeds to the house?'

My mother said in a tiny voice, 'I packed them carefully, Charlie. I was trying to keep everything safe till you got back. In case we got invaded.'

'Silly Dorry,' said my father, putting his arms round her. 'What made you think that might happen?'

'They were talking about it in the village,' said my mother contritely. 'That it looked as though Hitler might be invading Britain at any moment and because we're so near the sea, I just thought...'

'Silly, silly girl,' said my father. 'We'll dig it up at once.'

'Have your tea first, darling,' my mother said. 'I've cooked you your favourite lardy cake.'

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Every time I get a chance and remember something I am going to write it down like this. (Julia Pritchett's diary, 1947)

Julia Pritchett closes the grubby exercise book and puts it back into the briefcase among all the others. She had never thought, when she had written her diaries, that one day she would be searching among them for clues to where her mother had buried that box.

The trouble is that she cannot remember the name of the village in which her family lived, she does not even know which town is near. She knows it is not far from the sea, the house was near a corner shop, that a shallow river runs at the bottom of the garden, that in the garden there is, there was then at least, a pear tree. That the house is gone. She knows her family's name is Pritchett, yet has so far managed to find no record of it.

She sits on the edge of her bed in the seedy London hotel room and feels washed with sadness because that day of long ago has gone so utterly. She looks round the shabby little room, with its cheap furniture, the best place she dared afford and compares it to the lovely home of her childhood. She has been to England several times before, hunting for her missing childhood, searching fruitlessly among birth certificates, church registers, marriage licences and each time has been so overwhelmed with depression that she is glad to go back to Canada, where at least there is nothing to remind her of the things she has lost.

Julia carries her diaries everywhere she goes in England, hoping that somewhere, somehow, she will come across a clue leading her to the place of her childhood. Sometimes at night in lonely hotel rooms she riffles through one, letting it fall open anywhere, in the hope that fate will let drop before her eyes the very lines

she needs. Often she has been ablaze with hope, thought she was there, felt certain this was the place but every time her search had ended with disappointment. It always turned out to be the wrong village, the wrong family, the wrong convent, the wrong little adopted boy. For years she would try to forget the whole thing, get on with her life, concentrate on her career, on making a go of it in her adoptive country. But then the longing and the guilt would rise in her again. Again she would gather up whatever she could save, make yet another trip to Britain and resume her probably hopeless search.

Some of the pages had been ripped away. Even now, after all these years, the voice of the Boys' Sister would sometimes ring in her ears. 'You were very kindly treated with you came to us. These things you have written here are wicked lies and you are an ungrateful child.' She had ripped Julia's laboriously written pages apart and punished Julia for her falsehoods, though Julia had been trying her very hardest to write the perfect truth, a truth that would sustain her and her brother for the rest of their lives.

A fine drizzle crinkles the surface of the slow-flowing river, plonks damp spots on the battered bits of tin and cardboard sprouting from a rubbish tip in the middle of the waste land, settled in shining wobbles over the 'For Sale' sign on the cottage front.

A grey cottage on a grey day. It stands awkwardly on the unkempt land, not a riverside cottage, not Kitty's idea of a cottage at all. To her these were thatched affairs, honeysuckle round the door, more often seen embroidered

on tea cosies than in actuality. This one has a garden bordered by a drooping fence of rusty barbed wire and rotting plank fencing which goes down to the water's edge and takes up about a third of the land. The rest of the land has been returned to a sordid wilderness. Brambles sprawl over rank trees. The ground is tangled with elder, dock and nettles. Ash saplings and buddleia rampage. Rubbish protrudes from every bush and grass hump. In this dank place man's dirty hand is pressing hard on nature's careless one.

Kitty surveys the area mournfully, considers silently how unattractive the countryside is compared with the parks of London, orderly with flower borders, clean and careful.

Matt, however, gazes around him as though looking upon Paradise. His face, thinks Kitty, radiates when he smiles. Little laughter lines crease his mouth. Tim, who is Matt's best friend and has a veterinary surgery in the village, has found this cottage. He laughs happily. 'I knew you'd like it, Matt. I knew it would be the perfect place for you.'

