

# The Whalebone Theatre

*and*

## **Highly Regulated and Overlooked: Women Writers and Child Characters in the Big House**



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All that I present here for examination, an extract from a novel and a critical commentary, is my own original work, undertaken for this degree. A full version of the novel, *The Whalebone Theatre*, was published by Penguin Fig Tree in 2022.

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# Abstract

This thesis comprises two components: an extract of *The Whalebone Theatre*, a novel, and a critical commentary entitled *Highly Regulated and Overlooked: Women Writers and Child Characters in the Big House*.

*The Whalebone Theatre* follows one family, the Seagraves, from 1919 to 1944. The main characters are Cristabel, Flossie and Digby, who grow up in a country house in Dorset. They are neglected children who find freedom in books and imagination, which leads to the creation of an open-air theatre from the skeleton of a whale. The novel is divided into five acts and the extract contains Act One and Act Two.

In the critical commentary, I examine my intentions and inspirations for *The Whalebone Theatre* by studying writers I loved as a child: Lucy M Boston and E Nesbit. I explore Boston and Nesbit's work with a particular focus on the big house setting, gender roles and childhood reading. I draw upon critical works to examine the interlinked experiences of a child character and a woman writer in negotiating the big house setting, typically a symbol of a dominant patriarchal culture, and reflect upon how my childhood reading shaped my novel.

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# **An Extract from The Whalebone Theatre**

What cares these roarers for the name of king?

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

## Act One: 1919–1920

### The Last Day of the Year

*31st December, 1919*

*Dorset*

Cristabel picks up the stick. It fits well in her hand. She is in the garden, waiting with the rest of the household for her father to return with her new mother. Uniformed servants blow on cold fingers. Rooks caw half-heartedly from the trees surrounding the house. It is the last day of December, the dregs of the year. The afternoon is fading and the lawn a quagmire of mud and old snow, which three-year-old Cristabel stamps across in her lace-up leather boots, holding the stick like a sword, a miniature sentry in a brass-buttoned winter coat.

She swishes the stick to and fro, enjoying the *vvp vvp* sound it makes, uses it to spoon a piece of grubby snow to her mouth. The snow is as chilly on her tongue as the frost flowers that form on her attic window, but less clinging. It tastes disappointingly nothingy. Somewhere too far away to be bothered about, her nanny is calling her name. Cristabel puts the noise away from her with a blink. She spies snowdrops simpering at the edge of the garden. *Vvvp vvp*.

Cristabel's father, Jasper Seagrave, and his new bride are, at that moment, seated side by side in a horse-drawn carriage, travelling up the driveway towards Jasper's family home: Chilcombe, a many-gabled, many-chimneyed, ivy-covered manor house with an elephantine air of weary grandeur. In outline, it is a series of sagging triangles and tall chimney stacks, and it has huddled on a wooded cliff overhanging the ocean for four hundred years, its leaded windows narrowed against sea winds and historical progress, its general appearance one of

gradual subsidence.

The staff at Chilcombe say today will be a special day, but Cristabel is finding it dull. There is too much waiting. Too much straightening up. It is not a day that would make a good story. Cristabel likes stories that feature blunderbusses and dogs, not brides and waiting. *Vvvp*. As she picks up the remains of the snowdrops, she hears the bone crunch of gravel beneath wheels.

Her father is the first to disembark from the carriage, as round and satisfied as a broad bean popped from a pod. Then a single foot in a button-boot appears, followed by a velvet hat, which tilts upwards to look at the house. Cristabel watches her father's whiskery face. He too is looking upwards, gazing at the young woman in the hat, who, while still balanced on the step of the carriage, is significantly taller than him.

Cristabel marches towards them through the snow. She is almost there when her nanny grabs her, hissing, 'What have you got in your hands? Where are your gloves?'

Jasper turns. 'Why is the child so dirty?'

The dirty child ignores her father. She is not interested in him. Grumpy, angry man. Instead, she approaches the new mother, offering a handful of soil and snowdrop petals. But the new mother is adept at receiving clumsy gifts; she has, after all, accepted the blustering proposal of Jasper Seagrave, a rotund widower with an unmanageable beard and a limp.

'For me,' says the new mother, and it is not a question. 'How novel.' She steps down from the carriage and smiles, floating about her a hand which comes to rest on Cristabel's head, as if that were what the child is for. Beneath her velvet hat, the new mother is wrapped in a smart wool travelling suit and a mink fur stole.

Jasper turns to the staff and announces, 'Allow me to present my new wife: Mrs Rosalind Seagrave.'

There is a ripple of applause.



Cristabel finds it odd that the new mother should have the name Seagrave, which is her name. She looks at the soil in her hand, then turns it over, allowing it to fall on to the new mother's boots, to see what happens then.

Rosalind moves away from the unsmiling girl. A motherless child, she reminds herself, lacking in feminine guidance. She wonders if she should have brought some ribbons for its tangled black hair, or a tortoiseshell comb, but then Jasper is at her side, leading her to the doorway.

'Finally got you here,' he says. 'Chilcombe's not quite at its best. Used to have a splendid set of iron gates at the entrance.'

As they cross the threshold, he is talking about the coming evening's celebrations. He says the villagers are delighted by her arrival. A marquee has been erected behind the house, a pig will be roasted, and everyone will toast the nuptials with tankards of ale. He winks at her now, bristling in his tweed suit, and she is unsure what is meant by this covering and uncovering of one eye, this stagey wince.

Rosalind Seagrave, née Elliot, twenty-three years old, described in the April 1914 edition of *Tatler* magazine as 'a poised London debutante', walks through the stone entranceway of Chilcombe into a wood-panelled galleried room that extends upwards like a medieval knights' hall. It is a hollow funnel, dimly lit by flickering candles in brass wall brackets, and the air has the unused quality of empty chapels in out-of-the-way places.

It is a peculiar feeling, to enter a strange house knowing it contains her future. Rosalind looks around, trying to take it in before it notices her. There is a fireplace at the back of the hall: large, stone and unlit. Crossed swords hang above it. There is not much in the way of furniture and it does not attract her as she hoped. A carved oak coffer with an iron

hinge. A suit of armour holding a spear in its metal hand. A grandfather clock, a moulting Christmas tree, and a grand piano topped by a vase of lilies.

The piano, she knows, is a wedding present from her husband, but it has been put to one side beneath the stuffed head of a stag. Around the walls droop more mounted animal heads, glass-eyed lions and antelopes, along with ancient tapestries showing people in profile gesticulating with arrows. As blue is the last colour to fade in tapestry, what were once cheerful depictions of battle are now mournful, undersea scenes.

To the right of the fireplace is a curving wooden staircase leading to the upper floors of the house, while on either side of her, worn Persian rugs lead through arched doorways into dark rooms that lead to more doorways to dark rooms, and so it goes on, like an illustration of infinity. The heel of her boot catches on a rug as she steps forward. They will have to move the rugs, she thinks, when they have parties.

Jasper appears beside her, talking to the butler. 'Tell me, Blythe, has my errant brother arrived? Couldn't be bothered to show his face at the wedding.'

The butler gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head, for this is how Chilcombe is run, with gestures so familiar and worn down they have become the absence of gestures – the impression of something that used to be there; the shape of the fossil left in the stone.

Jasper sniffs, addresses his wife. 'The maids will show you to your room.'

Rosalind is escorted up the staircase, passing a series of paintings depicting men in ruffs pausing mid-hunt to have their portraits done, resting stockinged calves on the still-warm bodies of boars.

Cristabel watches from a corner. She has tucked herself behind a wooden umbrella stand in the shape of a little Indian boy; his outstretched arms make a circle to hold umbrellas, riding crops and her father's walking sticks. She waits until the new mother is out of sight, then runs

across the hall to the back staircase, which is concealed from view behind the main staircase. This takes her down to below stairs, the servants' realm: the kitchen, scullery, storerooms and cellars. Here, in the roots of the house, she can find a hiding place and examine her new treasures: the stick and the crescents of soil beneath her fingernails.

On this day, below stairs is a clamorous place, the tiled kitchen echoing with activity. The servants are excited about the evening celebrations, anxious about hosting the wedding party, and full of gossip about the new wife. Cristabel crawls under the kitchen table and listens. Items of interest spark like lightning across her consciousness: favourite words like 'horse' and 'pudding'; voices she recognizes surfacing in the melee.

Her attention is caught by Maudie Kitcat, the youngest housemaid, saying, 'Maybe Miss Cristabel will be getting a little brother soon.' Cristabel hadn't seen a little brother get out of the carriage, but perhaps one would be coming later. She would like a brother very much. For games and battles.

She also likes the housemaid Maudie Kitcat. They both sleep in the attic and practise their letters together. Cristabel often asks Maudie to write the names of people she knows in the condensation on the attic windows, and Maudie will comply, squeakingly shaping the words with a single finger – M-A-U-D-I-E, D-O-G, N-A-N-N-Y, C-O-O-K – so Cristabel can trace her own small finger along them or rub them out if they have displeased her. Sometimes, Maudie will visit her in the night if Cristabel has one of the dreams that make her shout, and Maudie will stroke her head and say shhh, little one, shhh now, don't cry.

In the kitchen, Cook is saying, 'An heir to the estate, eh? Let's hope Jasper Seagrave's still got it in him.' Bellows of laughter follow. A male voice shouts, 'If he can't manage it, I'll step in and have a go.' There is more laughter, then a crash, something thrown. The sound of servants roaring at this incomprehensible exchange is a thunderous wave washing over Cristabel. She decides to use her stick to write her letters, tracing a circle in the flour on the

flagstone floor, round and round. O. O. O. O. Time away from her interfering nanny is rare, she must not waste it. O. O. O.

O for 'oh'. O for 'ohnoCristabelwhathaveyoudonenow'.

Upstairs on the first floor, Rosalind sits at the dressing table in her new bedroom, although she hardly can call it new, for everything in it appears to be ancient. It is a room of aggressively creaking floorboards and fragile mahogany furniture lit by smoke-stained oil lamps: a collection of items that cannot bear to be touched. She hears laughter coming from elsewhere in the house and feels it as a rising tension in her shoulders. A maid stands behind her, brushing out Rosalind's ink-dark hair, while another unpacks her cases, carefully extracting items of lingerie that have been folded into perfumed satin pads. Rosalind is aware of being examined, assessed. She wishes she could open her own luggage.

Rosalind checks her reflection in the dressing table mirror; composes herself. She has the pert face of a favoured child. Wide eyes, an upturned nose. This is complemented by her self-taught habit of clasping her hands beneath her chin, as if delighted by unexpected gifts. She does this now.

She has done well, despite everything; she must believe this. There had been sharp talk in London. Intimations of unwise dalliances. Suggestions she'd ruined her chances fraternizing with one too many beaux. But all those men had gone now. One by one, all the charming boys she had danced with and strolled with and dined with had disappeared. At first, it was awful, and then it was usual, which was worse than awful, but less tiring. After a while, it was simply what happened. They left, waving, on trains and went into the ground in places with foreign names that became increasingly familiar: Ypres, Arras, the Somme.

The years of the war became an achingly monotonous time, with Rosalind perched on

a stiff armchair, trying to finish a piece of embroidery while her mother intoned the names of eligible young men listed in *The Times* as dead or missing. There were stories in the newspapers about ‘surplus women’ – millions of spinsters who would never marry due to the shortage of suitable husbands. Rosalind cut out magazine pictures of society brides and glued them into a scrapbook: an album of lucky escapees. She was fearful she would become a black-clad relic like her widowed mother, a woman alone, fussing over teacups and miniature monkey-faced dogs, entrapped by knitting baskets and petulant footstools.

Even when the Great War ended, there was nobody left to celebrate with. The handful of passable men who did come home spent parties swapping battle stories with hearty girls who had been in uniform, while Rosalind stood against a wall, her dance card empty. So when she met Jasper Seagrave, a widower looking for a young wife to provide a son and heir, it seemed a space had been made for her, a tiny passage she could crawl through into the orange blossom light of a wedding day, where a house of her own would await her.

And here she is. She has made it through. A winter wedding, not ideal, but still a wedding. Despite the sinus problems of the groom. Despite his insistence on the jolting carriage ride. Despite the view from the rattling carriage windows jerking backwards and forwards like scenery waved about by amateurish stagehands. Despite the clamping, clawing feeling in her heart. It could all be rectified.

Rosalind lifts her new diamond earrings to her ears. She watches in the mirror as one of the maids lays out her ivory chiffon peignoir, arranging it with respectfully covetous hands on the four-poster bed, which has a high mattress like the one in the story of the princess and the pea. Outside the darkening window, there is the crackle of a bonfire, the murmur of voices as the villagers arrive, and the rich, burnt smell of roasting meat.

Cristabel is standing in the garden by the fire, closely observing the suckling pig hung over

the flames on a spit, a red apple jammed in its rotating mouth. She holds her stick in her right hand. Her left hand is in her coat pocket, fingers running over other newly acquired treasures found below stairs: a scrap of newspaper and a pencil stub. It is a kind of reassurance, to have these small things she can touch.

She can hear her nanny crashing through the house looking for her, her angry nanny voice running ahead of her like a baying pack of hounds. Cristabel knows what will happen next. She will be taken upstairs to her bedroom without supper as a punishment for disappearing. The candle will be blown out and the door locked. The attic will become shadowy and endlessly cornered: a shifting blackness raked by the slow-moving searchlight of the moon, a great lidless eye.

She cannot take the whole stick up there with her, she knows this from experience, so she stashes it beneath a hedge, breaking off a piece to keep in her pocket with her other items. She runs her thumb backwards and forwards over the rippled bark, as she will later on, when she is lying in her narrow bed – as a way of turning over the time when she is not allowed to make a silly fuss. When she was a little baby she made a fuss, and her nanny made her wear the jacket with the arms that tied round to stop her climbing out of bed. She does not intend to make a fuss again.

Beneath her pillow, she keeps fragments of various sticks, several stones that have faces, and an old picture postcard of a dog owned by a king which she found under a rug and named Dog. She can line them up, feed them supper, have them act out a story, and put them to bed. She can protect them and stroke their heads if they have shouting dreams, and make sure they don't get out on the cold wooden floor.

She crouches down next to a patch of snow, uses her forefinger to write her letters. O. O. O. She hears her nanny saying: 'For pity's sake, there she is. Digging in the snow with her filthy little fingers.'

Cristabel likes the word snow. She whispers it to herself, then continues her work, her daily practice: shaping letters, making words, taking names.

S-N-O.

### **The Morning After**

*1st January, 1920*

New year, new decade, new house, new husband. New as a new pin. Didn't her mother always say something about new pins? Rosalind feels pinned beneath the sheets of the marital bed. There is a rigidity to her spine that recalls the dinosaur skeletons in the London museums. She is fixed in place. An exhibit. White-capped maids come and go, lighting the fire and drawing the curtains, as busy and remote as gulls. Through the window, Rosalind can see bare trees flailing.

Jasper has said it may take time for her to adjust to the role of wife. He says she is young and that being with a man is new to her. (An image flits into her mind – an August evening near the boat shed with Rupert, his moustache scratching against her neck like wire wool – she shakes it away.) Jasper believes she will become familiar with her marital duties in time. She will become familiar with the unfamiliar. She is holding herself very still because it does not seem possible for these unfamiliar acts to exist in this room, alongside such steadfastly ordinary items as her silver hairbrush, the bedside lamp.

The maids bring her breakfast, balancing it on a tray on her eiderdown so she is presented with an unappealing display: a heap of gelatinous scrambled eggs cupped by the curving gristle of a sausage. She covers the tray with a napkin and reaches for her glass

atomizer: pff, *ppffffff*, and Yardley Eau de Cologne hazes the air.

The maids pass and call, pass and call. Rosalind hears her own voice producing suitable words for them. ‘Not much appetite. Thank you so much.’ The maids take the words and the uneaten food away with them. There is a discreet spiral staircase hidden behind a Chinese screen in the corner of the room that allows them to come and go without using the door.

Soon she must attend to things. She must dress appropriately and do what is expected of her. She must be a – what was it Jasper said? His voice so horribly loud in her ear in the darkness, like the voice of a giant – she must be a sport. Rosalind looks up at the tapestry canopy hanging over the bed to find the pattern she had studied last night. It is hidden in the larger design, a sort of lopsided face looking back at her, repeated many times over.

The maids reappear, swooping about with garments and undergarments; they want to dress her and make her beautiful. Men used to tell her she was beautiful. They admired her and talked of their beating hearts, and she felt this as an exultation, an adoration. She never believed that what they called love would involve such obscene exertions. Brute weight and panting effort. A pile of flesh smelling of port and tobacco, pressing the air from her body until she could not breathe. And the pain: pure white pain, flashing like stars behind her eyelids. No, this has nothing to do with love.

A maid approaches. ‘Mr Seagrave has gone to Exeter on horse business, ma’am. He hopes you enjoy your first day in Chilcombe.’

Rosalind nods. She has no words left. She is blank as paper in her stiff sheets.

The maid comes closer, crossing the creaky floorboards. ‘We met yesterday, ma’am. You may not remember. I’m Betty Bemrose. I’m to be your lady’s maid.’ Rosalind glances down to find that, most surprisingly, the maid has placed a hand on her own. ‘Perhaps a bath, ma’am? You look wrung out.’



Rosalind looks at Betty's concerned face beneath her white maid's cap. It is round and freckled, and there is the unexpectedly reassuring pressure of her hand.

Betty continues, 'There are some bath oils, ma'am. Believe you brought them with you. That'd get you back on your feet.'

'Rose,' Rosalind says. 'There is a rose oil.'

'Lovely.'

'A dear friend gave it to me. He was an officer. Died in France.'

'So many gone,' says Betty, heading into the adjoining bathroom. 'My sister's husband was lost at Gallipoli. They never even found him. I had them bring up some hot water for you earlier, ma'am, so I only need add the oil.'

'My friend – he had freckles like yours.'

'No!'

'He was charming.'

Betty reappears in the bathroom doorway. 'When you're having a bath, I'll get the bed linen changed. Put some more coal on the fire. We only light the upstairs fires when there's people staying so they do take their time to get going.'

'He took me to The Waldorf once. Have you heard of it?'

'Can't say that I have, ma'am.'

'Simply everybody goes there.'

Betty comes to the bed and gently pulls back the covers. 'Let me help you, ma'am.'

Rosalind grips the young woman's arms and allows herself to be navigated to the adjoining room, where a cast iron hip-bath waits in front of a low fire, holding a shallow layer of still water, scented with roses.

Sitting on a step outside the kitchen door, Cristabel grips her stick firmly in her fist and writes in the dust: B-R-U-T-H-E. B-R-O-H-E-R.

‘Try again,’ says Maudie Kitcat, passing with a basket of dirty bed linen. ‘You are near enough getting it though.’

The new Mrs Jasper Seagrave, bathed and anointed, leaves her bedroom and makes her way downstairs. She is unsure what is expected of her. Her husband is away, and she does not know how to find out when he might return. A letter from her mother has arrived, reminding her of the importance of establishing her authority with the staff, and Rosalind fears enquiring about her husband’s whereabouts will not improve her standing in the eyes of the household.

However, she does make authoritative decisions on several matters: that sausages are repellent and fit only for dogs; that a modern bathtub must be installed; that the Christmas tree should be thrown out, along with the lilies (her mother always says lilies remind her of very *obvious* women). Also: a gramophone is to be purchased post-haste, and her husband’s sullen daughter should have a French governess. *You*, writes Rosalind’s mother in a forward-leaning hand, *are a new broom in the household! Brisk and firm!*

Despite her mother’s instructions, Rosalind finds it difficult to issue orders to the male staff, many of whom, such as Blythe the butler, are old enough to be her father. But it seems apt that she, the young bride, should be unknowing. Hadn’t she read in *The Lady* that ‘men can’t help but respond to the feminine charms of the innocent ingénue’? ‘Be elegant,’ continued the magazine, ‘and a little spoiled, but not bored.’

Rosalind leans on the piano near a framed photograph of her new husband. She likes the words ‘new husband’, they have an exciting feel to them, like a gift box rustling with

tissue paper. She likes to use the words even as she avoids looking at the photograph. *New husband. Elegant, not bored.*

The day passes. Other very similar days pass.

Rosalind subscribes to magazines and cuts out pictures of items necessary to her new life – hats, furniture, people – or notes them in a list. Next door to her bedroom is a small room, a boudoir, containing all the lady of the house might need: a decorative table at which to serve tea, a roll-top writing desk, an ivory letter opener. Rosalind sits at the desk and sifts through her magazine cuttings like a miner panning for gold.

With the help of Mrs Hardcastle the housekeeper, she orders a few essentials – silk pillowcases, hand creams – and waits for them. If she stands on the gallery landing, she can look down into the entrance hall, known as the Oak Hall, to see if anything is arriving. She discovers saying ‘I’m having a little wander’ will usually remove hovering servants. But if they continue to linger, she will then feel obliged to embark on a little wander.

Chilcombe is only modestly sized, nine bedrooms in all, but has been built and added to in such an arcane way that each part seems difficult to reach. Its residents and staff must make long excursions along convoluted corridors with a variable camber, sloping like a ship’s deck. There are often unexpected steps, sudden landings. The windows are narrow as arrow slits and the stone walls damp to the touch.