'This is the place I have been looking for,' Matt says. 'I want the rest of the land as well, and I shall make an offer for that too when I can get the money together. All this will be ours one day, Kits.' He waves an imperious hand, gesturing like an emperor.

A bird, perched silent in a gnarled old tree, stretches its wings and starts to sing as though contradicting him. 'Not yours, mine.'

'A thrush,' breathes Matt, peering up among the twisted branches. 'You don't see them so often nowadays.'

Tim says, 'It's a bargain, folks. Snap it up or someone else will.'

Kitty sighs, conflicted. 'It looks spooky.'

'I'll protect you from the ghosts, Kits,' laughs Matt, and winks at his friend.

Kitty loves Matt's laugh, rich and dark like chocolate.

A large and iridescent bird comes strutting out from among the weed-tangled rubbish dump, stares at the intruders with a scornful air and strides away, head high. Even in the dull light, rainbows shine luminously among his feathers.

'Wow, what a gorgeous bird. What is it?' Kitty cranes to get the last sight of the haughty creature before it vanishes in the undergrowth by the river.

'A pheasant, you ignorant townie,' taunts Matt.

'Gorgeous after being hung for three days then roasted with apple sauce,' says Tim.

'You wouldn't,' cries Kitty in outraged accusation.

'Would I? Would he?' laughs Tim. 'Your husband's a crack shot, darling. And the pheasants round here have been bred for only one purpose, to be shot by the likes of Matt and me.'

'In that case I won't agree to live here,' says Kitty sternly.

'There's a rough shoot over there.' Tim points. 'We won't shoot the one in your garden.' Kitty does not like the idea of any pheasant being shot, but at least feels calmed at the idea of this one escaping.

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Tim opens the front door. The air inside is musty as though no one had lived there for years. Kitty follows the two friends and tries to swallow her apprehension.

Matt, looking back, half way up the uncarpeted, footstep-ringing stairs, sees her expression, says, 'Cheer up, Kits. Once you have got the knack of living in the country you'll love it.'

Kitty looks gloomily out of the stairway window to that dead scrambled place from which the pheasant emerged. Hankers for the sight of shops and traffic. A hum comes from a distant motorway that only comforts her a little.

Matthew opens the master bedroom window and leans out into the misty rain. He draws in breaths as though the air is nourishing him, sucking in great gulps through his nostrils. 'God, Kits, glorious, eh?'

'Why hasn't anyone bought it already if it's such a bargain?' asks Kitty sensibly. She is not often sensible, but the occasion seems to demand it. She sees the glance that passes between the friends and alerted, demands, 'You know something. Tell me. You've got to tell me.'

'Don't be silly,' he chides, shaking her hands off. 'It's nothing.'

'It's ghosts, isn't it? The people here say it's haunted. That's why no one wants to live here.'

'Oh, don't be silly, Kitty,' says Matt once again. He gestures into the garden. 'If we buy I'll have that dying tree cut down.'

'Oh, the old pear tree. It's a landmark in the village. Someone told me there was another house here, over there, just beyond the pear tree. Where all that junk's been

dumped. But the house was bombed by the Germans, blown up during the war. After the explosion had died away the only thing left standing was the pear tree.'

Kitty shudders.

Matt says, 'We can start our family here, Kits. This is the perfect place to bring up children.'

Kitty's heart leaps with hope. Suddenly the faults of the cottage fall away. A place to bring up children in. Matt's children. Her children. She puts her arms gently round his waist and hugs him.

'I love you, Matt,' she whispers.

'Come on, cut it out, you love birds,' says Tim. 'If you're really interested let's go back to the estate agent and make an offer.'

The sun shines, the day Matthew and Kitty move in to Waste Land Cottage. It all looks quite different, light spilling into the large windows, flushing the ceilings, making the linoleum glow.

'You see, it's quite modern, just the way you like things,' Matt says, as they go around among the movers, putting the furniture in place. 'It may not be very pretty, but it's well built and by this time next year, you'll see, it'll be really lovely when we've painted it, got some plants growing over it. And then, and then Kits, when we've got possession of that land out there, we'll have a great open glass conservatory here, get those trees in order, perhaps put a herbaceous border across there and from here get the full view of the river. Oh, Kitty Kitty, it will be like Heaven.'