Rosalind would go out, but the outside world seems unapproachable. In London, the outdoors had been tidied up into parks. At dusk, the lamplighters with their long poles would light the gas lamps lining the pathways, golden circles flickering into life across the city. But in Dorset, the darkness descends so completely it is like falling into a coal cellar. There are no bandstands or statues. Merely ominous woods and a few acres of estate land, home only to ancient trees with fencing round their trunks, as if each were the last of its kind. One wizened

oak is so decrepit its branches are propped up with metal staves. Why do they not let it die? Rosalind wonders, for it is very ugly; a bark shell of itself, strung up like a man shackled to a dungeon wall.

The back of the house overlooks a courtyard edged by brick outbuildings: a laundry, tool sheds and stables. Adjacent to the outbuildings is a walled kitchen garden tended by a gardener trundling back and forth with a wheelbarrow. Sometimes there are dead pheasants or hares hanging from the door handles. There are murmured, laughing conversations between servants. Rosalind watches from a landing window, careful not to be seen.

There is a village about a mile away, Chilcombe Mell, but when Rosalind and Jasper passed through on their journey from the train station, she had seen only a handful of thatched cottages, a few shops, a church and a pub. It seemed a half-abandoned place; the buildings all slumped together at the base of a valley as if they had slithered downwards in an avalanche. Beyond the village is a ridge of high land running parallel with the coast, a steep escarpment topped with straggly trees and prehistoric burial mounds. It is known as the Ridgeway and shuts out the world quite succinctly. Who will ever find her here?

Jasper had told her, during their courtship, that the Ridgeway was thought to be the hill the Grand Old Duke of York had marched his 10,000 men up and down. ‘Why on earth did he do that?’ she’d replied, knowing that this was not the desired response. His wooing of her had largely consisted of him presenting her with historical facts in the way a cat continually brings its owner dead mice, despite their perplexing lack of success. Even at the beginning of their relationship, there had been this awkwardness: a sense of tight smiles and small unpleasant acts of disposal.

When, one morning, there is a knock on the door of her boudoir, Rosalind is quick to respond, expecting Betty bringing her latest purchase. Instead, it is a stout, bearded man in

tweed plus fours. Rosalind's surprise is considerable, as she has managed to entirely divorce the physical being of Jasper Seagrave from the words 'new husband'.

'Hear you've been shopping,' says Jasper.

'A few items. Heavens, why did you knock? Does a husband need to knock?'

'If you prefer. I won't.'

'It merely seems –' Rosalind finds she has envisaged a different reunion between husband and wife. Shouldn't he sweep in, declaring he has missed her terribly? Shouldn't there be trinkets? Wouldn't that make this all much better?

'Taking Guinevere out this afternoon,' says Jasper. 'Don't suppose you fancy coming along?'

'Is that a horse? Isn't it raining?'

'Not much. No matter. See you at dinner.'

'I've never been good with horses –' and here she hesitates, uncertain how to address him, 'Jasper. Dear.'

Jasper tugs his beard, then leans forward to plant a bristly kiss on her cheek. 'No matter,' he says again, before heading downstairs.

She calls for Betty to draw her bath before dinner. Betty natters away as she lays out Rosalind's eau-de-nil silk evening gown – long lines, finely pleated, beaded side-seam – and Rosalind is grateful. It helps settle her mind, which has become agitated since Jasper's arrival. She reclines in the perfumed water and enjoys Betty's talk as background noise: a sister's engagement, plans for her upcoming birthday.

'Your birthday – how old will you be, Betty?'

'Twenty-three, ma'am.'

‘The same age as me.’

‘Wish I was the same size as you, ma’am. You’ll be pretty as a picture in this gown.’

Rosalind glances at her own white arms. ‘We may have to take the gown in, Betty.’

‘Have you been off your food again, ma’am? That’s a pity. I suppose you miss your London life. I know your mother writes to you often.’

Rosalind suspects her mother would disapprove of such intimate conversation with staff. She pictures her hunched over her writing bureau, scribbling: *A wife’s role is to submit to her husband! To be help-meet, inspiration and guide!*

‘My mother writes every day,’ she says. ‘I’m her only child.’

‘She must be proud of you, doing so well for yourself,’ says Betty.

A wife’s role, thinks Rosalind. To submit. Elegant. Not bored. She spins these words in her mind through the silences of dinner in the dark red dining room and the waiting in the bedroom afterwards and the time after that, when she looks up at the canopy to find the lopsided face watching her in her wife’s role, and there is something in that which allows her a little distance while it goes on: the unspeakable intrusion, the nightshirt he never takes off bundled between their bodies like something he is trying to smother, and even though there is a part of her mind that fights, that baulks and resists, she does not move a muscle, she never cries out, she simply remains there, gripping the bed sheet with both hands, staring up past him.

How is she to believe it? That this violence is done to her nightly, and all around her, people sleep soundly in their beds, happy it is being done.

And a small finger in the attic traces B-R-O-T-H-E-R, B-R-O-T-H-E-R, B-R-O-T-H-E-R.

## Prodigal Brother

February, 1920

A distant *putt-putt-putt* is the first sign that the long absent Willoughby Seagrave, Jasper's younger brother and only sibling, is returning to Chilcombe. Cristabel, crossing the lawn with her newly appointed French governess, stops to listen. It is an entirely new sound that reaches her ears from across the full distance of twenty centuries; one that has never been heard on the estate before. Cristabel drops the dead snail she is carrying in order to concentrate. The French governess also pauses. *Mon Dieu, petite Cristabel. Ç'est une automobile! Oui, Madame, ç'est vrai.* It is a motor car.

As it approaches, the noise of the vehicle clarifies: it becomes a rattling, rapid *dug-dug-dug-dug*. To a few of the men cleaning out the stables behind the house, the sound is chillingly reminiscent of German guns. But to Maudie Kitcat and Betty Bemrose, the servants tripping over themselves to reach the front door first, it is the sound of glamour and escape, of day trips and freedom, of London and Brighton, of Swanage and Weymouth. It is the sound of the future. It is Willoughby Seagrave.

Betty and Maudie are both ardent fans of Willoughby. Between them, they make sure they receive the letters he sends to Cristabel, the wartime niece he has never seen due to his military service in Egypt. Betty was taught to read by her father, who runs the pub in the village, so she is able to read Willoughby's letters out loud to Maudie and Cristabel, and what letters they are, full of deadly scorpions, desert moons and nomadic tribes. All recounted in Willoughby's looping handwriting with its upward-rising dashes and lavish capitalization; his voice both confiding and dramatic (*Mark my words, little Cristabel – this was an Adventure*

*of the Highest sort!)*.

His letters always begin *My dearest youngest Lady*, then launch headlong into a continuation of an escapade from a previous letter, so his correspondence becomes a never-ending tale of derring-do (*You will no doubt remember I had leapt from the bad-tempered Dromedary, lest Muhammad think me a fearful wobbler, and together we were pursuing the Senussi on foot through the Dunes – my men following, fatigued but resolute!*). At the end of every letter, Cristabel commands, ‘Again. Again.’ And so they must.

Why Willoughby is still galloping about the desert while everyone else has come home from the war is not entirely clear to them, but they have seen a photograph of him in his cream uniform that Jasper has put in a drawer, and he is just as dashing as the film stars in Rosalind’s magazines. Twenty-three-year-old Betty enjoys Willoughby’s adventures in the same way she enjoys a gossipy newspaper story about the Bright Young Things and their London parties. But for fourteen-year-old Maudie, Willoughby is overwhelming. When Betty reads out his letters, a violent flush creeps over Maudie’s face, colonizing her features.

Maudie, the youngest kitchen maid and Cristabel’s companion in the attic, is an orphan with a tendency towards intensity. She once locked a delivery boy in the laundry after he teased her about her wayward hair. There are rumours her family were smugglers. There are rumours the delivery boy found a headless rat in his bicycle basket. Maudie has grabbed Betty’s hand and is now scrambling with her towards the front door as the vehicle containing Willoughby and a pile of battered luggage roars up the drive. They cannot miss his opening scene. For this is the promise of Willoughby: he is a performance.

The noise is such that Jasper, breakfasting in the dining room, pauses mid-kipper, and asks, ‘Are we being invaded?’



Rosalind, at the far end of the dining table, sets down her teacup and holds a hand to her throat. From outside comes the bang of someone slamming a car door, followed by the cacophony of all the rooks that nest in the surrounding trees taking to the sky at once.

Blythe the butler performs a neat half-bow and is about to seek out the noise-maker, but the noise-maker is already with them, striding into the room, his face sooty with dirt, and a pair of driving goggles pushed on top of his wavy copper-coloured hair. Somehow, the space is jammed with people who weren't there a moment ago, a mass of them pressing in behind Willoughby, a crowd that includes Betty and Maudie, Mrs Hardcastle the housekeeper, the new French governess, and Cristabel, carrying a stick.

‘Well,’ says Willoughby, his voice warm and reassuring, with a slight laugh to it. ‘Hello, everyone.’

His audience giggles and gabbles their replies, talking over the top of one another; nervous participants.

Cristabel pushes through the onlookers and solemnly raises her stick. Willoughby bows deeply as a pantomime prince, saying, ‘You must be Cristabel. I can see your mother in you. What an honour to finally make your acquaintance.’ Then he addresses Jasper and Rosalind, still seated at the table, ‘Although, I heard a rumour in London that my brother is keen to extend his family – and why wouldn't he be?’

Rosalind blushes. Jasper opens his mouth but misses his cue, as Willoughby turns back to his audience.

‘Betty Bemrose, I have missed you. How I longed for your capable hands in the desert. Nobody in Egypt darns a sock like you. I was threadbare and bereft.’

‘Mr Willoughby,’ replies Betty, bobbing up and down, both mortified and delighted.

Willoughby's tone moves so smoothly between registers, it is hard to determine whether he is starring in a romantic film, a Shakespearian comedy or a West End farce, and

therefore difficult to know whether to be offended by him. Most give him the benefit of the doubt, as there is a line that curves upwards around one corner of his mouth that speaks of his pleasure in ambiguity and his enjoyment of all the benefits of all the doubts that have already been given to him – and his generous willingness to accept more.

Jasper sniffs. ‘I presume from that terrible racket you’ve bought some ludicrous vehicle.’

‘Wonderful to see you too, brother,’ says Willoughby. ‘I do have a ludicrous vehicle. Perhaps I could take you for a drive?’

‘Might have told us what time you were arriving. Given us time to kill the fatted calf,’ says Jasper, pulling his napkin from his collar.

‘Spoil this lovely surprise? Heavens, no,’ says Willoughby, although he is now smiling at the French governess. ‘I rather fancy this young lady would enjoy a ludicrous vehicle.’

‘Monsieur Willoughby –’

‘I can see you as a racing driver, mademoiselle. Leather gloves on. Ripping along at thirty.’ He pulls the goggles from his head and tosses them towards her. ‘Give those a try.’

‘Mr Willoughby, you’ll be wanting a bath no doubt,’ says Mrs Hardcastle, but Willoughby has taken the governess by the arm and is leading her back through the Oak Hall, saying, ‘A quick spin. Just to get a feel for it.’ Maudie’s face, as she watches them pass, is as agape as a desert moon.

When Rosalind makes her way to the dining room window, she sees, in the pale light of a February morning: Willoughby, a French governess in driving goggles, an unsmiling housekeeper, and a child wielding a stick, all seated in an enormous open-top car that is chugging slowly along the drive, occasionally veering on to the edge of the lawn. This unusual activity is overlooked by Jasper, who is not quite smiling but not quite not, along

with Betty, Maudie and a cluster of servants. Rosalind watches as the car accelerates, kicking up gravel, its French passenger screaming, and Willoughby shouting over his shoulder, 'We'll be back for lunch.'

Rosalind hears Jasper come in and retreat to his study at the back of the house. She wanders to the drawing room but cannot settle. She is disturbed by the servants, who are fluttering from room to room, window to window, like a flock of birds trapped in the house. In the end, she simply folds her hands, closes her eyes and waits. She is getting better at waiting.

The driving party returns to Chilcombe three hours later, dust-covered and bearing streaks of what looks like strawberry jam. Cristabel is fast asleep, still clutching her stick, and being carried by Mrs Hardcastle. Rosalind is in the Oak Hall to meet them.

'Goodness,' she says, 'somebody take that child upstairs and give her a good wash. I can hardly bear to look at her.'

She hears her mother in her voice and finds it reassuring. The disruption of Willoughby's arrival has allowed her to step into a role that has thus far eluded her: the lady of the house. She straightens her back as the windswept motorists troop past. The French governess has a pink carnation tucked behind one ear. At the rear of the party, Willoughby lingers in the doorway, holding his motoring cap in his hand, ruefully stroking his moustache.

'Why don't you come in?' Rosalind asks.

'I fear I've made a dreadful first impression.'

'It certainly isn't usual for guests to take half the household off on a jaunt.'

'No. It isn't on,' he says.

'Whatever must the villagers think. Seeing you careering about like that.'

'Do you care what they think?'

Rosalind frowns. 'Of course.'

He shrugs. 'I believe they rather enjoyed it. We stopped at the pub so they could have a good look at the motor.'

'You went to the pub in the village?'

'We did. Do you object?'

'No. Yes,' says Rosalind. 'I mean, I might not have objected. Had I been asked.'

'That's what I hoped. Can we start again? On a proper footing this time. After I've had a bath. I'll be so shinily clean and perfectly mannered you won't recognize me.' He smiles and it is the blinding burst of a photographer's flash powder.

'That sounds – acceptable,' says Rosalind.

'You are a good egg. I knew you would be.'

'Did you? Why did you think that?'

But he is already moving past her, pulling his shirt from his trousers and bounding up the stairs two at a time, calling, 'Is there hot water for me, Betty?'

Rosalind is left waiting by the door, holding her unanswered questions, her handful of lines.

## Circling and Re-Circling

*March, 1920*

Chilcombe is different with Willoughby in it. Even before Cristabel opens her eyes, she can sense a tingling shift in the air. She creeps out of bed at the same dark hour as Maudie, before anyone else is awake, and while Maudie heads to the scullery to begin her morning chores, Cristabel tiptoes down to the kitchen and heads outside to find Willoughby's motor car.

Maudie has told her the only good thing about getting up horribly early is that the last day has gone, but the new one not yet begun, and in that gap, the house belongs to Maudie. Cristabel feels the truth of this as she steps out under a deep blue-black sky, where the only sound is a blackbird's chirruping call, a run of silver stitches through the darkness. This breathless, shadowy world is full of possibility. Everything she touches now will be hers.

The motor car has been parked by the stables and covered with a tarpaulin, which is easy enough to climb under. Hoicking up her nightgown, Cristabel clambers into the driver's seat and examines the steering wheel, the polished wooden dashboard, and the glass-covered dials, very tappable. She moves the steering wheel from side to side. She says, 'Hold on to your hats, ladies.'

Sometimes, she looks at the back seat to see where she was when Uncle Willoughby gave her a jam tart, to be eaten with fingers, no plate or napkin, as he drove through puddles, making everyone shriek. 'Just for you,' he had said, 'no sharing allowed.'

'I don't share,' she replied, and he laughed so much she hadn't bothered to explain she wasn't given things, so she couldn't. She likes to hear him laugh. That irrepressible sound, bursting through the ordinary run of things like a cannonball. Cristabel kneels up on the leather seat and reaches for the rubber bulb of the brass car horn.

Rosalind wakes early, jolted from sleep by a loud noise from outside. Surely Willoughby isn't leaving already? Whenever he is with them, the house has a sense of exciting, preparatory activity – as if it were the start of a holiday – but there is always the accompanying fear he might suddenly depart.

She has Betty dress her quickly in order to be at the breakfast table as fast as she can, but she is the first to arrive. Willoughby and Jasper appear an hour later, demanding large quantities of food. Rosalind rarely manages to eat anything at breakfast, or even say anything beyond the usual pleasantries, but watches as the brothers bicker while devouring whatever is placed in front of them, overlooked by portraits of stern Seagrave ancestors.

Jasper's method of feeding is base and agricultural, the resolute troughing of a man who has long since eaten his way past culinary enjoyment, whereas Willoughby eats like a flamboyant painter – sweeping swathes of marmalade across crumbling toast, pouring milk into his teacup from a jug held so high the liquid becomes a single thin torrent, and licking butter from his fingers while waving down Blythe to request more bacon.

'Sister-in-law Rosalind, the current Mrs Seagrave,' says Willoughby, helping himself to the last of the eggs. 'What are your plans for the coming weeks?'

'Willoughby,' growls Jasper, from deep within his kedgeriee-dotted beard.

'Well –' says Rosalind.

'Because I'm off to Brighton for a few days, so you won't have to feed me, and you'll save on candles. I'm staggered you're still holding out against electrical lights, Jasper. My bedroom is black as the very grave.'

'Oil lamps are perfectly adequate,' says Jasper. 'I will not have unsightly cables strung across my land.'

‘What are you doing in Brighton, Willoughby?’ asks Rosalind. ‘I’ve been to Brighton.’

‘I’m to meet a man about an aeronautical adventure.’

Jasper sighs. ‘Do be sensible, Willoughby. Our family funds are not a bottomless pit. As I keep telling you, there are good positions in the colonies for ex-military men. Saw your friend Perry Drake at the club last month – he’s off to Ceylon to keep the locals in line.’

‘Perry will be a credit to the Empire, I’m sure. But I don’t want to do that. Mother and Father left me money to do whatever I want.’

‘You can’t fritter away your allowance on foolishness,’ says Jasper.

‘Why not?’ says Willoughby. ‘Don’t you read the papers? The great estates are all being sold off. Why not spend our pennies on something enjoyable before we lose the lot? When’s the last time you bought anything other than a horse? Why this pettifogging insistence on things being done as they’ve always been done?’

‘I bought a piano. For Rosalind. For my wife.’

‘Does anyone ever play it?’

‘One has responsibilities –’

‘The future’s coming for you, brother, whether you like it or not,’ says Willoughby. ‘Talking of Perry, you’ve reminded me he met a chap in the army who would make a decent land agent for Chilcombe. Fellow called Brewer. Practical sort with a keen eye for a balance sheet. You’ll need one of those soon.’

But Jasper is continuing along the conversational path he started on before there was any mention of land agents. ‘One has responsibilities. We have staff who rely on us.’

Willoughby turns to Rosalind. ‘Let me tell you about my aeronautical adventures, Mrs Seagrave. A newspaper is offering an obscene amount of money for the first aviator to fly non-stop from New York to Paris.’

‘Wouldn’t that be dangerous?’ asks Rosalind.

‘One might lose one’s hat. But it’s exhilarating up there, gazing down on the clouds. A white feather bed stretching all the way to the horizon.’

‘Fatuous nonsense,’ says Jasper.

‘I’ve never been in an aeroplane,’ says his wife.

‘I’ll fly down here. Land on the lawn,’ says Willoughby.

‘You’ll do no such bloody thing,’ says Jasper.

‘Cristabel would be delighted,’ says Willoughby.

‘You should not be encouraging a love of aviation in an impressionable young girl.’

‘Might be a little late there, Jasper. I’ve ordered a toy aeroplane for her and, do you know, I found one of those wooden swords we had as boys hidden in the stables – I’ve cleaned that up for her too.’

‘Heaven’s sake, Willoughby, that was my sword,’ says Jasper.

‘You couldn’t land an aeroplane on the lawn, could you?’ says Rosalind.

Willoughby smiles. ‘Is that a dare?’

‘I will not allow you to flap around on my lawn like a pheasant,’ says Jasper.

‘Eagle, surely.’

‘I will not be provoked at my own breakfast table, do you hear?’ barks Jasper, yanking the napkin from his collar.

‘Everybody can hear, brother.’

Jasper stamps from the room, slamming the door. The tableware rattles: a thin silvery peal of cutlery versus crockery. Willoughby leans across the table to pull his brother’s breakfast plate towards him. They hear a shout from the hall – ‘The child’s left her bloody twigs everywhere!’ – Cristabel’s voice crying, ‘Retreat to the barricades!’ then the sound of small feet running up the stairs.



Rosalind waits for the table to compose itself. 'Willoughby, surely we won't have to sell off Chilcombe? Jasper says it's been in the Seagrave family for generations.'

'You're a Seagrave now. What do you think?'

'I'm never sure what I think.'

'You need to have a son, then you can start to sound more confident. Two sons, ideally. An heir and a spare. No need for blushing, dear sister.'

'Don't you care what happens?'

'Mrs Seagrave, I'm the spare. None of this is mine, as far as the eye can see.'

Willoughby gestures widely, then returns to Jasper's leftovers.

Blythe the butler enters, adjusting his white gloves. 'Will you be requiring anything else, sir?'

'Nothing at all,' says Willoughby. 'Have someone bring my car round.'

'Off so soon?' says Rosalind, but Willoughby is already leaving, taking Jasper's toast with him.

Breakfast with both Seagrave brothers in attendance often ends in this way, with food thievery and napkins thrown to the ground and dramatic exits, and the current Mrs Seagrave left alone at the dining table, staring at the sugar bowl for want of anything else to do.

Whenever Willoughby goes, she feels she has missed a chance. She is eager to show him that she too is familiar with the wider world, conversant with the latest society news. She wishes she knew how to capture his interest, how to slow his bright carousel long enough that she might join in.

The more she studies him, the more Rosalind notices that the rules of behaviour do not seem to apply to Willoughby. His attendance at meals is haphazard; his handkerchiefs are Egyptian

silk and jewel-coloured. He never joins the household when they dutifully troop off to Chilcombe Mell church on Sunday mornings, but Rosalind has seen him chatting cheerfully to men from the village. Jasper chastised him about it once and Willoughby replied he'd fought alongside such men and wasn't about to start talking down to them now.

After her afternoon rests, Rosalind often opens her bedroom curtains to see Willoughby's tall figure disappearing into the trees at the edge of the lawn, with Cristabel trotting at his side clutching a wooden sword. Betty tells her that they go down to the beach, that Willoughby is teaching his niece to catch crabs. She wonders who has allowed this. She wonders what the French governess she has employed is doing.

She has the sense there are no boundaries in Willoughby's life. It is so enviably free in contrast to her own, so adroitly nonchalant. Rosalind's life, first with her widowed mother and now with Jasper, seems an endless succession of Sundays: clock-marked, rule-bound days of manners and luncheons. How thrilling to discover that the rigid particularity of things – fish knives, tablecloths, topics of conversation – is as arbitrary as deciding that one day should be called Sunday and treated differently to all the rest. If Sunday is only Sunday because we call it Sunday, then why not call it Friday instead?

One morning, she meets Willoughby in the Oak Hall. He is on his way out; she is having a little wander. He nods towards the list she holds in her hand.

‘Anything of importance, Mrs Seagrave?’

Rosalind looks down at the list. ‘Oh. It's nothing.’

Willoughby frowns. ‘Is it a shopping list? I'm off to London today.’

‘No, this is my list of the shops I want to visit. When I go to London.’

He takes the list from her hand. ‘Do you need anything from these shops?’

‘I won’t know until I visit them. I don’t know what’s in them as I’ve only read about them. In magazines. They are new shops and I want to see everything they have. Then I’ll choose. A hat perhaps. Or a bracelet. Something unique. I have very particular tastes.’ These nine sentences are the most she has ever said to him.

‘Right you are.’ He glances at the list, hands it back to her, then leaves the house with a wave.

Two days later, Betty brings a parcel to Rosalind. ‘Came in the second post for you, ma’am.’

Inside, Rosalind finds a beribboned gift box from the hat shop that was at the top of her list. It contains an illustrated colour catalogue describing every style of hat they sell, along with a note in looping hand-writing that reads: *For Mrs Seagrave & her Very Particular Tastes. W.* It hums in her hands.

Rosalind wanders the gallery landing, absent-mindedly touching her throat, watching dusty columns of light fall through high windows into the hall, where the grandfather clock ticks and tocks. In her boudoir, she cuts pictures from her magazines, lets them float to the floor. She goes through her catalogue, circling and re-circling. The catalogue. The note. The catalogue. The note. Her turn coming round.

It becomes a habit then. Whenever Willoughby leaves for London, he visits Rosalind beforehand to enquire whether he should pay a visit to one of her shops.

Willoughby is practised in the art of being attentive to women, but he enjoys this diversion, primarily because of the specificity of Rosalind’s requests – ‘A soliflore scent from an established French house, but not eau de toilette, it should be eau de parfum or nothing at

all' – so unexpected, coming from his brother's demure young wife.

He enjoys too the ceremonial return to Chilcombe: carrying in a pile of boxes and watching as Rosalind examines their contents, intent and focused as a jeweller, her acceptance or rejection of items entire and irreversible. It is the only time he sees her make decisions without deferring to Jasper, and he finds it captivating.

Sometimes, he will pick out an item himself, testing his eye against her own. He will tell her the shop manager suggested it, and wait for her reaction. It amuses him that his choices are consistently rejected; he feels sure if he offered them as gifts, she would claim to adore them.

Only one of his secret purchases – the new Guerlain women's scent Mitsouko – passes her test. She tips a drop on to her wrist, sniffs it, then screws up her nose. 'Awfully heavy.' But as he is about to re-seal the elegant square bottle, which has as its stopper a glass heart, she takes it back from him. 'No, I'll keep it. It's not altogether vulgar.' When he leaves, her face is at her wrist, breathing it in, with an absorbed expression.

These moments come back to him at odd times. Her delight at the arrival of the items, her glee in the unwrapping. The lilac veins in her wrists. The shadows beneath her eyes. How she stared. She seemed to be looking at more than a few items in gift boxes: it was as if she saw the whole world in miniature; the eye of the botanist trained on the microscope.

One afternoon, Willoughby passes Cristabel on the gallery as he is carrying a stack of parcels to her stepmother.

Cristabel brandishes her wooden sword and says, 'Halt, stranger. I'm waiting for a brother. Is he in there?'

'Afraid not,' Willoughby replies. 'Both hands used on a broadsword, by the way.'

‘He will be here soon. Maudie told me what wives do.’

‘Darling girl, don’t listen to the maids’ silly chatter.’

‘Maudie isn’t silly. Why don’t you have a wife?’

‘I haven’t found one that wasn’t already taken. Besides, they seem like hard work.

Expensive too. I prefer to spend my money on motors.’

‘When will I have a motor?’

‘When you stop frowning at your favourite uncle. We’ll go for a spin tomorrow, shall we? You can bring that French governess of yours. I do enjoy her company.’

‘I can’t bring her.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘New mother has sacked the governess.’

*‘Quel dommage.’*

‘Maudie says new mother doesn’t like anyone prettier than she is.’

‘Maudie isn’t silly at all, is she? What is this ferocious scowl for now?’

‘I’m not pretty. But new mother still doesn’t like me. But I don’t care about that.’

‘You shouldn’t. Pretty girls can be terrifically dull. Remember, two hands on the hilt.

Weight on the back foot. Better.’

## Entreaties

*March, 1920*

Weymouth is full of sand. A chilly easterly wind is blowing across the wide expanse of the bay, skittering over the white tops of waves and whisking fine sand from the beach, so it gusts in stinging flurries towards the seafront hotels, neglected after years of diminished wartime trade. A line of vacant faces squinting out at a battleship-grey sea. To Jasper, the seaside town feels deserted, a final outpost.

He walks the length of the Esplanade, a broad walkway curving along the beach. In the previous century, it was promenaded upon by royalty, but now there are only wounded Anzacs – soldiers from Australia and New Zealand stationed in the Dorset town to recuperate, pushed along in blanketed wheelchairs, with empty sleeves or trouser legs tucked up and neatly pinned. Jasper considers it a cruel twist of fate that brave men used to the Southern Ocean's azure seas should wind up on England's insipid South Coast, the ocean's limpest handshake.

Scattered among the leftover Anzacs are a few early season visitors, gripping their hats on this blowy day, and down on the beach a handful of children are paddling, skinny limbs pinking with the cold. A pair of old-fashioned bathing machines stand empty at the water's edge. A sign saying 'Back Soon' is propped against the striped tent housing the Punch and Judy puppet show.

At the far end of the Esplanade, there is a red-brick terrace of guest houses, backing on to the town's harbour. Ships' masts are visible above the rooftops, like a series of crucifixes. The penultimate building has a wooden billboard propped by its front door, which proclaims it to be the residence of MADAME CAMILLE, MYSTICAL PSYCHIC adviser to KINGS

AND QUEENS, TELLER OF FORTUNES – SHE SEES ALL! SHE KNOWS ALL! This is followed by a chalk illustration of a single eye.

Brushing sand from his beard, Jasper knocks on the door. A young boy lets him in and points up a dark staircase. Madame Camille has a narrow room on the first floor. Something red and gauzy has been draped over a standard lamp, giving the space a rouged, infernal glow. Madame Camille herself is seated at a baize card table by a window overlooking the harbour, her hands resting on a glass ball. Jasper presumes it is meant to be a crystal ball, although it could be a ship's buoy scooped from the harbour for all he knows.

He sits down opposite her and places three coins on the table. Madame Camille's eyes flicker over them, quick as a lizard's tongue. She is thin-faced, with a fringed scarf draped over scraggly hair.

'You've come for someone you've lost,' she says, her accent unfamiliar. Irish perhaps. Or pretending to be.

Jasper is startled by the informality of her address. 'I have. My wife. My first wife, Annabel. I overheard a servant of mine saying you contacted her late husband, and I –'

'Annabel. A strong woman. They don't always want to be contacted, the strong ones. Reluctant to accept it themselves, you see.' Madame Camille rubs the glass ball.

'I see.' He isn't sure he does.

'Do you have an item of hers that still remembers her touch? Something she always kept with her?'

Me, he thinks. I still remember her touch. He frowns, then reaches into his pocket to find Annabel's accounting notebook, each page filled with the miniature Sanskrit of her pencilled numbers. Madame Camille takes the notebook, closes her eyes, breathes loudly through her nose. Outside, a paddle steamer lets go a brassy hoot from its funnel as it makes its way out to sea.

‘I hear voices,’ says Madame Camille.

Jasper whispers, ‘Is she there? May I speak to her? I wanted to explain about Rosalind. A sense of duty compelled –’

‘A spirited lady.’

‘Is she cross with me?’

Madame Camille frowns. ‘She’s distracted. Keeps searching about. Did she lose something dear to her? Jewellery? A set of keys?’

‘Nothing springs to mind.’

‘It can be the most unlikely item – a window left open – it bothers them awfully.’

‘I keep the windows closed as a rule. May I speak to her now?’

‘She’s calling out, bless her heart.’

‘For heaven’s sake, why can’t you tell her I’m here? Or at least give me some proof that this woman is truly my Annabel.’

Madame Camille half opens her eyes. ‘Not in the business of proof, mister. I gives you what they gives me.’

‘Ridiculous!’ Jasper exhales, spittle ricocheting through his whiskers.

Her eyes are fully on him now, undiluted, sharp as a fox. ‘Perhaps that’s all then.’

‘This is what I get for my money?’ says Jasper, noticing at that moment the money he placed on the table is no longer on the table.

‘It comes as it will,’ she says, infuriatingly unconcerned.

From the corridor comes a deep masculine cough.

Jasper stands up and barrels furiously from the room, past the young boy who let him in, now accompanied by a large man in vest and braces with great hams for arms, and rushes back down the stairs, into the daylight, and the sudden shock of garish seaside life is nauseating: the limbless Australians, the discordant jangle of a pipe-organ in the pleasure



gardens, and the nasal cries of Mr Punch grappling with his wife. *Thwack, thwack, thwack.*

*That's the way to do it.*

Jasper hurries along the Esplanade, his face repeatedly crumpling in a kind of agony. How stupid to think he could talk to Annabel. Utterly idiotic to go to that fraudulent gypsy. He finds a handkerchief. Blows his nose loudly. Plonks himself down on a wooden bench. Looks out along the shore.

He is heartily sick of Dorset. Every morning, reading the newspaper, he will seek out advertisements describing land for sale in Cumberland, in the north of England, where he and Annabel had spent their honeymoon. Hadn't honeymooned with Rosalind. Hadn't seen the point.

In Cumberland, everywhere you looked, you faced the kind of epic landscape that could make a man take up religion or watercolour painting. But Jasper is trapped on the crumbling bottom edge of England, constantly badgered by disgruntled tenants and staff, all wanting more from him when he has increasingly little to give. He thinks of the accounting notebook in his pocket, how it changes from Annabel's neat numbers to his own chaotic scribble, dotted with question marks.

Rising taxes have forced him to sell off two tenant farms and he is only clinging on to the last having agreed to fix the rent at pre-war rates. His own family are more of a hindrance than a help. Rosalind has eye-wateringly expensive tastes, and although she is due to inherit a hefty amount when her mother dies, said mother refuses to shuffle off. Meanwhile, Willoughby is burning through his allowance at a flagrant rate. Whenever Mr Bill Brewer, his new land agent, shows him the household ledger, Jasper can see – for the first time in his life – gaps, debts, vacancies. Just last week, his one remaining gardener had gone off to work in a Torquay hotel.

There are only a few of Jasper's original staff left. Barely a handful had returned from the war, and most had left something of themselves behind on the battlefield, if not a foot or an arm, then whatever it was that controlled their emotions. Jasper recognized the flighty look in their eyes as that of a horse after a thunderstorm: there could be no talking reason to them. They would have to come round in their own time, if they ever did.

In an attempt to balance the books, he had sold a few family portraits. He felt a twinge of sadness as Great-Aunt Sylvia was carried away, but then a diminuendo of that feeling, as if her solemn face were watching him from a train moving into the distance. When housed in Chilcombe, the portraits had been part of a reassuring continuum, but once given a price, something of them vanished. The train containing Great-Aunt Sylvia rounded a bend; the smoke from its chimney rose up and merged with the clouds.

Jasper blows his nose again, a mournful bugle call. The sea is still grey, the wind still cold. Somewhere along the diminishing coastline lies his home. His ancient home containing a wife he doesn't love and a child he doesn't know how to love and an empty space where his love used to be.

Sometimes, when Cristabel wakes in the night, she cries, 'I'm up here!' as if answering a question about her whereabouts, but nobody in the house has asked the question, nobody in the house has called for her. From her tiny bedroom on the other side of the roof space, Maudie hears Cristabel shout out once, twice, then a mumbled version and then nothing, just the silence of children, held high in the pitch-black attic, listening, waiting.

Every morning, after breakfast, Rosalind will go to her writing desk to compose charming letters of invitation, hoping to begin the life she imagined when she said her wedding vows. Each missive she sends out she imagines as a plucky messenger pigeon flying over the great

wall of the Ridgeway. Every letter includes an enticing mention of *Jasper's brother Willoughby – a war hero!* – and folding him into an envelope gives her a strange pleasure, as if she were sealing Willoughby inside her future plans. *Do come!* she writes. *Do!*

But replies to her entreaties are few.

One evening at dinner, she says, 'Jasper, perhaps we could consider taking a house in London for the season?'

'I stay at the club if I need a bed,' he replies.

'What about when your daughter comes out? It would be useful then.'

Jasper coughs. 'Long way off.' He pushes back his chair and leaves the room.

Left alone at the long table, Rosalind senses the scuttling approach of servants and lifts her smile in readiness.

'Everything satisfactory, ma'am?'

'Perfect. Thank you.'

Later, lying in her newly installed bathtub, Rosalind calls to Betty, 'The child, Jasper's child, how old is she?'

Betty's freckled face appears in the doorway. 'Just turned four, ma'am. Had her birthday last week, in fact.'

'Is she coming on all right, do you know?'

'I believe so, ma'am. They say she is a bright girl. Already learnt her letters. She's a funny one, Cristabel. The other day –'

'Could you fetch a towel, Betty?'

'Right away, ma'am.'

Rosalind swooshes gently to and fro, luxuriating in her new tub, until Betty arrives with the towel, then she heaves herself from the suction of water, rejoining gravity.

At her dressing table, she idly plays with the contents of her jewellery box while Betty brushes her hair. 'Betty, does the girl Cristabel resemble her mother? I've never seen a photograph.'

Betty pulls a face. 'Hard to tell, ma'am. Mrs Annabel, God rest her soul, had what you might call strong features.'

'Ah,' says Rosalind, meeting her own gaze in the mirror. The reassurance of her face. Its fine planes. Its surety.

Betty says, 'I've let out your red gown as you asked, ma'am. It was tight at the waist, wasn't it? Good to see you've got your appetite back.'

## So First, the Primroses

*April, 1920*

Betty was the one to tell Rosalind. Pragmatic Betty with her numerous sisters and accumulated knowledge of what goes on within the mysterious, treacherous innards of women.

Rosalind was in her rose-scented bath, casting an assessing eye over her floating Ophelia body. 'I must stop eating rich desserts, Betty. I'm developing a paunch.'

Betty paused in her folding of towels. 'Well, ma'am. I was meaning to say. My eldest sister gets a bump there when she's expecting.'

'Expecting what?'

'Expecting a baby, ma'am. When she's in the family way.' Betty kept her attention on the towel in her hands. 'Forgive my impertinence, ma'am, but do you – have you noticed any change to – has your monthly visitor arrived of late?'

Rosalind said nothing. There had been the word 'baby' and then her ears had tucked themselves shut, neat as an otter's, so Betty's voice had become an unintelligible *wurble*, *wurble*, *wurble*. She held herself very still. There was something in her. They had put something in her. How dare they intrude upon her like that.

Betty looked at her. 'Ma'am?'

'I won't be joining my husband for dinner tonight,' Rosalind heard herself say, and was surprised at the civility of her voice. 'Would you be so kind as to let Mrs Hardcastle know? That will be all.'

Rosalind stayed in the claw-footed bathtub until the water went cold, only her face, knees and breasts poking above the surface: a pale archipelago. Floating in the filmy water,

held up by it, she hung suspended above the rest of the house. She listened to the continuation of evening activity: the patter of servants on staircases; the chiming of the grandfather clock; a rook cawing outside, jawing companionably on like an after-dinner speaker. Everything was as it should be, as it always would be.

When she sank a little, so her ears were submerged, she heard her own heartbeat very close by. Lying there, goosebumped and shivering, Rosalind wished, for the first time in her adult life, that she could see her mother, but then she remembered how her mother was, and wished instead she had been given a different mother. One like Betty's, perhaps, who ran the pub with her husband and was prone to being overly generous with the gin but was someone you could tell your troubles to. But how foolish to think in such a way. Your mother was your mother, whether you liked it or not. You had no choice in the matter. If she had a gin-swilling mother who worked in a village pub, where on earth would she be now? Certainly not in a claw-footed bathtub. Certainly not in possession of pure rose bath oil. And Rosalind watched the light on the bathroom wall shift in slow degrees from gold to peach to grey.

The following morning, a doctor came into her bedroom.

Rosalind presumed Betty had told Mrs Hardcastle about her body's new bulge, and this information had been passed on to both a doctor and to Jasper, as there was a posy of primroses on her breakfast tray. She was relieved by this, as she could not think how to tell Jasper herself. So first, the primroses, and then the doctor, all before she was out of bed. Now she was the carrier of a possible Seagrave son and heir, her husband would give her flowers and allow strange men into her room to examine her.

Dr Harold Rutledge was his name. A friend of Jasper's. Stout and ruddy as a toby jug. Rosalind kept her eyes on the canopy above the bed as he ran his hands over her abdomen,

leaning close enough that she could smell last night's brandy on his breath.

'All seems tip-top. Plenty of rest, no horse -riding, but normal marital relations can continue,' Dr Rutledge said, then laughed, an oddly triumphant noise. 'Good old Jasper,' he added, pulling aside the top of her nightgown to press a cold stethoscope to her breast.

Rosalind wondered what he could hear through his metal instrument. She imagined a hollow hissing of reeds. She was aware of a crowded, desperate feeling in her mind that only abated when she concentrated on a far corner of the canopy.

The doctor removed the stethoscope and closed her nightgown as casually as a man turning the page of a newspaper. 'Excellent, excellent,' he said.

Everybody seemed very pleased, and, despite the fact Rosalind didn't tell a single soul, everybody seemed to know, almost immediately. Village children appeared with bouquets. The butcher's boy arrived with a parcel of meat. Even the vicar in Chilcombe Mell church beamed benevolently at her from the pulpit while speaking of fruitfulness. It was as if they had been waiting for this all along.

She remembered how welcoming they had been when she arrived. Their eager hands opening doors, carrying bags, offering tea. They had pressed her clothes, poured her wine, and she had felt rather royal, as if she were someone of importance. But they hadn't wanted her at all, had they? They had wanted it.

Rosalind retired to her bedroom, pleading nervous strain, admitting only visits from Betty or Mrs Hardcastle or Willoughby, if he came with things from London. Jasper, surprisingly acquiescent, retreated, muttering, 'Whatever you wish.'

Dr Rutledge called occasionally to examine her expanding stomach. He advised she take up cigarettes, saying women were prone to hysteria when with child. 'Brain's starved of

nutrients. Try a few every day after meals and you'll be right as rain.'

The cigarettes (provided by Jasper) (in a silver case engraved with her initials provided by Willoughby) were vile, but she persevered. There was something about the way they set her head spinning she almost enjoyed. She imagined herself with a stylish cigarette holder, at a party in Belgravia. She didn't like to look down at her body any more. She preferred the version of herself she was ordering clothes for: the society hostess with the twenty-one-inch waist.

Deep in her belly, the implanted creature grew. She did her best to ignore it, but she was hot and tired, a bloated vessel. At night, even with the windows wide open, she tossed and turned in her own sweat, her body generating heat like a smelting furnace. Every morning she woke exhausted, with a sour metallic taste in her mouth, as if she had spent the night sucking coins.

Of course, they had not thought to tell Cristabel. The thought did not enter their minds. It remained outside their minds, along with most matters pertaining to Cristabel. Such thoughts were items left uncollected, of little value. And, as often happens, these forgotten items were picked up by servants.

Maudie Kitcat peered into Cristabel's attic bedroom one evening and said, 'You're to have a brother or sister, have they told you?'