‘Yes,’ says Kitty, her heart glowing, still remembering the way he had said, ‘a good place to bring up children.’

‘Look, lovely tiled floor under this ghastly lino.’ Matt peels back the stuff. He thumps his hands against the cupboards, says, ‘Strong wood, well made. Someone has put a lot of money into this fitted kitchen. You’ll have fun making your cakes here.’

Kitty cranes on tiptoe to peer inside one of the cupboards. Some mouldering packets of food and a half full bottle of brandy lie there.

‘A tramp got in and lived here for a while.’ The gasman looks up from behind the stove he is reconnecting.

‘What happened to the tramp? Why did he leave his things here?’

The gasman laughs. ‘God knows. We heard an explosion one night. Really loud. As if the whole house had been blown up. Everyone in the village heard it. Anyway he came rushing out, yelling with terror and fell head first into the river. A couple of us had to jump in and pull him out in the end. Couldn’t swim and even if he had known how, was so dead drunk that without us he would have drowned. He must have been pretty scared to have left his brandy behind and never gone back for it.’ He fiddles with the pipes, tightens a screw, then says, ‘I’ve never believed the village scaremongers who say the waste land’s haunted. I still think it was something to do with a gas leak.’

‘See, see, I told you,’ cries Kitty.

‘Oh, stop that,’ Matthew tells the man.

The gasman packs his tools, shrugs, says, 'I'm only telling you what people say. I don't believe it. But there's people in the village that really do. Even the most daring of the village kids never play out there, on that bit of the waste land. And have you wondered why no one's ever built on it? They say that bad luck came to anyone who tried.'

Kitty shudders.

'Well, let's be thankful that it's not been built on,' says Matthew fervently. 'I wish the villagers would carry their prejudices a little further, though, and refrain from dumping rubbish on it as well.'

Kitty and Matthew have been living in the cottage for a week.

'See darling. Peaceful as paradise. No ghosts here.' Matt is still arranging his things, putting the furniture where he likes it.

Kitty smiles, happy to see him happy. Today she has actually tiptoed out onto the waste land to see if she could catch another sight of the pheasant. Walked softly so as not to wake any spirits, but gone there all the same. Then had stayed there for ages, enchanted by a little squad of ducks that had suddenly appeared along the river, and came up the bank to waddle among the rushes.

Matt shakes her out of her thoughts. 'Come on, you lazy lout. Don't leave everything to me to do. Help me get these things back in the cupboard. Tim's coming round in a moment. We're going out to try to bag a brace of pheasants for supper.'

'Don't go, don't leave me. I get shit scared on my own,' Kitty begs, clutching him by the arm.

‘For Heaven’s sake, Kitty,’ he reprimands. He wags his finger at her, looks at her sternly over the top of his glasses.

Kitty still goes on holding him. She loves it when he talks to her as though he is her father. Or at least, since she never had a father, as she imagines fathers talk to their children. It makes her go goosey all over.

‘It might be true, what that gasman said.’

‘Even you don’t believe it,’ smiles Matt.

‘But it’s true nobody comes there. A perfectly OK man’s bike was lying there the day we came and no one took it.’ Kitty, whose eyes in London had always been kept peeled for the sight of an unlocked bike had stared at this one covetously. And if it had lain anywhere else would have snatched it up like a shot.

‘I didn’t see it,’ says Matthew peevishly. ‘You should have told me. You know how I need one. I’ll get it now.’

‘It’s gone now. Someone did take it in the end.’

‘There you are,’ says Matt, cross and satisfied at the same time.

‘Even birds and rabbits don’t go in there so there must be something.’

‘What about that pheasant, the day we came to look at the cottage,’ laughs Matt. ‘See how you contradict yourself, Kits.’

She laughs too. Her fears have ebbed really, but she is enjoying his chiding.

That night they hear a bird singing from inside the rubbish-littered undergrowth. Kitty and Matt, leaning

from their bedroom window, drown in the sound of wonder from the small bird's throat.

Matt puts his arm round Kitty's waist. 'A nightingale,' he breathes.