Cristabel looked up from her bed where her collection of stones with faces were building themselves a home under her pillow to protect themselves against the ravaging attacks of the postcard of a dog called Dog. 'The brother?'

'Could be.'

The stones with faces came rushing out of their pillow shelter, their expressions twisted cries of joy and relief, and the postcard of a dog called Dog was tipped over, like a



great wall.

Maudie watched, with her curiously fixed stare, and continued, 'Betty says if they don't have a boy, they'll keep going till they do.'

'Where is the brother living now?' asked Cristabel.

'In Mrs Seagrave's belly. That's why she's gone fat.'

Cristabel reached under her bed to grab a few sticks from her stick pile to build a little bonfire. She carefully leaned the sticks against each other, then said, 'I didn't live in her belly.'

'You didn't.'

'I lived here. In this place. This is my place.'

'That's right.'

'The brother will live here too. With me. I will look after him.' She looked at Maudie who nodded, then walked away down the attic corridor.

Cristabel placed the postcard called Dog on the bonfire and put the stones with faces in a circle around it. There would be a great feast tonight. A postcard of a dog called Dog would be roasted with a red apple in its mouth. There would be fresh snow. And jam tarts. And everyone would have seconds. And no one would go to bed.

## **Under Beds**

### **Under Cristabel's Bed**

Feathers, acorns, sheep's wool, a seagull skull, a dried ball of glue, one large lobster claw.

Three snails in a jar.

A trench lighter.

A wooden sword.

A toy aeroplane.

Drawings of soldiers, sometimes accompanied by dogs, camels or bears, captioned: HOLD FAST FOR ENGLAND and BROTHERS UNITE and LOYAL PALLS and SHE-BEAR SUCKLED THEM.

Lists of names, some crossed out.

One toffee, half eaten, rewrapped.

### **Under Maudie's Bed**

Four of Willoughby's letters to Cristabel.

An old piece of soap found in a guest bedroom.

A book about hunting African wild beasts taken from the study.

A pocketknife.

Lumps of chalk found on the Ridgeway.

A slate on which the letters of the alphabet are practised.

A diary.

A pencil.

### **Under Rosalind's Bed**

Shoe boxes containing the following:

Invitations and dance cards for events held during June and July 1914.

A napkin taken from the Café Royal, London, during the early hours of 17th July, 1914.

Six theatre tickets.

Two cinema tickets.

A daisy chain, pressed and dried.

Thirty-seven illustrations of bridal wear cut from magazines between 1913 and 1918.

One hundred and fifty-two magazine clippings depicting items including: Victrola gramophones, anti-wrinkle turtle oil creams, illustrations of correct dining etiquette, Sioux Indian ornaments, electrical reading lamps, croquet mallets, Turkish cigarettes, camphorated reducing creams, luxury hosiery, Royal Worcester teacups, and revitalizing health tonics to restore natural vigour to body and mind after times of great strain.

An article entitled ‘Which Kind of Marriage Turns Out Best?’ cut from *Women’s Weekly*, February 1919, following sections underlined:

*He has a horror of the lip-salving, opinionated girl of today. He just wants a wife with one or two ideas in her head and a home*

*A woman who is loved has no need of ambition*

*A man may run straight – but a woman must!*

*Without passionate love*

*Magnetic spark*

Photographs cut from various women’s magazines captioned:

*The tide of progress that leaves a woman with the vote in her hand but scarcely any clothes on her back must now ebb and return her to her femininity.*

*A free art plate of Florence La Badie, effervescent star of Thanhouser Film Corporation.*

*Off to the Paris fashion parades in a giant aeroplane from Croydon!*

Articles entitled:

‘The Latest Ways of Warming Homes’

‘A Loving Wife’s Burden’

‘Life Stories: At the Crossroads!’

An advertisement: *Maternity Corset: in all the latest designs, giving a QUITE ORDINARY APPEARANCE to the wearer – a physical as well as a mental comfort. Spotted broche, ribbon trim, side lacing allows for adjustment.*

## A Sleeping Woman

*August, 1920*

One summer afternoon, Willoughby says, ‘This used to be my mother’s bedroom. It was very different then.’

‘How so?’ Rosalind looks up from leafing through fabric samples. Now seven months pregnant, she is propped up in bed wearing a floral nightgown and matching bed jacket.

Willoughby has draped his long frame across the delicate chair that sits beside her dressing table. Betty is in the adjoining bathroom, cleaning the new sink. A gift box lies on the floor, its lid half off, something chartreuse and silky spilling out of one corner like liquid.

He says, ‘Mama favoured a funereal style of decor. Windows closed against contagions. Curtains drawn to protect the furniture. I had to sit by her bed in the gloaming while she read the Bible.’

‘The only books my mother considers acceptable are the Bible and Debrett’s,’ replies Rosalind. ‘She thinks reading unbecoming in a woman. Told me I should never develop a taste for fiction.’

‘You’re fond of magazines,’ says Willoughby, smoothing his moustache.

‘I prefer the pictures to the stories.’

‘So do I.’

‘I’m grateful to my mother, of course,’ says Rosalind, after a pause.

‘I’m not. I couldn’t breathe around her. I’m talking of my mother, you understand.’

Willoughby ruffles his hair, looks about the room. ‘I much prefer it now. Even with this flowery wallpaper.’

Rosalind blinks. ‘Rose damask. From Haynes of Paddington. I’m glad you approve.’

Do you approve?’

Willoughby laughs, a rich, dark sound. ‘I do. The room’s inhabitant is also much improved. Although I rarely see her outside of this room.’

‘I hope to be up on my feet soon, but Dr Rutledge tells me I should rest,’ says Rosalind. ‘It’s not unpleasant though. Quite soporific. I lie here and I imagine the parties I will have, in the autumn, and at Christmas. I lie here and picture the parties and what I will wear and absolutely everything to do with them. After that, I close my eyes and think of nothing. I simply stop for a while, and everything continues about me, almost as if I weren’t here at all. Isn’t that strange.’ During the course of this speech, her hands become restless, her fingers twisting into her hair.

Willoughby shifts in his seat. ‘I look forward to these imaginary parties.’

In the bathroom, Betty turns on the taps in the new sink. The pipes give a great clanking boom.

Willoughby smiles a little downward smile as he stands up. ‘I should let you rest.’

Rosalind watches him leave.

During the last weeks of her pregnancy, Willoughby continues to visit Rosalind, bringing requested items from Mayfair boutiques. After examining the purchases, Rosalind often falls asleep. It occurs to Willoughby that he has never seen a woman sleep in this way before. When next to a sleeping woman, he is usually asleep himself. Or picking up his clothes on the way to the door. He remains in the chair by the dressing table, murmuring to Betty, ‘I’ll sit here a while, see if she comes to. Perhaps you could fix her some fresh flowers.’

He likes to observe Rosalind’s face, which is like a child’s as she sleeps, both innocent and furious. Sometimes she frowns, as if concentrating; sometimes a smile repeatedly twitches the corners of her mouth, as if she were greeting a line of people.

Sometimes, most peculiarly of all, he can see the movement of the baby in her belly, her nightgown briefly distended by a miniature foot or fist pushing outwards.

Mrs Hardcastle had given him a hard stare when she met him emerging from Rosalind's room one afternoon, carefully closing the door behind him. 'Mrs Seagrave needs her sleep, Mr Willoughby.'

'That's precisely what she's getting,' he replied, hands held up in innocence.

He isn't unaware, of course, of the body beneath the nightgown, still slender despite its protruding stomach. A sleeping woman is not conscious of the ways her buttons can gape, or how her bed sheets can wind about her legs.

But there is something else too: he is enjoying this time because it is unlike any other time he has spent with a woman. He is a man for whom doors and nightgowns have opened easily. The world, for Willoughby, is entirely accessible; it lies about like the spoils of war, waiting for him to take it. But his exchanges with Rosalind are bound about with restrictions and propriety. They feel decorous, courtly, soothing. The presentation of gifts in a quiet room. The pulling of a ribbon on a parcel. Nothing more.

Behind the veil of her eyelids, Rosalind roams the darkness. She has noticed a peculiar thing. She feels the presence of Willoughby most intensely if she closes her eyes. She feels he is somewhere in the darkness with her, and they are drifting around each other like balloons. There is a sense that if she presses forward, pushes through the darkness, she will come upon him, sprawled in an armchair by a dressing table, swinging one leg to and fro like a pendulum, waiting in a room much like the one she is in now.

Increasingly, she cannot sleep when he is in the room with her, although she dutifully tries to. She focuses on the black behind her eyes and wills it to let her through, concentrating on limiting her movements, controlling her breathing. Sometimes she drifts into a doze and

then returns, drifts then returns, like a tethered boat on a moving tide.

Outside, the summer burns on. The sunlight through the floral curtains tinges the room warm pink like the inside of a conch shell or the fleshy glow of the world as seen by a child with its fingers pressed over its eyes.

One day in the last week of August, Rosalind is lying on her high bed, elegantly draped in a masquerade of sleep. Betty has gone to the kitchen, dispatched by Willoughby to fetch a jug of water. Suddenly, Rosalind hears his chair creak. He is moving. And she knows, with a tightening of breath in her throat, that he knows she is not asleep. His voice, when it comes, is close to her ear, soft. ‘Stay just as you are.’

She hears the sound of a chair being pulled across the wooden floor, then the sound of him sitting down near her. She remains perfectly still, unable to admit to her charade, even though he has spoken to her. The darkness behind her eyes has shrunk to nothing. She exists only in her throat, the tips of her nostrils. She could exist in this single moment for ever – then the chair scrapes back and she hears him leave the room.

He comes again the next day. Betty is dispatched. The chair next to the bed.

He comes again a few days later. Betty leaves. The chair pulled closer.

He comes again and it is the first day of September and he places his hand on her torso at the place where her stomach begins to swell. He leaves it there for a moment, as if monitoring something, then briefly stretches out his fingers like a pianist reaching for an octave so that his thumb touches the underside of her breast. They remain like this for a while, neither of them moving, before he takes his hand away. But a moment later, it returns, landing on her side, then moving to her wrist, her waist, her throat.

Rosalind, lying back under the weight of her belly with her eyes closed, is unaware of his movements until they arrive fleetingly on her body. It is as if she were a great mountain



range and his hands the tiny, feathery touches of explorers with their charts and compasses, slowly making their way across the slumbering earth, casting their ropes about her.

(But where is  
Jasper? He is at  
the stables, the  
races, the auction,  
the church, the one  
decent restaurant  
in Sherborne, the  
gentlemen's club  
in Marylebone: he  
is anywhere at all  
that is nowhere  
near a wife within  
weeks of  
childbirth. He  
exists in a thin  
seam of usual  
haunts that allow  
him the luxury of  
looking neither up  
nor down nor side  
to side but simply  
straight ahead,

most often  
through the  
bottom of a  
brandy glass,  
because he cannot  
look anywhere  
else.)

And when her waters break, when Willoughby is above her in her airless bedroom on a warm September afternoon, it is as if Rosalind has become molten; turned from flesh into liquid and left her own body behind.

## Cristabel and the Stories

*August, 1920*

There is much for Cristabel to do before the arrival of the brother. Maudie says babies are tiresome and she'd as soon leave them on the lawn for the rooks to have at their eyes, but Cristabel feels this is because Maudie does not have any brothers. Or sisters, for that matter, but brothers are the main thing.

A brother, according to the books Cristabel has read, is a plucky lad full of life and go, ripe for adventure. Uncle Willoughby is a brother, and he is much more adventurous than her father. Cristabel's brother will need a wooden sword like hers, and she has put some of her stones with faces into his cradle to act as companions, for on windy nights there is a howling in the attic that even a plucky brother might find alarming.

She is also planning to tell the brother stories. Her current charges – the stones and the postcard called Dog – are always hungry for stories. She reads to them from discarded newspapers or Uncle Willoughby's letters. Sometimes, she even manages to steal a book from her father's study. She is forbidden to enter the study or touch the books, but if she ever sees the room unattended, she will dart in and stuff a book under her dress. Only one at a time though, and returned quickly, so there are no telltale gaps left on the shelves.

The study contains collections of Greek myths; leather-bound volumes of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; a book called *Moonfleet* about smugglers, and, best of all, a row of adventure stories by someone called G. A. Henty, with titles like *At the Point of the Bayonet* and *The Bravest of the Brave*. According to the author's introductions, they are based on true episodes in England's glorious history. It is from these books she has learnt the ways of brothers.

The Henty books are cloth-bound, with gold-lettered titles and illustrated covers bearing crossed rifles and jousting knights. Each is carefully inscribed with the same scribbly name on the frontispiece – *J. Seagrave Esq.* – and the pages repeatedly marked with greasy fingerprints. When Cristabel first opened Henty's *The Dash for Khartoum*, a shower of old pie crumbs fell from its pages into her lap. They turned out to be edible.

Cristabel has enjoyed every one of these books and memorized as much of them as she can, but she would like the brother to have something new, not stolen. A story to keep.

'Do you have any stories?' she asks the French governess, who rolls her eyes and says, '*Non.*'

'Do you have any stories, Betty?'

'What do I want with stories?' replies Betty, who is on her knees, blacking the grate in the attic.

'You read the stories in the new mother's magazines.'

'They're romance, Miss Cristabel. Not fitting for the likes of you.'

'Why? What's in them?'

Betty sits back heavily on her haunches, her face red and perspiring. 'They're about weddings and that.'

Cristabel frowns. The brother will not want stories about weddings. He will no doubt find them as tedious as she does, so she resolves to make the best of what she has. She can read him the letter from Uncle Willoughby about discovering a scorpion in his boot in Constantinople, and it can be followed by the newspaper report she found about the hanging of an Ontario man who took hours to die, and she can finish with Henty's account of an Englishman leading a band of peasants to victory against the blood-stain'd sons of France. Maybe after that, she can do it backwards.

'Maudie, does a story always have to go from beginning to end? Can it go the other

way?’

‘However you prefers it, Miss Cristabel,’ says Maudie, carefully sharpening her pencil with a pocketknife. ‘In my diary, sometimes I go back and read a bit from last year, and it don’t matter. All headed to the same place. It’s pleasant to drop in on yourself unexpectedly –’

*Maudie Kitcat’s Diary*

*25th December, 1918*

*frost*

*church*

*plum pudding*

*member when I kisst Clive in the last stabel on the left after church that time an how  
he shook*

‘– and find yourself still there. But when you’re reading it, you know more than you did then. So you feel clever. Cleverer than that Betty Bemrose, at any rate.’

‘What’s in your diary, Maudie?’

‘Never you mind.’

‘Can I see it?’

Maudie shakes her head. ‘Not ever. I’d have to slit your throat while you was sleeping.’

‘With that very knife?’

‘Very same.’

Maudie is an excellent mentor in so many ways, and Cristabel is extremely gratified to take her advice regarding stories. Forwards or backwards, it doesn’t matter a jot.

## Waiting, Wanting

*25th August, 1890*

*Thirty years earlier*

It was the first day in months his parents had even glanced at him, and Jasper was balling it all up. Forced into a sailor suit that strained over his sixteen-year-old tubbiness and trying not to drop his baby brother in a stuffy photographic studio in Dorchester as a man hidden beneath a black cloth peered through the lens of a wooden contraption and shouted at Jasper if he breathed too visibly. Every time the photographer shouted, Jasper's father shouted, his mother sighed, and the photographer's assistant also sighed. An echo chamber of shouts and sighs. All his fault.

But his parents – Robert and Elizabeth – couldn't raise themselves to scold him properly. They were too busy adoring nine-month-old Willoughby in his voluminous christening gown, and continued to do so all the way home, cooing like idiots at the baby as they bounced about in the horse-drawn carriage. Jasper pressed his forehead to the rattling window and watched the sky pass by. The stately clouds proceeding over the water meadows outside the town looked solid, habitable. Great white clouds. Great white myths.

Baby Willoughby was a miracle. Everybody thought so. For almost the whole of Jasper's life, his mother Elizabeth had been pregnant, but every Seagrave child born after Jasper died, usually immediately. Others survived just long enough to be given weighty ancestral names, which they took down with them into the Seagrave crypt at the village church, where their small coffins were lined up on a shelf like parcels waiting to be posted.

It did not do to make a fuss, but it was felt as an affliction; this repeated boxing up of

tiny bodies, this shutting up, this muffling. Chilcombe was a mute place of closed doors where red-eyed maids pressed handkerchiefs to their mouths. At the end of every meal, Elizabeth would lay her cutlery precisely in the centre of her bone china plate without a single sound.

One of the footmen told Jasper that babies were made because ‘married folk do what cows and bulls do’. Jasper had seen this: the snorting bull lurching on top of the cow; the cow staring ahead, fatalistically chewing its cud. His body recognized such activity as known, as possible, but he could not imagine his parents behaving in such a way, for they hardly seemed aware of each other.

His mother wore black dresses that extended from chin to floor, and drifted about like a ghost, whereas his father existed somewhere beyond the walls, charging about the Empire. If Robert ever returned, it was a brief, blustery visit, in which he would blow through the building in a flurry of discarded boots and shouted orders to servants, like a localized tornado: a great deal of flattening; no real contact. Sometimes the only sign that his father had returned home was a new stuffed animal appearing in the Oak Hall.

How the babies were produced seemed unlikely, but that they died seemed inevitable. Jasper was the sole survivor: all-conquering and monstrous. From his bed at night, he sometimes heard an ailing infant crying and transformed these sounds into the screams of the vanquished Arabs in Khartoum. He imagined himself leading the victorious British troops; national acclaim quick to follow, his proud father slapping him on the back. When the screaming finally stopped, silence hung on the quivering air, long and expectant.

Then Willoughby was born. Jasper barely gave him a thought, expecting this baby to go the way of the others, but Willoughby, with his copper hair and bow-lipped mouth, did not die. And one day, Elizabeth unexpectedly dropped her cutlery in the middle of breakfast and

asked for the baby in the nursery to be brought to her. Jasper, up in the attic schoolroom reciting Latin verbs with his tutor, heard footsteps running by, then Willoughby being borne past like a young maharajah in an elephant parade.

The following day, an even more surprising event occurred. His mother appeared in the schoolroom. She had never been there before. Previously, the schoolroom was merely the name of a place that existed somewhere above her, remote as heaven.

‘One of the maids suggested Willoughby might like a toy,’ Elizabeth said.

A maid appeared brandishing two of Jasper’s tin soldiers. ‘Will these do, ma’am?’

‘Perfect,’ said his mother and away the raiding party went, leaving Jasper with nothing but *amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant*.

From then on, it was as if there were some sort of celebration going on in the house that Jasper was not permitted to attend. When he walked through the house with his tutor, heading out for his daily march along the coast, he would see people arriving to view the miracle baby, guests gathering in the drawing room, and his mother holding Willoughby, her face strained with anxious hope. It was an expression Jasper had previously seen on Cook, whenever she had created a new meal for his parents.

(Jasper would often lurk in a corner of the kitchen as Cook waited to hear how her creation had been received, because if she caught him watching, she would wink and say, ‘Now you’ll eat anything I give you, Master Jasper,’ and this would be followed by a tasty morsel: a chunk of cheese or an apple briskly polished on her apron. It was also true. Jasper would eat anything Cook gave him, primarily because she was one of the few people to speak to him without being obliged to do so. Besides, it satisfied something in him, to take food and eat it, it didn’t matter what it was. He was neglected and peevish; peevish and neglected. It was hard to tell which came first.)



‘Chop chop, Jasper,’ his tutor would say, ushering him out of the house, and Jasper would spend the walk slashing at plants with his wooden sword.

In the evening, when the time came for Jasper to greet his parents before their meal, he would descend the staircase, hair flattened with saliva, and lurk in the hall until permitted to enter the dining room; somewhere he only saw in glances, as he was not allowed to gawp about like a fish. The walls were painted blood red, to show off the meat served on the family china, while his parents were lit by candles, their long shadows looming behind them. In discreet corners, servants waited to serve; just as the dining room waited for Jasper every day, waited to find him wanting.

One evening, Robert, a man who began conversations somewhere in the middle, said, ‘Time for you to learn more than Latin, boy. Need to set an example for Willoughby. You’ll be coming with me tomorrow.’

At the mention of Willoughby, Elizabeth smiled down at the dining table, as if admiring her reflection in a pond. Jasper looked at the paintings on the walls. Portraits of Seagraves with alabaster skin, from a time when both men and women favoured ringlets. All seemed to be pressing a single hand to their chests, one finger splayed apart as if attempting to subtly point to something: the lustrous fabric they were wearing, perhaps, or the faux classical landscape behind them – *Look! In the trees! A little domed temple!* – or even the alarmingly high forehead of the person in the portrait next to them. At the far end of the room hung the photograph of surly Jasper in his sailor suit, holding Willoughby in his gown.

‘That wooden sword of yours,’ said Robert. ‘It’s a child’s toy. Give it to your brother. That will be all.’

Dismissed, Jasper went upstairs and got into bed, where he retrieved a biscuit stored under his pillow and picked up his King Arthur book. Then he put them down again. He

should read less. Eat less. He should buck up his ideas. Jasper stared at the ceiling.

The following morning – in fact, all of the following mornings, of all of the following years, throughout his youth and then his twenties and his thirties – Jasper glumly followed his father out of the house to learn about his responsibilities as heir, while inside, his younger brother blossomed effortlessly. Willoughby learnt to walk in a single afternoon; Jasper stole whiskey from his father's liquor cabinet, went swimming in the sea late at night, slipped on the pebbles and broke his ankle so badly he was left with a limp. Willoughby gambolled everywhere with his favourite wooden sword; Jasper hobbled about, weaponless, waiting for his father to die so he might be able to prove himself to his father.

The limp did not help matters. Jasper felt uncomfortable when visiting tenant farmers. He preferred doing the rounds on horseback. Up there, he was far enough removed from the *populous* to achieve benevolence. On foot, lumbering along, he was cumbersome as a circus bear. He noticed the sharp eyes of the estate workers as he approached; their smirks as he lurched across uneven fields like a man moving a wardrobe.

His social life was similarly limited. He wanted very much to be a fine English gentleman, but he could not dance, as his weak ankle gave way beneath him. He sat at the side of assembly rooms, imagining grisly deaths for young bachelors who could waltz. His poems remained in his pockets. He comforted himself with the thought that noble Hector never bloody well waltzed. During the night, if he had consumed too much food at dinner (and he usually had), he could hear himself breaking wind in his sleep, the helplessly escaping air a sort of continuation of his inept attempts at making small talk, a smattering of half-hearted repartee.

Sometimes, while following his still-very-much-alive father about the place, Jasper came up with schemes for how he might change life at Chilcombe if he were in charge. In

reality, there was no space left for his ideas, given the scale of his father's. Robert Seagrave's booming Victorian confidence dominated the future like the grand avenue of beech trees he was planning. Robert would never live to see the trees grow, but he had no doubt that in hundreds of years, Seagraves like himself would be parading beneath them.

It was a curious thing, that Jasper's father's life served as impediment to his own. Occasionally – on November afternoons, for example, the low sun glinting over the cobalt sea – the ocean inspired huge, inexpressible sensations that reduced Jasper's thoughts to broken half-sentences.

I love the –

How can we not believe that –

To meet someone who –

What would it be –

Sentences snapped in two before they had the chance to become clichéd, before his gloomy mind could dismiss them as claptrap, as impossible nonsense.

'Jasper, pay attention, for pity's sake,' his father would bark.

There was cheese to be eaten in the kitchen. Cake too. Apple dumplings. Peppermint creams. Turkish delight. The jelly-covered crust of an old pork pie.

## The Boxing Day Hunt

*December, 1914*

*Six years earlier*

Willoughby. Willoughby! Jasper did his best to ignore his brother. It was the first and, God willing, last Christmas of the war, and the younger Seagrave son was home on leave. Taking a break from soldiering, Willoughby bestrode the front lawn wearing white jodhpurs, a scarlet jacket and a top hat, while knocking back a glass of port and holding a frisking horse for a pneumatic blonde heiress. Jasper heard the heiress exclaim, ‘Such bravery! We all think of you,’ and knew it was not the massed troops of Britannia that she and the other women of England held in their minds as they knelt to pray in village churches or gazed across the sea towards battle-scarred France – it was bollocking Willoughby.

Willoughby Seagrave was the toast of society and, most gallingly, the toast of women. Jasper had seen even the dowdiest of old maids gazing lustfully after his long-legged brother. The boss-eyed spinsters Jasper escorted to county balls never looked at him that way. Catching his reflection in silver-framed mirrors, he knew why. He was a sobersided man in his forties, with a haggis for a face, and he was forever peering about, as if trying to puzzle out the answer to something everybody else knew.

Jasper had hoped when he became head of the family, matters might be different. That he might be respected. It was true that once his father finally had the good grace to expire – toppling over like a tree after Sunday lunch, as if to show them how an Englishman should die – things started to look up.

The whole village lined the route to the church on the snowy day of the funeral, just before Christmas 1913, and Jasper walked behind the men carrying the coffin, aware of the

villagers' eyes following him. As he paced behind his father's body, he heard in his mind the carol 'Good King Wenceslas'. *In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted.*

It would be wrong to say he was happy at the funeral; he felt his father's absence as a vast, whistling space. But as the mourning party left the churchyard, having deposited Robert in the crypt next to his wife and all their babies, Jasper found himself humming the tune – *Bring me flesh and bring me wine* – and by the time he was back in the house (the house that was now his), pouring himself a brandy, he was softly singing. *Thou shalt find the winter's rage, freeze thy blood less cooooo-ooooold-leeeee.*

But it soon transpired that matters hadn't changed. Whenever Jasper met local people, they only wanted to talk about his father and how there would never be another of his like. Robert had been blessed with the gift of obliviousness and the villagers appeared to admire him for it. Whenever Robert cantered by on horseback, he would wave at them so very generally, it was as if he were blind and simply gesturing in the direction of people he had been told were nearby. If he ever appeared on foot, there would be a flurry of hat-tipping and curtsies that he would stride through, like an explorer through jungle undergrowth. On the rare occasions when Robert did notice an individual among the masses – an especially pretty child, a pleasingly capable groom – then that person felt the very eye of God had turned upon them.

Jasper was not, is not, never will be God.

'Everything all right, sir?' said Tom Hardcastle, the man holding Jasper's horse.

'Hmph,' replied Jasper, watching the fulsome heiress leaning from her horse to take a sip from Willoughby's glass. Their father had never allowed women to join the hunt, believing their erratic reactions spoiled the sport, but Willoughby was welcoming them with open arms.

One booted foot into the strong hands of Tom, and Jasper is hoisted into the saddle,

immediately kicking his horse Guinevere away from the rest of the pack.

Thankfully, Willoughby didn't last long. After an hour of riding, he declared the fox they were chasing to be an unbeatable beast, bellowed, 'A port, a port, my kingdom for a port!' and led his followers and the panting hounds back across the fields to the house.

It took Jasper another hour of determined hacking before he could take solace in the countryside: the clockwork clatter of a pheasant's wings as it burst from a hedgerow; the sea in the distance, the same washed-out white as the sky.

Faithful Guinevere carried him on until they were quite alone. He was almost starting to feel equable when a woman cantered up, wearing a black riding jacket and a hat with a veil. She was not riding side-saddle; she was riding square in the saddle as men do.

'Trying to escape?' she asked, slowing to a steady trot.

Jasper grunted.

'Precocious, isn't he? Your brother,' she said. 'I had been warned.'

'Bloody going to ride his bloody horse into the bloody ground,' said Jasper.

'Shame we couldn't warn the horse. I say, what a field for a gallop – come on.'

She was off. Guinevere gave a skip of delight and Jasper found himself following. They thundered across the hard winter earth like jockeys.

At the far end of the field, the woman pulled her horse to a halt. Her hands, Jasper noticed, were firm but gentle with the bit. She didn't go in for the yanking that Willoughby and his boorish friends were prone to.

'There's a respectable inn near here,' she said. 'We could let these fine creatures have a well-deserved rest.'

She led him there, swinging herself from the saddle with a boyish leap. Jasper dismounted, feeling, as he always did, the drop in status that accompanied his drop to earth.

His weak ankle buckled as soon as his feet hit the ground.

The woman looked up from where she was scraping her boots. 'Riding accident?'

Jasper rifled through his usual list of suitably manly excuses for his limp, but her flushed face, friendly as a Labrador, caused him to say unexpectedly, 'Pebbly beach. Whiskey.'

'Bad luck,' she winced, tying their horses to a fence. 'Hamper you at all?'

'Nuisance when deerstalking. Gives way on occasions.'

'I've a horse with a gammy leg,' she said, pushing open the door to the pub, which was hunched low beneath a thatched roof. 'Used to pitch me off in the most unlikely places, but then he learnt to watch where he put his feet. You know how useful that can be in a hunter. Looking to breed him next year.'

'Is that so? I'm looking for a sire for Guinevere.'

Jasper could hardly hobble to the bar fast enough. A pair of brandies and they were soon sitting by the fireplace in the snug, cantering through his favourite subjects: horses, hunts, bloodlines, breeding. Her name was Annabel Agnew. She had black hair escaping in wiry coils from her hairnet and a trace of mud across one cheekbone. He ought to tell her to wipe it off, but perhaps not yet.

'Didn't think the fairer sex went in for horses,' said Jasper, with what he hoped was a jocular air.

'Always loved them. Get to ride more now as I'm helping my father run our estate. My older brother was killed in France, so until my younger brother learns the ropes, I'll still be running it. He's at Harrow. Hoping he'll stay there until the war is over.'

'Awful business. But the Germans won't hold out for long. England will always come up to the mark. What brings you to Chilcombe?'

'I have a younger sister too. The one who fell off her horse before she'd even

mounted it. I'm under strict instructions to keep her away from your brother. Which – it now occurs to me – I'm failing to do. She's terribly smitten with anyone in a uniform.'

'You're the chaperone, eh?'

'The spinster sister is often required to prevent their siblings contributing a little too much to the war effort.'

Jasper guffawed. 'Should get back to the house then.'

Annabel frowned and leant back in her chair. 'Just how fast can he be, this ruinous brother of yours?'

'Well. I suppose there are several young women back at the house.'

'All of whom he probably needs to charm.'

'Quite right.'

'Could take him about as long as it takes us to have another drink.'

'You might well be correct.'

'So, this Guinevere – tell me where you found her. She's an impressive beast.'

Later, three brandies later, when they were trotting back to Chilcombe, Jasper noticed that, on horseback, she didn't seem so tall. In the pub, when they stood up in the inglenook, she had rather towered over him, but in the saddle, thanks to Guinevere, he had at least half a hand on her.

Jasper and Annabel dismounted in front of the house, leaving their horses to Tom. Jasper limped quickly to the entrance, keen to escort her inside, but as he pushed open the front door, he heard riotous laughter.

Arriving in the Oak Hall, he saw Willoughby in an armchair by the fireplace – an armchair he had presumably dragged out of the drawing room – surrounded by his acolytes,



who were drinking port and carelessly chucking logs on to a ferocious fire. There was a woman slumped next to Willoughby, wearing the bottom half of the suit of armour and inexpertly sounding a bugle. The other parts of the armour were scattered about the floor like dismembered limbs.

‘Nearly had it that time, darling,’ said Willoughby.

‘That armour is not for dressing up,’ snapped Jasper. At the sound of his voice, servants lurking on the gallery vanished into bedrooms.

‘Only just got back, Jasper? Must have been a very wily fox,’ said Willoughby, without looking round.

The woman attempted to sit upright, hiccupping loudly. She was the blonde heiress.

‘That woman should be taken to her room,’ said Jasper, feeling his face redden. ‘We have guest rooms for our guests. She should be lying down in one of those.’

Willoughby used the spear belonging to the suit of armour to push a log on to the fire. ‘Is that what we do, brother? Do we ask our guests to remain in their rooms?’

‘That is not what I said, Willoughby.’

‘Jasper, we are back, all too briefly, from a bloody business, fighting the good fight. Surely even you can’t begrudge us a few drinks?’

Jasper was about to give them a sizeable piece of his mind, when he heard the strangest noise. Annabel was laughing uproariously. He should have guessed there would be something wrong with her. She must be one of those lunatic spinsters. He was wondering if she would ever stop, when she slapped her hands against her sides, and said, ‘You won’t believe it, but that’s exactly what Jasper said.’

‘What did I say?’ said Jasper.

‘I was adamant that if we came back here and found a scene of gallivanting, that Jasper should kick you out, you insolent buggers,’ said Annabel. ‘But he said I couldn’t

begrudge boys back from the front a few drinks.'

Jasper glanced at Willoughby, who had turned to look at Annabel.

'He's even put some money behind the bar at the pub in the village so you chaps can have a pint or two before dinner,' she continued. 'Isn't that right, Jasper?'

Jasper opened his mouth, Annabel supplied the words. 'What do you think, chaps, drinks in the local hostelry?'

The men looked at each other, then the one called Perry said, 'Splendid idea, Jasper old boy.' Soon they were all putting on their hats and trooping out, leaving the heiress to be helped by Mrs Hardcastle.

Willoughby, bringing up the rear, paused in front of Annabel. 'I don't think I've had the pleasure,' he murmured, carefully buttoning his jacket.

'Annabel Agnew,' she said, extending a hand. From the side, Jasper noticed she had the profile of a Roman emperor.

'Knew a girl by that name in Hampshire,' said Willoughby, taking her hand in his. 'She preferred to be called Belle.'

'Annabel,' said Annabel.

'Friend of Jasper's, are you?'

'Very much so,' she replied, her voice brisk as a whip. 'Don't think I caught your name.'

Willoughby smiled. 'Willoughby Seagrave, at your command.'

'Jolly good,' she said.

Jasper caught a look passing between them, that of the strict schoolteacher to the wilful pupil: a steady reckoning of each other's strengths.

After Willoughby had left, Annabel turned to Jasper. 'There is a village pub, isn't there?'

‘Yes. Place called The Shipwreck.’

‘Thank the saints. I was rather banking on that. Best send a boy down there with instructions for the landlord, or that motley rabble will turn up to find no drinks available.’

‘Bloody hell. Yes, we must.’

‘No hurry though. None of them looked capable of anything more than a saunter.’

Jasper called in the youngest footman and sent him down to The Shipwreck with orders to give Willoughby and his friends everything they wanted. It pleased him in an unexpected way, this act of munificence. He wondered whether he ought to do something similar for the staff on special occasions. He considered musing out loud about this idea in front of Annabel Agnew. He decided he would do this as he gave her a tour of the house.

Summoning up the courage to do so took him through the study, the dining room, the garden and the stables, but eventually, when they arrived back in the drawing room, he said, ‘Might borrow that idea of yours. Drinks at The Shipwreck. For the staff, I mean. New Year’s Day. Perhaps a show of fireworks for the village children.’

‘Capital notion,’ she said.

‘Thank you for stepping in earlier,’ he mumbled. ‘I went off half-cocked.’

‘My pleasure.’

‘Willoughby makes my blood boil.’

‘Best keep him out of the house then,’ she said, and were this statement coming from anyone other than the straight-forward Annabel, Jasper might wonder if it was meant flirtatiously, but with her, it seemed simply an honest assessment of the situation. Although, he couldn’t be sure that there wasn’t a slight sparkle in her eyes. Then he realized he had been studying her face for some time while half chewing on his moustache.

‘I chew it, when I’m thinking,’ he said, smoothing his moustache back into place.

Annabel held up one of the loose strands of hair that had escaped from her hairnet – the ends were broken and split. ‘Snap.’

One of Jasper’s hands was still attending to his facial hair; the other suddenly felt agitated and empty. There was only the sound of logs in the fireplace burning, their crackling and sighs, and his own breathing.

Annabel was still holding her own hair. ‘Always been envious of dogs. Having bones to chew.’

‘Yes,’ replied Jasper. He could hear her breath now, as well as his own, and the silence seemed even larger.

‘Always wanted lots of dogs,’ she said, looking at him with a frankness that was astonishing.

‘Very fond,’ he said, and felt, at that moment, that somehow each of his breaths drew her closer to him, though he could not remember either of them moving.

Then a maid came in carrying a coal scuttle. ‘Beg pardon, Mr Seagrave,’ she said. ‘I thought everyone had left.’

‘Not everyone,’ said Jasper, swallowing. ‘Could you bring us some tea?’

‘And cake,’ added Annabel.

Jasper found he was beaming at the remarkable Miss Agnew. ‘Yes. Yes, yes. Lots of cake.’

Jasper and Annabel spent the afternoon by the fire in the drawing room. It was a quiet room, north facing, with a cool light, the walls heather green, hung with paintings of rural landscapes: cattle in snow, cattle fording a river, cattle come to a river at twilight. They drank tea and ate cake and talked about horses and dogs, dogs and horses. He told her some of his

favourite historical facts about the region and it transpired she had some fascinating ones of her own.

Time appeared to do extraordinary things. At one point, Jasper glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, and it was four o' clock, but when he looked again a second later, it was gone six. Then, when he was watching Annabel efficiently demolish a slice of fruitcake, her cheeks glowing pink in the heat from the fire, and she looked up to catch his gaze, he found he was aware of each and every second as it passed. When Willoughby's boisterous party returned from the pub and Annabel got up, saying she must check on her sister before dinner, Jasper was suddenly disconsolate.

As she was leaving the room, Annabel turned back. 'Fancy a ride out tomorrow?'

Jasper nodded. Annabel waved a strand of hair at him and disappeared.

Dinner that night was not as hideous as he feared, despite having two of Willoughby's brainless friends seated next to him. He could suffer their nonsense because every time he looked up, he could see Annabel in a blue silk evening gown, at the other end of the table. In the candlelight, her hair shone black as oil.

The men around him were talking of war. They couldn't wait to get back to France, to get stuck into the Bosch. They would be home by springtime. Willoughby was boasting to the blonde heiress about being posted to Egypt, promising to bring her back a pyramid.

This is my house, thought Jasper. Tomorrow, these people will leave, and this will still be my house. Annabel Agnew lives in Wiltshire. Wiltshire is not that far away.

In the midst of the clamour and battle of the dining room, he raised his glass to her across the table.

## His

*February, 1915*

*Five years earlier*

‘Naturally, my sister is heartbroken,’ Annabel had said, relaxing into an armchair in the drawing room. ‘Ever since she heard the notorious Willoughby was off to Egypt, she’s been reading the newspapers, and now the Ottomans have invaded, she’s beside herself.’

‘She needn’t worry,’ said Jasper, pouring brandy into two glasses. ‘My brother has a knack of avoiding anything resembling hard work. Last I heard, he was learning to ride a camel.’

Annabel laughed. ‘Thank goodness you’re nothing at all like him.’

Jasper paused in front of the drinks cabinet. From there, he could see out of a window overlooking the lawn to where a rook paced to and fro, its considered manner suggesting a man with his arms held behind his back, filling time, waiting for news. The February weather was grey and dismal, a thick fog had rolled in from the sea. There was just the rook, the lawn, the fog, and the room Jasper was standing in.

What he meant to say as he turned round to offer her a glass was, ‘Would you care for a drink?’ but Jasper Seagrave had never been good at public speaking, and the words came out quite differently. What he said was, ‘Would you care to marry me?’

Annabel took the drink from his hand and said, ‘Let me get this one down me.’

Jasper turned to pace, to regret, to rue, to stew, but Annabel had drunk the brandy in a single gulp and was placing the glass on a side table, saying, ‘I think I would, you know. Yes, I think I rather would.’

When they married, one month later in the village church, it was a modest celebration, as so many were away fighting. They honeymooned in the Lake District, in beautiful Cumberland. Afterwards, Jasper would remember that day, those first weeks, in bright flashes, like scenes glimpsed from a moving train. It seemed remarkable to have such happiness when news from abroad was increasingly dark and worrying, but Annabel Agnew – Annabel Seagrave – made everything remarkable.

Returning to Dorset, he felt somehow taller. He was sure the servants looked at him differently. Annabel was so practical, so cheerful: her strong hands flicking through the household accounts or knitting mufflers for the troops or tightening a stirrup on Guinevere or checking the teeth of one of their new dogs. She proved perfectly capable.

They were unsure if she would ever be able to have a child. The riding accident that meant she always rode square in the saddle, never side-saddle, had damaged her pelvis. There were concerns. Annabel over thirty and Jasper in his forties. Some days, he believed he would be happy to die heirless simply because she was there every morning when he woke up. There, frowning through her reading glasses at her notebook, a pencil behind her ear, then turning to him with a smile. She was larkish at times, but always concentrated when he spoke. ‘Got it,’ she would say, and she always had.

They trained their horses together, talked about entering a few in races. They even went up to Ascot that year, and thought it was the new corset beneath her dress that made her faint after the first race. She wasn’t used to being out of her riding breeches and, when they got home, announced she didn’t want to go anywhere that required corsets again. They didn’t know she had fainted because she was with child. A month later, when it had become clear that Mrs Seagrave was pregnant, they had laughed and wept until Annabel insisted they stop because they were upsetting the dogs.

She suffered throughout her pregnancy. Her damaged pelvis gave her great pain. ‘It better be a boy,’ said Jasper, carrying in one of the new puppies to show her, ‘can’t let you go through this again.’

Willoughby was surprisingly admiring. His telegram from Cairo read:

*SPLENDID NEWS STOP SPLENDID WOMAN STOP OVERJOYED FOR YOU BOTH  
STOP W*

Jasper suspected Willoughby was worried about what might happen if Jasper never produced an heir, because then the great weight of the family name would shift on its axis and slide towards Willoughby, and all the camels in Persia couldn’t gallop fast enough for him to escape being buried beneath that.

But what did that matter, because Chilcombe was truly Jasper’s now, in a way it had never been before. When he and Annabel, his wife (his wife!), walked arm in arm across the lawn, he felt he was returning to his rightful place. He would follow her as she walked through the house, watching as she opened doors, opened windows, opened cupboards, finding the most unlikely things: a harp (which she could (almost) play); a stuffed baby elephant (which she had mounted on wheels for their child to ride), and Jasper’s old copy of *The Iliad*, which they read together to the baby in her stomach.

Annabel. She was bracing: she was the wind that smacked you in the face when you set your horse at a gallop; she brought the blood to your cheeks; and she was the warming brandy waiting for you by the fire at home. They were to have a child in the spring. A son, he was certain. Everything was coming towards him now.



## **They Won't Let Him**

*March, 1916*

*Four years earlier*

They won't let Jasper in the room. They won't let him in the room. Three men, four men, have to heave him away. He tries to break down the door, he wants to see her, but they say not now, sir, not now, sir, you wouldn't want to, sir, the doctor says there was a great deal of blood, sir, it's for the best, sir, but he had only just found her, he had only just found her, he needs to get to her, he needs to see her, he needs to tell her, she was going to help him, she was going to make him, she was his, she was his smart sparkling Annabel, a thoroughbred, that's what she was, and she would have him, she would have him, she accepted him, she took his hand, she kept everything in order, she did the books, she could account like a marvel, and when she turned to him from her writing desk to ask if there was anything he needed, he would say that everything was perfectly satisfactory, that he would sit and read the papers, but the day's news would slip through his fingers to the floor and all he could do was watch the concentration concentrated in the nape of her neck, where wiry wisps of hair fell over her collar, and he never thought he would admire brains in a woman, but she had the brains of a good hunter, she knew when to take the fence and when to stall, where the ground was boggy, where the turf was firm, she made it look easy, that leggy stride of hers, a woman who could break the neck of a pheasant without blinking because it was kinder to be quick, and in the evenings, he would sit before the fire and watch her laughing as she tried to play the harp, plucking sound from strings she'd found hidden in the attic, and she came to him with a frankness, with a blunt and welcome ease, like dropping your clothes on the beach,

none of that sideways, side-saddle nonsense some women went in for, flapping their fans, whispering with their friends, she came to him honestly, long-limbed as a boy, straightforward as a soldier, flexing her lengthy fingers, fingers mobile as a monkey, deft as a bookkeeper, fingers that flared with magic and pulled gold and music from the air, as if gold and music had always been there, and who will do the accounts now? Who will account for him now? By his word, he is loosed and falling, and they won't let him in the room, they won't let him in the room, and from somewhere he hears the rising wail of an infant, a baby they tell him is a girl, sir, a girl who looks just like her mother, sir, her mother, her mother, her mother, she so wanted to be a mother and they won't let him in the room to tell her, they won't let him in the room.

## Afterwards

*April, 1916*

*Four years earlier*

They had boxed up Annabel. Put her in the crypt. There had been a funeral. He believed he had been there. But he also knew it was impossible.

Jasper knew that each day followed another day, but this too was impossible, as every day was the same day. There was a war going on in Europe. There was an empty space in his house. That was all.

They had printed her name in the newspaper alongside the dead infantrymen. He had sold the harp. Given the dogs away. Put the stuffed baby elephant in the attic, upended, its little wheels spinning in the air.

It all seemed quite fraudulent. It was incomprehensible that events kept happening and she was not there to see them. Sometimes, he woke in the dead of night, wanting to tell her something dreadful had occurred, to shake her awake and say, 'My dear, you simply won't believe this.' But there was no one there, only the whistling walls and the empty dark.

She would be back soon. Not on this long, empty day, but perhaps the next. He wished someone would shush that noisy baby.

She would be back soon.

## The Vegetable

*September, 1920*

‘Is everything all right?’ says Willoughby, nodding at her stomach.

‘I don’t know,’ says Rosalind. ‘I felt something.’ She cautiously puts her hand down beneath the sheets and discovers the bed is sodden. Glancing surreptitiously at her fingers, she notices the liquid is tinged pink with blood and feels a distant jolt of fear.

‘I’ll fetch Betty.’ Willoughby pushes back his chair, moves away from the bed.

Betty arrives in the room surprisingly quickly. ‘Is anything the matter, ma’am?’

‘There seems to have been some sort of accident, Betty. The bed is wet. I don’t know why, I –’

‘Goodness, it means the baby’s coming, ma’am. I’ll call Maudie to fetch the doctor. Let’s get you out of that wet nightgown.’

‘It’s coming now?’

‘They come when they want, ma’am. Arms up, that’s lovely.’

Rosalind allows Betty to move her about like a rag doll. She is dazed, still lost in the heady world behind her eyelids – and Willoughby gone, when they had been so close, his mouth so near to hers she could feel the warmth of his breath.

Betty dispatches maids to fetch clean towels and hot water. Boots clatter up and down the staircase. Mrs Hardcastle appears in the doorway, tapping her fingertips together, then vanishes. There are shouts outside, the crash of a bicycle dropped to the ground. Messages are sent to Salisbury where Jasper is visiting a racing stables.

‘When will it happen, Betty?’ asks Rosalind.

‘The doctor will be able to tell you, I’m sure.’

‘I’ve quite an ache in my back. Does it hurt as much as they say?’

‘It can’t be that bad, ma’am, or people wouldn’t keep doing it.’

Doctor Rutledge arrives promptly, having been visiting a patient in the village, and Mrs Hardcastle escorts him into the bedroom. He listens to Rosalind’s heart with a stethoscope and runs his hands over her bump, frowning. Then he asks her to lift her knees up and hold them open.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she says.

‘Need to take a quick look,’ he says. ‘See what’s what.’

Betty smiles reassuringly and begins folding up the bedcovers from the bottom of the bed to allow the doctor access. ‘A quick look, ma’am. To check all’s well.’

Between them, Betty and Mrs Hardcastle push Rosalind’s knees up towards her chest and then Betty prises them apart. Rosalind has to look away, her hands fluttering about her face, as the doctor leans in, armed with some kind of steel implement.

‘I see,’ says the doctor, after a while. He returns to feeling her bump, his eyes casually wandering around the room as if examining the decor. ‘I see.’

The women wait.

After some time, Dr Rutledge turns to Mrs Hardcastle. ‘Difficult to tell where this baby is.’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘Strapping big baby too.’ Dr Rutledge looks at Mrs Hardcastle for some time, adjusting his waistcoat. There seems to be an unspoken assessment going on between them. Finally, he says, ‘If it is the wrong way round, it might not be plain sailing.’

‘It has been traditional for the Seagrave heir to be born in the house,’ replies Mrs Hardcastle.

‘Wouldn’t like to take any chances. Especially after.’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ says Mrs Hardcastle.

Betty places her hand on Rosalind’s arm.

‘Is Jasper due back soon, Mrs Hardcastle?’ says Dr Rutledge.

‘We haven’t heard from him, Doctor.’

‘Am I right in thinking Mr Willoughby Seagrave has a motor car?’

‘We’ll find him right away, Doctor.’

Betty and Mrs Hardcastle help Rosalind down the stairs, both talking to her, a cross-stream of encouragement and reassurance. Other staff hover nearby, hands clasped nervously in front of them. Rosalind has been dressed in a clean nightgown, dressing gown and slippers, which gives her the curious feeling she is a child allowed up past bedtime.

‘Good luck, ma’am,’ says Blythe, opening the front door.

Outside, Willoughby – one hand on the wheel of his open-top car, one hand lighting a cigarette – revs the engine. Mrs Hardcastle opens the rear door and helps Rosalind into the vehicle while Dr Rutledge heaves himself into the front passenger seat, smiling cheerfully and saying, ‘Splendid machine. A Wolseley, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘Four-cylinder engine, four-speed gearbox. She’ll go for miles, this one,’ replies Willoughby, patting the wooden dashboard. ‘Is Mrs Seagrave all right?’

Rosalind notices that the day has become evening. Long shadows are falling across the lawn, and the trees at the lawn’s edge are silhouetted against a persimmon sky. Beyond the trees, she can hear the sea’s gentle back and forth. It would be a perfect evening to sit outside with a cocktail, laughing at some snappy witticism with your head thrown back, a string of pearls at your throat.

‘Mrs Seagrave is doing marvellously,’ says Dr Rutledge. ‘Let’s get her to the

hospital.'

'A hospital?' Rosalind asks, but her voice is lost in the roar of the engine. As they accelerate away, she looks back to see Betty and Mrs Hardcastle standing outside the ivy-covered house: Betty with one hand in the air, Mrs Hardcastle with both hands to her mouth.

The car jolts down the driveway, past the stone pillars that mark the entrance to the estate. The pillars are topped with indeterminate heraldic creatures that Jasper once explained to her, but Rosalind cannot remember what he said. The iron gates that used to hang between them are long gone and only the stone creatures remain, green with age, totems of a previous civilization.

As the car steams through the village and up over the Ridgeway, with choking belches of petrol fumes, the ache in Rosalind's back increases. She tries to tell Dr Rutledge, but he is having a shouted conversation with Willoughby about fuel consumption, and whenever he looks round at her, she feels obliged to smile politely. She attempts to lean forward to tap Willoughby on the shoulder, but the movement of the car and the awkwardness of her bump means she fails to make contact. It is easier to simply hang her upper body over the edge of the vehicle and take gulps of the evening air as the countryside flies past. She hadn't realized there was so much of Dorset. It looked much smaller in the pictures she'd seen.

The car suddenly comes to a halt, brakes screeching. The lane up ahead is full of sheep, their black faces emitting a cacophony of *baas*. A shepherd stands in their midst, staring open-mouthed at the vehicle. Willoughby swings the car into the hedgerow, reverses out and drives back up the lane.

'Try a left up here,' cries Dr Rutledge, gesturing towards a grass-covered track.

'There are no signposts anywhere,' says Willoughby, 'I could navigate better in the bloody Sahara.'

'Ah! By the stars, eh?' shouts Dr Rutledge, hanging on to his hat as they gain speed.

He turns to Rosalind. 'All right back there?'

The pain in the lower half of Rosalind's body has worsened. It doesn't seem to be an ache any more, but something more purposeful. It comes in waves that tighten like an iron corset, until, at their peak, there is a moment where she feels ready to throw herself from the vehicle, then it fades and the world returns. She is not sure if this cycle lasts for minutes or hours. She hears the doctor reassuring her they will find the right road soon, but it is not possible to speak because it is coming again, the tightening. With each exhalation of her breath, she makes a moan like a cow. As long as she can fill her head with the moaning noise, she can still breathe. As long as she can stay hanging over the edge of the car, she can get through it.

Then they are pulling over to the side of a lane near some farmland, and Dr Rutledge is clambering across the leather seat towards her. She is half aware that he is reaching between her legs, but this is no longer something she is able to worry about.

'Thought so,' he says. 'It's coming. On to your back, Mrs Seagrave, on to your back.'

Between them, Willoughby and Dr Rutledge manoeuvre her, so she is positioned lying along the back seat, propped up on Willoughby. Dr Rutledge has opened the rear door to give himself more room, and stands half out of the vehicle, feet balanced on the running board as he unbuttons her dressing gown.

'Do you have anything we could give her? A shot of morphine?' asks Willoughby.

'Too late for that.'

'Nothing at all?'

'It's nature's way. Follow my instructions, Mrs Seagrave. Let's have no fuss.'

The doctor rips open her nightgown with a practised air and Rosalind sees her own legs smeared with blood. She is suddenly weeping, furiously and copiously, like a child.

'Don't try to get up, Mrs Seagrave,' says Dr Rutledge. 'When I tell you to push, you



must push with all your might.'

'But I don't want to,' she says.

Willoughby takes her hand. 'You're in it now, darling. I'm afraid there's only one way out.'

'Mrs Seagrave, I need you to push. Right now,' says Dr Rutledge, rolling up his sleeves and crouching between her knees.

Rosalind tips her head back to look at the sky and sees it miles above her, like the surface of the ocean. It is not possible to stay inside her body with all that is going on, it seems likely that she will die if she stays there, of pain and shame, and so she leaves it, and swims upwards to the blue film of sky, hearing her own curious lowing echoing out across the fields below her. Willoughby is gripping her hand and in some far distant part of her, she strains to rid herself of a boulder wedged in the structure of her body.

'That's it,' cries Dr Rutledge.

Willoughby wipes her hair from her face. 'Come on, soldier.'

When Dr Rutledge next tells her to push, Rosalind roars through gritted teeth, trying to heave the boulder out of her body. She heaves and heaves and thinks it will never be done, but suddenly it is done, and the doctor is lifting up a purple-faced infant, saying, 'It's a girl, a girl.'

Its fists are clenched and its toothless mouth is straining open like a baby bird gaping for a worm and its yellowy eyes are unfocused in the wandering way of the blind and when Rosalind looks at it, the moment is silent and empty.

'Good grief, the child's the spitting image of Jasper,' says Willoughby, his voice unexpectedly shaky.

'Never fear, Mrs Seagrave, the next one will be a boy,' says Dr Rutledge, tucking the baby into the crook of his arm. 'You popped this one out marvellously. We'll tidy things up

and get you home. Shift yourself on to the picnic blanket, there's a good girl. Don't want to stain the seats.'

Dr Rutledge uses his handkerchief to carefully wipe the baby's face as it lies in his arms, and then smiles at Willoughby who is reaching out to touch the child's clenched fist, as if they two were the proud new parents.

'Hello there,' says Willoughby. 'How do you do?'

## All Off

*September, 1920*

Cristabel wakes before dawn and doesn't know why. Then she hears it: the cry of a baby. She scrambles out of bed, pulls a cardigan over her nightgown and is about to race down the attic stairs when she sees Maudie, already dressed in her maid's uniform, frizzy hair escaping from her white cap, climbing towards her with an oil lamp.

'The brother –' Cristabel begins, but Maudie cuts her off with a shake of her head.

'It's a girl. Big one.'

Cristabel sits down on the wooden stairs, frowning. 'Are they sure?'

'Face like your father's, but it's a girl all right. Mrs Seagrave hasn't taken to it. Says it looks like a vegetable.'

'You said they'd try again if it wasn't a boy.'

'They will. That's why she's here.'

Cristabel sighs. It isn't what she had hoped for. The letters for the brother will have to be retrieved from under his pillow. The stones with faces too. It is a grievous blow, but despite this, she does feel some measure of sympathy for the vegetable baby disliked by the new mother. Surely sisters must be beneficial in some way. They know how to do weaving and how to cook simple warming fare. Sometimes they look after aged parents, when everyone else has left. Sometimes they are chained to rocks and offered up as sacrifice. She could probably find a use for that sort of thing.

Maudie looks at her thoughtfully. 'I know you was wanting a brother.'

Cristabel nods. 'But I have a sister.'

‘Half-sister,’ replies Maudie. ‘She’s no mother of yours, that one. You’d be wise to remember that.’

Rosalind is glad to get back to Chilcombe, where she can return to her bedroom sanctum and put the indignities of the motor car episode behind her. She is tended by devoted Betty, who brings her strengthening meals of liver and heart. Betty helps her bathe in scented water hot enough to return her to herself and, afterwards, binds Rosalind’s stomach with a long piece of linen, to regain her figure.

Lying in bed, Rosalind runs her hands over the tight layers of fabric. She feels rather wounded by everything, rather taken apart, and the bindings are a protective casing, a comfort. Outside, it is becoming autumn and the wind is moving through the trees like a rumour. The seasons are on the turn.

Sometimes, Betty will ask if she wants to see the baby, but Rosalind will say no, the child is better where it is. Betty will nod understandingly. She has seen her sisters go half mad trying to look after screaming babbers. It is not the kind of work a delicate lady like Rosalind should do. A nanny is employed. Rosalind’s mother writes to express her satisfaction that Rosalind has succeeded in *her primary and most blissful duty as a wife*.

Late one afternoon, Rosalind wakes to see Jasper standing at her bedroom window loudly blowing his nose into a crumpled handkerchief, his many-chinned profile startlingly reminiscent of the baby dispatched to the attic. A baby born in a car. How *déclassé*. She suddenly feels a clarification of her feelings towards her husband, as if everything up until that point had gathered together and hardened.

He speaks without looking at her. ‘Betty tells me you are fond of the name Florence for the child. After the celebrated nurse, I presume. I would be happy with that choice.’

‘I might call it Vegetable,’ she says. ‘It looks like one.’

Jasper turns to her, perplexed. ‘What are you saying? Don’t you like it?’

Rosalind does not answer. She stares back at him. He has caused this, and he has had to do none of the horrible bits. She feels the kind of impotent crossness she felt as a child.

Jasper continues, ‘Harold Rutledge said you might be upset it wasn’t a boy. Next time it will be.’

Rosalind says nothing; the silence is a small weapon for her to use. She carefully straightens her bedcovers. She needs to start making some lists. She wants to hold a birthday party for Willoughby in November.

Jasper frowns. ‘I was delayed. On the day. Didn’t want to worry you.’

‘I wasn’t worried,’ she says.

‘Willoughby said you were a trooper.’

‘Did he?’

‘You can call the child whatever you like. I’m just glad you’re all right,’ he says and crosses the room towards her, with his hands outstretched in a strange half-pleading gesture, as if carrying an awkward weight: a rolled-up rug; someone else’s coat; an old ill dog.

‘I’m perfectly all right,’ says Rosalind, tucking her hands under the sheets. The thought of him touching her brings on a shuddery feeling. ‘Could you ring the bell?’

‘Can I get you something?’

‘I want Betty.’

‘Of course.’ Jasper obediently presses the button on the wall that summons a maid.

‘The name. Florence. It isn’t because of the nurse,’ says Rosalind, after a pause.

Under the covers, she is running her hands over the bindings, adjusting them where they feel loose. ‘Why should I care about some dry old stick of a nurse? No. I saw a film. When I was in London. *The Woman in White*. It was about a beautiful woman called Laura who falls in

love with an art teacher, but an evil old man called Sir Percival tricks her into marrying him instead. What he doesn't realize is there's another woman who looks like Laura. Then – well, it's complicated, but Sir Percival dies in a fire so Laura and the teacher can marry like they should. Ah, Betty, come in. I was telling Jasper about a film. Betty loves to hear about films. She desperately wants to go to a picture house, don't you, Betty?'

Betty nods. 'I do, ma'am.'

'It was the actress in the film, Jasper. Her name was Florence La Badie. I will always remember her.'

'I see,' says Jasper.

'My child may look like a vegetable, but at least she will have a film star name,' says Rosalind. 'Or is that worse, do you suppose? To be a dowdy girl with a glamorous name.'

'No daughter of yours could ever be dowdy, ma'am.'

'You are a dear, Betty. I almost want to take you to a picture house myself,' says Rosalind. 'Was there anything else you wanted, Jasper?'

Jasper blows his nose again. 'Only to give you my best wishes,' he replies, formal as a retiring judge.

Rosalind observes her husband as he crosses the room. Once the door has shut behind him, she lets out a breath. Then she gets out of her bed in her nightgown and walks barefoot to her dressing table, where she sits down on the stool, positioning herself in front of its triple mirror in order to see herself and her two pleasing profiles: a triptych of reassurance. Betty stands behind her, running one hand down her mistress's long hair, which shines in the glow of the softly sighing oil lamps.

Rosalind says, 'You will see a film, Betty. I will take you to London and give you the afternoon off specially.'

'That would be a treat, ma'am.'

Rosalind nods, then opens a drawer of her dressing table and takes out a photograph from a magazine, which she passes back over her head to the maid. 'While you're at the picture house, Betty, I will have my hair cut in that modern style,' she says. 'In a London salon.'

Rosalind waits to catch Betty's gaze in the mirror, then, using both hands, lifts her hair and holds it folded against the back of her head, so it appears shorter, a jaw-length bob. 'Like this,' she says. 'All off.'

## Things

*October, 1920*

Cristabel, aged four and ever after, would place a great deal of importance on logic.

She is not allowed to have new boots because she spoiled her old ones by throwing them into the sea to serve as an anchor. She must wear the salt-stained pair until she has learnt her lesson. This is something she can understand. There is a followable logic to it. But there is one issue that does not seem understandable, however much she thinks about it. The issue of the things that boys have.

She had first noticed it when she came across a fisherman's wife playing with her infant son on the beach, letting him sit in the shallows at the water's edge. The naked boy, who was hitting the water with his plump hands, looked like the baby Jesus in the stained-glass windows in the village church. Slightly disgruntled, with a domed head. But between his legs there was a peculiar thing: a fleshy periwinkle curled on a wrinkled skin pouch of marbles. That – she later learnt from Maudie – was a thing that made him a boy, and boys were what the new mother was meant to be providing.

Cristabel did not have a thing. She had checked. Therefore, she was not a boy. She was not what was wanted. The vegetable baby also did not have a thing. Maudie confirmed this. Ergo, the vegetable baby was also not wanted.

Once alerted to the existence of these items, Cristabel kept a watchful eye on any she saw, to see if they did anything of interest. They never did. The things she sighted on the village boys when they went swimming in the sea were simply longer versions of the one seen on the baby on the beach.



What the things were called was a puzzle. Betty responded crossly to this question, saying, 'Never you mind, madam,' and took away Cristabel's breakfast before she had finished. The fisherman's wife just laughed. Maudie, usually so blunt in her responses, pulled a face and said, 'I only know words your stepmother wouldn't like.'

They seemed such insignificant things but were protected by this peculiar anonymity and brought their owners considerable advantages. Boys with things were allowed to wear trousers and go to school. People ruffled their hair; threw them apples; gave them amusing nicknames; praised them for gumption. They didn't have to have petticoats or husbands. They kept their own surnames and drove motors.

The brother would have a thing too, and the brother would be the heir, and the heir was what everyone wanted. Cristabel thought 'heir' was a strange word. It looked like a mistake and was pronounced *air*, like the noise people make when they don't know what to say.

What heir meant was similarly confusing. You could be born an heir but also named one, if there was a sword. 'I name you Air,' said Cristabel to the umbrella stand shaped like an Indian boy, tapping her wooden sword on his shoulders. She would no doubt find out more when the brother arrived. He would probably share being heir with her. They were going to share everything, except jam tarts and the things that belonged to Cristabel.

Before she had known about the things, she had thought it likely that she might be a boy. She had qualities and ambitions well matched to boyhood. An interest in snails and maps and warfare. A roving disposition. Nobody told her that she wasn't. When they found her constructing a chariot out of a wheelbarrow and two croquet mallets, it was something typical of Cristabel. Eyebrows were raised. Punishments were half-heartedly discussed, then forgotten about.

It was only after the new mother started growing a baby in her stomach that people remembered Cristabel wasn't actually a boy, and that stricter standards of behaviour should be enforced. They started saying she must 'behave herself, like a big girl'. There was a distinct lack of logic in these new rules, but when she pointed this out, she was told to stop acting like an uppity little madam.

When the vegetable baby was christened (Florence Louisa Rose Seagrave – Cristabel's suggestion of 'Cristabel the Younger' sadly ignored), Uncle Willoughby bought Cristabel a dress and some squeaky shoes to wear for the church ceremony. The dress was a mass of bows and flounces, and she had to stand in front of the full-length mirror in the new mother's bedroom as they put it on her. There was much tightening and fastening, and she felt it as a kind of tethering, an impediment.

Her body was no longer something amenable that transported her rapidly about the place, like an excellent rickshaw; it was something forced to be stationary, something to be looked at.

'There,' said Betty, tweaking the ribbons on the dress, glancing between the real Cristabel and the reflected version. 'There you are.'

As if she hadn't been there before.

One evening, in the attic with Maudie, who is reading her *The Iliad* in return for one of Cristabel's pencils, it occurs to Cristabel that everyone interesting in *The Iliad* is a boy. They are all owners of things. The only girls in it are sad wives, sad servants or sad beautiful women who cause wars.

It is a dark, drizzly night. Wind sighs down the chimney. The sound of the sea comes and goes. Maudie, in her black and white maid's outfit, sits cross-legged on a rag rug in front

of the fireplace, carefully following the words with her finger, slowly intoning. ““Unarm’d if I should go, what hope of mercy from this vengeful foe; but woman-like to fall, and fall without a blow.””

‘What does it mean, “woman-like”?’ asks Cristabel, who is tucked up in bed. The slanting room is lit by a few guttering candles on the mantelpiece.

Maudie thinks for a moment, then replies, ‘It means Mr Homer never met me. Or Betty Bemrose, for that matter. You’d have a job to knock her down.’ She carries on reading while Cristabel considers this.

‘Maudie –’

“‘. . . pent in this sad palace, let us give to grief the wretched days we have to live . . .’”

‘Why aren’t there interesting girls in the stories?’

““Still, still for Hector let our sorrows flow, born to his own, and to his parents’ woe.””

‘Maudie, why are all the best characters men?’

Maudie closes the book with a *cillump*. ‘We haven’t read all the books yet, Miss Cristabel. I can’t believe that every story is the same. Bedtime for you.’

## **A Hunter's Moon**

*November, 1920*

Jasper eats a late lunch alone. Sinks a full bottle of Bordeaux. Starts on a second. He hasn't seen Rosalind at the dining table in months and Willoughby doesn't often show his face, not even for dessert. Jasper grimly spoons lemon syllabub through his beard, while idly wondering – with no real hope or expectation – if he and Willoughby will ever attain an affectionate, brotherly relationship. It is a matter of regret to him they still slip into the well-worn grooves of ancient quarrels and petty bickering. Willoughby's a flibbertigibbet peacock, with more hair than sense, but he's brave. Dauntless. He's heard Willoughby's fellow officers talk about him with admiration. Jasper would like to be able to call his brother a friend. That would be something.

By the time he rises from the table, after a silent four-course meal eaten at a table set for three, it has become evening and dark outside. Jasper walks through the ground floor of his home, where servants are hurrying about, making everything ready for the guests who will soon be arriving to celebrate Willoughby's birthday. As Jasper opens the door to his study, he notices moonlight falling through the window like an invitation.

These days, he is more inclined to close the curtains and share the solitary lamplight of his desk with a decanter of brandy, but as a youth, he'd never been able to resist a moonlit night. He would steal down to the beach, book in one pocket, pork pie in the other, sole witness to a world lit up in eerie whiteness.

Even on that awful night when he'd broken his ankle, and was sprawled on his back crying, he had still kept gazing at the moonlight on the sea. And of course, the times with

Annabel – the two of them swimming in the glittering ocean, so light in the water he could lift her like a bride – what a miracle that had been, what a gift. How he misses her. His love. His wife.

He hears a crash from somewhere upstairs in the house. Probably Willoughby dropping another bottle of wine he hasn't paid for. Jasper opens his desk drawer, pulls out a hip flask, tucks it into his jacket pocket, heads through the Oak Hall and out into the night air. He walks along the edge of the lawn, lifting his head to look at the moon.

For the last few nights, whenever he's gone out to talk to the horses, he has been captivated by the sight of a huge moon rising over the trees that surround the house. A giant disc, toenail yellow, heaving itself slowly into the night sky. Such effrontery in its bare-faced blankness. A Hunter's Moon, the villagers call it. After the autumn harvests have been gathered and there's nothing but stubble in the fields, a full moon comes in November to light up all the soft scurrying creatures with nowhere left to hide. The predators given a night of their own. The last killing of the year.

There has been too much killing. Whenever Jasper looks out across the front lawn, he remembers the summer of 1914 when war was declared. The Chilcombe Mell men who had joined up gathered in front of the house before leaving for France. There was a lunch provided. Ginger beer. Bunting. All very jolly.

His father would have known how to talk to them, that half-proud, half-shy bunch, shuffling about on the grass in their stiff new uniforms. But whenever Jasper looked at them, familiar faces kept catching his gaze, distracting him: little Albert who brought the post; Tom Hardcastle, head groom and devoted husband of Ada the housekeeper; Frank and Clive from the stables, standing with their father Sidney; spotty Reg the blacksmith's son, and Peter, the

youngest footman, still wearing his wire-framed glasses. The following day, they would all be packed on to the London train from Dorchester, off to begin the fight.

Jasper, too old and lame to sign up for the Big Show, was downright envious. It was sickening to be out of it, to be a civilian in wartime. It gnawed at him, this static uselessness. If only he could do something that counted, to prove he wasn't what his father called a 'snivelling hands-upper'.

He wanted to inspire courage in the men, so had scoured his well-thumbed copy of *The Iliad*, looking for a way to ignite the stirring emotions he experienced when reading about gallant Hector, stepping out from the walls of Troy to face the warrior Achilles, despite the pleas of his family. Jasper looked for a suitable speech from that moment, but found there was a great deal about 'perishing', which seemed less than apt. There were other marvellous sections though, which he rehearsed, quietly, in the lavatory.

So then Jasper: standing at the doorway to Chilcombe, flanked by servants, faced by soldiers. (Suddenly, a rushing awareness: hadn't he always imagined a moment like this? Hadn't he always been travelling to this point?) He began. "Without a sign, his sword the brave man draws and asks no omen but his country's cause." So said Homer and so say I.'

He heard rooks cawing in the trees, saw Peter the footman carefully taking off his glasses to wipe them, watched Reg turn to Clive and say, 'What's he on about?'

'Buggered if I know,' muttered Clive.

Jasper cleared his throat. 'One would wish to join you, of course.' (The disappointing sound of his own voice; the men leaning forward, straining to hear.) He tried again: 'Of course, one would wish to join you.'

But they didn't want to hear about him, it was their day. He knew that, damn it, he'd considered it in the lavatory. Then from behind him, a clear voice came ringing out, like a fork striking a champagne glass. 'Naturally, my brother Jasper wishes he could do his bit, but

we won't need any help. The only people in need of help are those poor devils who will be up against us!'

Laughter, cheers!

'By God, I'm sure that each and every one of you will stand alongside me, Willoughby Seagrave, and do your duty, for King and country, and for Dorset, this beautiful county and her beautiful women.'

Knowing laughter, cheers!

'You know me, boys, and while we're over there fighting the good fight, my family will ensure your families are well cared for, as we have always done.'

Murmurs of assent, sniffles from watching female servants.

'When we come home victorious, we'll meet again on this very spot, and Jasper will be here to welcome us back.'

Cheers, cries of agreement!

'Won't be long, boys – because the Bosch don't stand a damn chance!'

The red and white bunting flapping in the trees, the sunshine on the dappled lawn, the joyous faces hurraing, Willoughby in his officer's uniform, opening his hands to them all, and Jasper standing outside the walls of Troy, knowing he volunteered for a doomed encounter because he was too frightened to be thought cowardly.

'What do you say, chaps, a swift drink before we go?' Willoughby cried, bounding across the lawn to join the men.

Jasper retreated into the house. He hoped there might be some apple cake in the kitchen. He wished he hadn't worn a ceremonial sword. It clanked awfully.

Albert. Frank. Clive. Tom. Sidney. Reg. Peter. Willoughby. Only Frank, Reg and Willoughby came back.

Jasper continues to meander across the lawn, drinking from his hip flask. He can hear the hush of the sea, the tremulous hoot of a tawny owl; all else is silence. He looks back at Chilcombe, sees the shadows of servants flitting past windows, doing Rosalind's bidding, no doubt.

Lamps are lit on the ground floor, but the rest of the house is in darkness. Jasper hears the wail of a baby high in the attic. He finds the crying of children physically painful. He wishes he didn't ever have to hear it. Beyond the house, there is the Ridgeway, implacable and unlit. Beyond that, more hills and more darkness and towns and cathedrals and England and so on, all piling up behind it.

He is tired. Gone at the knees. Holed below the waterline. The newspapers say 'war weariness' has drained the nation's collective nerve power, allowing deadly Spanish Influenza to spread. Appalling, of course, that so many are dying from it, but the thought of a feverish descent is rather attractive – a sudden virulent end possessing the body as swiftly and irrevocably as love. He finds himself to be a heavy load. A sandbag of a man. He takes a swig from his hip flask, ambles round the corner of the house towards the stables, stumbling slightly on the lawn edge.

It is a comfort to him, the rich hay smell of the stables. The snorts and snickerings of the horses. He makes his way to faithful Guinevere's stall, rubs her velvet nose. She'd carried him through every ride with the hunt. It had been on her broad back that he'd first set eyes on Annabel Agnew. When had he last ridden out with hounds? Why didn't he have that in him any more? Yet another thing put down somewhere and forgotten about.

He unlatches the stall, leads the horse out. Finds a saddle, a bridle, and clumsily puts them on, murmuring alcohol-scented apologies into Guinevere's twitching ears. He pulls up a stool, balances precariously on it for a moment, before heaving himself into the saddle, shoving his feet into the twisted stirrups. Best foot forward. Once more unto the breach. Off



we trot.

Animal and man move ponderously out of the stables, heading round the house, through the trees, and down the path that leads to the coast. The night is frosty and still. The moon hangs low over the sea: a vast, pockmarked sphere. Jasper closes one eye and squints at it. It is the tarnished light of ancient metal, of fallen shields and broken swords. It stares him down.

Beneath the saddle, the shifting of Guinevere's bones jerks him from left, to right, from left, to right, as the elderly horse carefully picks her way across the hard ground. Guinevere knows this route well, so Jasper lets the reins drop, allows his bulk to be tipped inelegantly from side to side. He closes his eyes, lets his head tip forward, his body still jolting about, as if assailed from either side by invisible opponents. It would be bliss to sleep. His hands pat about himself for his hip flask and it is as he is doing this – this childlike *pat-pat-patting* of his own stomach – that Guinevere catches a hoof in a rabbit hole and lurches forward, pitching Jasper out of the saddle.

It would have been all right if he had been holding the reins. It would have been all right if he hadn't had his weak foot tangled in the stirrup, which meant that his body was swung downwards in a perpendicular arc and his forehead hit the ground first, smashing against a large rock with considerable force. As it was, his brain was severely rattled inside his skull and the urgent signals travelling through his synapses to warn him he was injured never reached their destination, and the crushed cells of his brain began dying in overwhelming numbers, flickering out like stars disappearing from the night sky, so his last thought wasn't really a thought at all, more a sense of something rushing past him, and an image he had been picturing in his mind in the moments before he fell, of a woman in the sea silhouetted against an argent moon.

Loyal Guinevere regains her footing. Snorts. Waits for instructions. When none are

forthcoming, she continues on her usual route, following the paths she knows of old, dragging the body of Jasper behind her.

### **Maudie Kitcat's Diary**

*3rd November, 1920*

*party tonight. all sorts arriving.*

*Mister jasper gone wobblin off on a horse. he's proper drinky. Mister willoughby says never be the most sozzled person at a party, unless it's an awful party. then he winks. Betty says to watch him he's a rascal. other times she says Maudie you watch too much. she should make up her mind. winks are secrets. little hooks. there are clasps on Mrs Rosalind's corsets called hooks & eyes. that is winks. little clasps only some see.*

*grandfather told me servants in this attic used to wink lights off and on to smugglers and nobody knew. most folk dont notice whats under their noses. i can be at the window in nothing but my slip and none of them downstairs knows. Mister willoughby winks to make me blush but i dont care. i do it too. winked at a village boy & kisst him in the woods. i am 15 tomorrow. got meself gifts as they wont will they.*

*one of Mister willoughby's hankerchiffs from the laundry basket smells of him*

*box of matches*

*glass marbel with bubbles inside*

*on my birthday i am going to kiss someone else. dont mind who.*

## **Act Two: 1928–1938**

### **Whale Fall**

*March, 1928*

She reaches skyward, feeling for a handhold. Beneath her fingers, the surface is smooth and slippery. There is nothing to grab on to. At roughly head height, there is a wooden tent peg she has laboriously hammered into place using a rock. It has a skipping rope knotted around it, which she grips and pulls, testing her weight. The peg wobbles but holds. She will have to heave herself up using the rope, then use the peg as a foothold to get to the top.

Before she commences her attempt on the summit, she looks out across the bay: a lively teal sea beneath a cloudless sky, with the Isle of Portland on the far horizon. After a night of thunderstorms, the air is as fresh as clean laundry. The chilly mist that has swathed the county for weeks has been swept away, lifting like stage curtains to reveal the coastline in its spring colours, the cliffs covered with yellow gorse, busy birds bouncing from bush to bush. An untouched morning: her dominion.

The sun has been up for half an hour already and interested gulls are appearing overhead, swooping and calling. She doesn't have much time. She adjusts the items strapped across her back, leans on the skipping rope and begins her ascent of the great mound. Best foot forward. Onwards and upwards. Near the top, the gradient levels out and she proceeds by dragging herself forward on her stomach, using her grandfather's ivory-handled hunting knife for leverage.

Finally, she reaches the peak. She eases herself to her feet, pulls a home-made flagpole from the bindings on her back, and stands on tiptoe in order to give herself enough

height and momentum to plunge the sharpened end of the flagpole into the carcass of the dead whale, the leviathan that is stretching more than sixty feet along the beach, reeking of the dark green depths of the ocean it traversed, before a storm washed it up on her beach, where she could claim it for herself: Cristabel Seagrave. She lets go a mighty war cry, hears it bounce around the bay, the bay, the bay.

Cristabel stands for a moment, holding her flagpole – a sharpened broom handle – as the disappointingly shallow wound she has made in the whale’s rubbery hide begins to ooze a clear liquid and a faintly bacon-ish smell. She looks back down the creature’s curving spine to its flat tail. The night before, when she had escaped from the house to watch the storm and discovered the dead whale washed up on the pebbles, its dark skin had been as glossy as wet lacquer. Now, out of its element, it is starting to dry out: wrinkling, paling. She can see white patches of barnacles on its back.

There are a few small wooden boats setting off from the next cove, about a mile to the west. She can hear the faint creak and splash as the fishermen row out from the shore, their sounds travelling low over the water like skimmed stones. They will have heard her cry. They will know she is waiting for them.

From behind her comes the sound of someone careering down the steep path on to the beach. It is her half-sister Florence, known to almost everyone as ‘the Veg’. She is out of breath, her round face flushed, wearing a dressing gown, one unbuckled shoe and an expression of high alarm. ‘I came as soon as I got your note,’ she says. ‘Goodness, I didn’t think it would be so big!’

The creature is a long tubular shape ending in an enormous mermaid’s tail. It is slumped on its side, with one flipper the size of a dining table flopped uselessly on the pebbles. At its highest point, where Cristabel is standing, it is seven feet high, a dark grey colour fading to a pale cream on its underside, which has a curious pleated texture. Its huge

head is almost entirely made up of its bottom jaw; the upper jaw appears only to be a flat lid perched on top. The thin line of the whale's mouth is downturned and a small eye, still open, is tucked in the corner of the mouth, almost as an afterthought. It is – thinks the Veg – like a giant button-eyed sock puppet, the kind she and Cristabel use in their cardboard theatre, and its great size makes its glum expression most affecting.

‘How sad,’ whispers the Veg, tears filling her eyes.

‘Pull yourself together, Veg,’ says Cristabel. ‘He was dead when I found him last night, and he was still dead when I came with my equipment this morning.’

‘He?’

‘I don't know. Hard to determine. Where's Digby?’

‘I'm here, I'm here,’ and a slim, dark-haired boy in shirt, shorts and plimsolls comes scrambling down the path. He has a checked tea towel knotted round his neck that flies out behind him as he pelts past the Veg. He only stops running when he is at the base of the whale, directly beneath Cristabel, then gives an admiring whistle. ‘What a beauty.’

‘Isn't he,’ grins Cristabel.

‘It's like I'm having a dream, only I'm awake. A whale on our beach. Did you claim him, Crista? Oh, you did! You took the flag!’

‘Remembered in the nick of time, Digs. Tell me, what's afoot back at the house? Are your parents awake?’

‘The situation remains uncertain,’ says Digby, who is six years old. He is Cristabel's long-awaited brother, even though he isn't actually her brother.

‘I woke Digby soon as I found your note. We came as fast as we could,’ adds the Veg, who is seven and a half. ‘You're very high up, Crista.’

‘There's some fishermen,’ cries Digby, pointing out to sea.

The girls turn to look, shielding their eyes with their hands. The morning sun is sharp

white light on the ocean and the fishermen approaching in their wooden boats are silhouettes against the brightness. As they get closer, they rest on their oars and push back their caps, squinting towards the children and the whale.

‘What have you got there?’ shouts one.

‘A mighty leviathan,’ shouts back Cristabel. ‘I have claimed it.’

‘Is that right?’ There is laughter from the boats, which rock gently, waves slapping against their sides. ‘Are you Miss Cristabel Seagrave, by any chance?’

Cristabel stares at them, holding her flag tightly.

‘It’ll start to smell soon,’ calls another of the fishermen.

‘That’s my concern,’ she says.

‘We’ll see what the Coastguard has to say about that,’ comes the reply.

The Veg calls out, in her high voice, ‘Cristabel found it.’

‘Thought that was you, Miss Cristabel,’ says the first fisherman. ‘You mind yourself up there.’

Cristabel straightens her spine and nods: a mute acknowledgement. ‘Decent sorts, fishermen,’ she says to the younger children. She has just turned twelve; there isn’t much she doesn’t know. She has read nearly all the books in the house and learnt a great deal more from men such as these.

She likes fishermen, gamekeepers, blacksmiths, butchers. She enjoys both their company and their useful skills, for she admires things done in an adept manner, in the same way she covets tools that can be snapped shut and pocketed. When the local men teach her practical skills, like tying knots or baiting fishing lines, and she is then able to carry them out by herself, it gives her the same feeling as having said, ‘Now, look here all of you, listen to me.’ The feeling of having written out some rules and handed them round. The feeling of being up in front on her own, as she is now, high on her whale, looking down at Digby and

the Veg.

But someone else is approaching. Mr Bill Brewer, Chilcombe's land agent, a former London debt collector, spotted in the Army Service Corps by Willoughby's friend Perry who has an eye for a useful man, and now ambling down the path accompanied by his spaniel, which begins circling the whale, sniffing excitedly. 'Well, well,' says Mr Brewer. 'Who wants to explain this to me?'

'Mr Brewer, I need you to alert the authorities,' says Cristabel. 'I have claimed a whale for the Seagrave family.'

'So I see, Miss Cristabel. Do you have any plans for it?'

Cristabel and Digby exchange glances. 'We will preserve it for the annals of history,' says Cristabel.

'We will make famous the name of Seagrave,' adds Digby, patting the whale appreciatively.

'We will examine its innards for science.'

'We will put it on display so all may come and wonder.'

'We will hang its bones from the ceiling of the Oak Hall.'

'Yes! We will have an enormous skeleton inside our house!'

'Forming an exhibit of national importance.'

'Poor whale,' says the Veg, under her breath.

Mr Brewer peers at the whale. 'I'm not sure Mrs Brewer will let you bring that in on her clean floors.'

Cristabel cautiously lets go her flag, relieved that it stays upright, then crouches down to hiss to Digby, 'He's not playing ball. We will need to alert the authorities ourselves. Can you run back? We'll have to send a telegram.'

'To who?'



‘The authorities. I’ll stay here. Stand guard.’

‘Righto.’ Digby sprints off, pulling the Veg with him.

The two of them dart up the steep path that leads from the beach to their house. It is – as the Veg has often observed – the kind of path you would be nervous about going up if you didn’t know where it went. It has – as she says – a tresspassy feel about it. It twists and turns its way up the cliff, with gorse and blackthorn leaning in from either side, tangling their spiked branches together, so there is no way of seeing where it leads.

At the top is an old wooden gate in a dishevelled hedge, with a sign that warns: PRIVATE PROPERTY. Digby and the Veg crash through the gate and run on, following the path through dense woodland. Branches snap underfoot; wood pigeons take flight from the bracken with a panicky flapping; swords of sunlight slant downwards through the trees. The woodland thins out as the path widens and becomes more established, leading eventually to the edge of a large lawn. The children sprint across the lawn to the front entrance of Chilcombe. They push open the heavy door and, turning to shush one another, step carefully through the entranceway and into the Oak Hall, where light from a new glass cupola embedded in the ceiling falls the height of the building and lands on the pieces of a broken whiskey bottle a maid is on her hands and knees sweeping up.

‘Leave it, leave it,’ says Willoughby, walking barefoot down the curve of the main staircase, tucking a stained shirt into crumpled trousers. ‘More bottles will be broken, I’m sure. Might as well get used to treading on them. Breakfast is the main thing. I am desperate for breakfast.’

‘Yes, Mr Willoughby, sir,’ says the maid. ‘And your wife, sir? Will she be requiring anything to be brought to her room?’

‘Rosalind has renounced all solid food stuffs for Lent. She is enjoying a purely liquid diet.’

The children watch as, on the gallery, a door opens, and Rosalind appears, smudge-eyed, wrapped in a peach silk peignoir. 'I can hear you, Willoughby. Your voice is very booming. I'd like tea and toast. You know I would like tea and toast. My cigarette case is missing.'

Willoughby, reaching the maid, stage-whispers, 'Bugger the tea and toast. I'd like my breakfast outside on the lawn. Can you do that for me?'

'My silver cigarette case,' calls Rosalind. 'The one you gave me.'

'You should check Perry's trouser pocket. You most certainly had it when you were sitting on his lap.'

'You made me sit there, Willoughby. You always talk as if you had nothing to do with anything.'

'I am in need of eggs,' says Willoughby, still addressing the maid. 'What's your name – are you Lucy or Elsie? I lose track.'

Rosalind pads rapidly down the stairs in her satin slippers, tightening the belt of her gown and saying, 'Lucy left months ago and there's never been an Elsie. Leave the girl alone. Whatever she's called, she's to bring me my tea.'

'Why your tea not my breakfast? What is it you want, Rosalind?'

She is next to him now and her hands are busy about his waist, pulling at his shirt, laying her thin fingers on the flesh of his stomach. 'I didn't hear you get up. I woke up and you'd gone. You left me there alone.'

'I'm fairly sure I'd performed my husbandly duty. I was hungry, woman. Still am.'

'Digby!' cries Rosalind, suddenly noticing the children. 'What are you doing? Have you been outside? What have you got round your neck?'

'A fine goatskin cloak, Mother.'

'It looks like a tea towel. Put a coat on. Remember when you had that terrible spring

cold? You aren't as strong as your father.'

'His father is hungry and is going to eat eggs if someone will ever bring them to him.'

Willoughby walks past the children, ruffling the Veg's mousy hair as he passes.

The maid darts quickly in the direction of the kitchen.

'Our guests will be expecting their breakfast too, Willoughby,' says Rosalind. 'How many people were here last night?'

'Seven? Ten? That dreadful woman with the turban definitely hasn't left,' he replies, his voice echoing in the stone entranceway.

'She's an American poetess. Much admired.'

'How unfortunate,' comes Willoughby's voice from the bright lawn.

Rosalind sighs. 'You could at least talk to her.'

The Veg nods encouragingly at Digby, pushes him forward.

'Mother?' he says.

'Yes, darling.'

'May I send a telegram to the authorities?'

'Is this one of Cristabel's silly schemes?'

'It's not a silly scheme. It's a matter of national importance.'

'You mustn't let her bully you, darling,' says Rosalind. 'I know she's older than you but she's not your big sister – just a cousin. She's lucky to be living here, all things considered.'

'Crista would never bully me, Mother.'

On the gallery, more bedroom doors are opening, and more dressing-gowned people with bleary, bloodshot eyes are appearing. One of them, a thin man with a ginger moustache, is wearing a turquoise turban at a jaunty angle.

'Perry!' cries Rosalind, lifting her arms so that sunlight from the cupola catches her

sleeves like butterfly wings. ‘You are naughty. You should take it off before anyone sees.’

‘A military man is never without the appropriate headwear,’ he replies. ‘My God, I feel rotten. I hope there’s a hair of the dog down there for me.’

‘Darling, of course. Come, come. We’ll breakfast on the lawn.’

‘Mother?’

‘Ask Mr Brewer, Digby. I haven’t time for whatever it is you’re talking about.’

Rosalind starts towards the staircase to meet her descending guests, then turns back to the Veg. ‘What are you wearing?’

‘My dressing gown, Mother. And one of my shoes. I left the other in –’

‘You’re managing to appear even less appealing than usual. Have Maudie brush your hair, what little there is of it.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ says the Veg.

Digby takes the Veg’s hand, squeezes it, and pulls her away. They head through the hall and downwards to the windowless world of below stairs, where they run along a corridor lined with a row of labelled bells – DINING ROOM, DRAWING ROOM, STUDY, MASTER BEDROOM, DRESSING ROOM, SECOND BEDROOM, GUEST ROOM 1, GUEST ROOM 2 – two of which are jangling neurotically, insistently.

On either side of the corridor are storerooms, cold rooms, pantries, wine cellars. These underground caves are crammed floor to ceiling with produce: tins, pots, jams, hams, butter dishes, biscuit jars, smoked fish, cold cuts, fruit cakes, and bottles of champagne stacked in a rack, like a glass honeycomb. At the far end of the corridor is the main kitchen, its tiled walls hung with copper pans, filled with a great black range with ovens on either side, and thick with bustling staff and the sizzle and spit of breakfast: kippers, eggs, black pudding. By scuttling through the kitchen, the children can leave the house by the back door, which leads to a courtyard surrounded by brick outbuildings. Mr Brewer’s quarters, where he

lives with his wife and young son, are here, above the laundry.

‘Mr Brewer has a telephone up in his office. I believe we could use that to send a telegram,’ says Digby, as they arrive at the door that leads to Mr Brewer’s home. ‘Do you know how to operate a telephone?’

‘No,’ says the Veg, ‘and we can’t go into his office without asking. That would be burgling.’

‘It’s not burgling if we need to alert the authorities.’

‘Need to alert them of what?’ asks Betty Brewer, née Bemrose, opening the door. ‘What are you two up to? Where’s that troublesome Cristabel?’

Digby and the Veg exchange glances; they are unsure of Betty’s loyalties. Even now she is housekeeper at Chilcombe and married to the equable Mr Brewer, they suspect her first report is always to Rosalind.

‘Good morning, Mrs Brewer,’ says Digby politely. ‘We’re not up to anything.’

Betty frowns, hangs a large set of keys on to a loop at her waist. ‘Don’t have time for nonsense today. I’ve eight hungry house guests and their staff to feed.’

‘Cristabel found a dead whale and we need to alert the authorities,’ blurts the Veg.

Betty adjusts her dress, shifts her wide, authoritative bosom, pulls the door firmly shut behind her so that it locks with a click, and sets off towards the kitchen with a bustling step.

‘Miss Florence, I believe I said I don’t have time for nonsense.’

Digby and the Veg look at each other.

‘We’ll have to go back to the beach and tell Crista we’ve met with unforeseen difficulties,’ says the Veg.

Digby pulls a face.

‘Come on,’ says the Veg. ‘She’ll know what to do.’

The children set off round the side of the house, heading once more for the woods, but are interrupted by a statuesque woman with dyed blonde hair, in a patterned robe, who is striding across the lawn with a cigarette holder and a champagne glass. ‘Oh, hi,’ she says, her voice a curiously elongated drawl. ‘Are you scampering squirrels the heirs to the estate? Can you tell me where I find the sea? I find it invigorating to commune with the ocean before I breakfast. I can sense it’s nearby – there’s a breath of salt in the air.’

The Veg points towards the path through the woods. ‘That way.’

‘I thank you. But tell me, why the headlong rush?’

‘There’s a dead whale and –’ says the Veg, breaking off due to a nudge from Digby.

‘You’re kidding.’ The woman has a long expressive face, both solemn and humorous, and appears to have drawn on her own eyebrows. She turns and shouts back towards a group of people gathering at a table outside the house. ‘These children say there’s a dead whale. Is this a common occurrence?’

Digby cries, ‘Good morning, everyone. Crista has claimed the whale for the Seagrave family. There’s no need for fuss.’

‘Too late, Digby old chap. If there’s a whale on the beach, it already has an owner,’ calls a man in a turban, who is Willoughby’s army friend Perry, such a frequent visitor to the house that the children know him as Uncle Perry.

‘An owner? Who?’

‘The King, dear boy. Anything washed up on the beaches of England belongs to the monarch by right. Whales, dolphins, porpoises. If they wash ashore, they’re “fishes royal”. A law that dates back to Saxon times, if I remember rightly.’

‘Really truly, Uncle Perry?’

‘Upon my word.’

The blonde woman claps her hands together. ‘I will never tire of these eccentric English laws. Why would you even have a law about whales? Oh my. So beautiful in its absurdity.’

From the table, Rosalind calls, ‘Myrtle darling, don’t waste your time with the children, come and have breakfast. I want to hear more about this Russian you met in France.’

The woman glides across the grass, turning in circles, half-dancing, making the breakfast party laugh.

The Veg puts her hand on Digby’s arm. ‘You will have to tell Crista about the King.’

Digby turns his wide brown eyes on his half-sister. ‘Oh golly, Flossie,’ he says. ‘She won’t like it. Not one bit.’

On the beach, Cristabel sits cross-legged on top of the whale, holding the flagpole upright, while her flag, an old handkerchief bearing an inky version of the Seagrave coat of arms – a crowned lion rampant – flutters in the breeze. Her face beneath the straight line of her fringe is resolute, determined. The whale is now surrounded by curious onlookers, local fishermen and people from the village, who are poking it and exclaiming loudly, while children clamber up its tail and pretend to ride it. Mr Brewer and his dog are still there, together with a few more Chilcombe servants. There is talk of a man from the Coastguard attending, and possibly a newspaper photographer.

Digby and the Veg push through the crowds.

Cristabel catches Digby’s eye. ‘What is it, Digs?’

He shakes his head. ‘Bad news, I’m afraid. Uncle Perry says you can’t claim it. He says it belongs to the King.’

‘Belongs to who?’

‘The King. Perry says King George owns all the dead whales.’

‘But it’s mine. I found it. King George doesn’t even know it’s here.’

‘Perry says there’s a law. I’m sorry, Crista.’

‘How on earth can there be a law about dead whales?’

‘I suppose if you’re King you can have laws about whatever you like,’ says the Veg.

‘That is the most damnably unfair thing I have ever heard!’ says Cristabel, yanking her flagpole from the carcass and throwing it down on to the pebbles, where it is gleefully captured by Mr Brewer’s spaniel.

Mr Brewer, calmly retrieving the pole from his dog’s mouth, says, ‘Not much in life is fair, Miss Cristabel. Will you be coming down now? Must be time for your breakfast.’

Digby adds, ‘Shall we have breakfast then, Crista? Aren’t you ravenous? We could come back later.’ He leans companionably on the whale and peers up at her.

Cristabel closes her eyes and places her hands on the creature beneath her. She feels the spring breeze on her face, hears the waves hitting the pebbles. She is tired, dizzily so, after being up nearly all night. She lifts her mind above the babble of the people surrounding her, and summons the memory of early that morning, when she had first clambered aboard the whale, and it had been hers: something she had found and claimed. This hulking beast, her deserved treasure, now taken from her by ridiculous old rules.

She hears the Veg far below saying, ‘We could dig a moat around the whale, Crista.’

Cristabel’s eyes flick open, and she slides down the side of the whale, landing neatly on her feet. She walks swiftly past Mr Brewer and the gawping, slack-jawed crowds. The Veg and Digby run to catch up with her as she strides up the cliff path, her fists clenched.

She speaks without looking at them. ‘It might be his, but it shouldn’t be his. Rules should always be fair. That’s the English way. I’m going home now because I am hungry, but



it is still my whale. By which I mean to say: it will be my whale. I've merely got to figure out how, and if I have to talk to the King directly, so be it.'

### **The Arrival of the God Poseidon**

*March, 1928*

The sloping ceilings of the attic give Cristabel an Alice in Wonderland feeling, as if she were too big for the room. Lying on her narrow bed, she imagines her legs growing until her feet poke out the window. It is sunny outside; the rooks are nattering away in the trees. She wishes she was on the beach with her whale. She wonders which foolish king made up the whale rules. She wonders about the man who wrote the Alice in Wonderland book. He can't have been very sensible either.

'Stay still, Miss Cristabel, for heaven's sake,' says Maudie, who is crouched at the foot of Cristabel's bed trying to lace her boots.

With her head on the pillow, Cristabel can reach up and place her hands on the ceiling, where it slants downwards to touch the floor. Both walls and ceiling have recently been covered with a bold striped wallpaper in red and white, patterned like a circus tent. It is, according to Rosalind, quite the latest thing.

Many things are now the latest thing. Cristabel doesn't care for any of them. The chromium bathtub. The glass-fronted cocktail cabinet. The blue baize billiard table. The giraffe-hide footstool. The latest things arrive at Chilcombe in crates carried by sweating delivery men, and there is a general flapping about, as if this latest thing will make everything

different, but each item, once put into position and subsumed into the quotidian, quickly loses its promise. The latest things are not the latest for long. Whether too modern to fit into the ancient house or not modern enough to avoid replacement, they are soon items of dissatisfaction, receding into the background or seeming to find their own way out.

‘Up you get,’ says Maudie, now a young woman of twenty-two, with strong limbs, thick eyebrows and a mass of frizzy brown hair barely constrained beneath a maid’s cap.

Cristabel is pulled to her feet, straightened up and brushed down. Her black hair is dampened with water and briskly combed into its usual square-edged bob: a series of hard borders around her unsmiling face. Then she is forced to eat a bowl of gelatinous porridge before she and the Veg are sent along the attic corridor to the schoolroom for French lessons with their latest governess, Mademoiselle Aubert.

Mlle Aubert is the girls’ sixth French governess. Rosalind is insistent they must have a French governess, despite their efficient dispatching of each one that comes their way. Although Cristabel will freely admit to hastening their departures, she is of the opinion that Rosalind’s own erratic behaviour is largely to blame for the rapid turnover of staff at Chilcombe. Cristabel has heard talk below stairs of drunken displays, outrageous demands. The servants say Rosalind is spending every last penny of Jasper’s life insurance on home furnishings and entertaining, but rarely remembers to pay their wages. Cristabel has said as much to Uncle Willoughby. ‘Rosalind does not inspire sufficient respect in the staff.’

‘Cristabel, sweetheart, you know very well she would rather you didn’t call her Rosalind.’

‘You can’t honestly expect me to call her Mother.’

‘I suppose not. Auntie? Don’t glower at me.’

From her desk in the attic schoolroom, Cristabel can hear the steady purr of Uncle Willoughby’s newest vehicle, a sporty Daimler, as it heads off down the drive. He will be out

all the bright day, speeding through the lanes, the world turning away beneath him like a spun globe.

‘Attention, Miss Cristabel, *s’il vous plaît*,’ says Mlle Aubert, a dour young woman with a face dotted by dark moles. ‘You will be leaving the globe alone. It is for Master Digby when he is learning the geography.’

Cristabel gives the schoolroom globe a final spin, watching as the countries blur into a multicoloured mass, dominated by the pink sprawl of the British Empire, which contains natives and tea plantations and ancient civilizations where Grandfather Robert suppressed uprisings and opened tombs and shot lions. Nobody ever tried to stop him from claiming his great treasures. She wonders if he ever had to reason with a king. Also: would it be possible to stuff a whale? Cristabel makes a mental note to ask Digby’s latest tutor, who is rather a sissy but useful in terms of providing scientific information.

In the airless schoolroom, there is only the squeak of Mlle Aubert’s chalk on the blackboard as she writes out the verb *être*; the buzzing of a bluebottle battering itself against a window; and the regular *bump, bump, bump* of the Veg’s boot swinging against a chair leg. Far below, Cristabel can hear the opening and closing of doors as the maids go about their business. Somewhere else in the house are Digby and his tutor, endeavouring to patch up Digby’s ragged education before he heads off to boarding school in September.

It is stuffy up in the attic. Always too hot or too cold. There is only one small fireplace in the girls’ bedroom, screened off by a wooden fire rail where the children’s damp clothes hang steaming, and faced by a rocking chair where nannies have soothed generations of fractious Seagrave infants, the runners creaking against the floorboards.

‘Do you think we should rescue that fly?’ asks the Veg.

‘*Non*,’ says Mlle Aubert. ‘We are doing verbs until you can say them in the proper way.’

‘Verbs? *Alors!*’ cries Cristabel, throwing up her hands in a Gallic gesture. ‘*Pourquoi?*  
Poor *moi.*’

The Veg giggles.

‘Very clever, Mademoiselle Cristabel,’ says Mlle Aubert, examining her cuticles.  
‘Clever girl to laugh at lessons.’ Phlegmatic Mlle Aubert is proving a formidable opponent.  
She has already outlasted all her predecessors, primarily because she has no desire to be  
liked. She regards any sign of friendliness as something of a weakness in those foolish  
enough to approach her pleasantly. Willoughby has observed that Rosalind has employed the  
only objectionable French girl he has ever met.

Cristabel says, ‘You must hate verbs too.’

Mlle Aubert folds her arms. ‘French verbs are simple. English verbs are difficult. If  
you had to learn English verbs, you perhaps have a reason to be complaining.’

‘Why did you bother?’

‘Because I am not a lazy oaf. You, Mademoiselle Cristabel, will be like the English  
ladies who go to Paris to buy fancy hats and shout at shop girls in English and do not hear  
when the shop girls tell them in French they are going to charge them double for their fancy  
hats. They do not understand because they were too lazy to learn their verbs.’

‘I detest fancy hats.’

‘But if someone is saying you have the face of the donkey, you perhaps want to  
know.’ Mlle Aubert raps the blackboard. ‘*Être.*’

‘What’s donkey in French? Is it *baudet*? How do you say you have the face of the  
donkey?’

‘*Être.*’

‘*Vous visage de baudet?*’

‘Without the proper verbs, your donkey insults will always be weak.’

Cristabel lays her head on her desk for a moment. Then, in a muffled voice, ‘Very well. I will do the verbs. But only in order to insult people correctly.’

Inscrutable Mlle Aubert gazes out of the window, slowly rolling up an exercise book. ‘*Être*,’ she says, then dispatches the buzzing bluebottle with an efficient thwack.

After many interminable hours, it is lunchtime. Over a tepid meal of stewed brisket and boiled potatoes, followed by milk pudding, Cristabel tries to engage the Veg in a debate about time travel. Could a scientific inventor create a machine using levers and clockwork that might return them to yesterday?

‘I didn’t like yesterday,’ says the Veg, ‘there were prunes.’ Her round face is serious, frowning.

‘I didn’t like it either, but it would be in the interests of furthering knowledge,’ says Cristabel. ‘Imagine, if you went back to yesterday, you might meet yourself.’

‘Meet myself?’ The Veg looks alarmed.

Cristabel continues, ‘Or you could go back to the time of the Saxons and demand the rules about whales be rewritten because they’re unfair.’

‘Enough nonsense stories,’ says Mlle Aubert, who considers most stories to be nonsense.

‘What’s the French word for whale?’ says Cristabel.

‘*Baleine*.’

‘What’s the French word for injustice?’

‘Eat your pudding.’

After lunch, the girls have their afternoon walk. Following Mlle Aubert, they make their way downstairs and through the Oak Hall, which, under Rosalind's jurisdiction, is now full of expensive fur rugs, curving armchairs made from cream fabric and bright inlaid wood, and circular side tables holding decorative lamps, magazines and ashtrays. The ancient brass candle holders have been removed from the walls and replaced by spherical glass electrical lights. Where there once were tapestries of battles there are now elaborate mirrors. The grand piano has been moved into the middle of the room and is topped by framed photographs of people in tennis outfits, alongside a fluted glass vase filled with faintly carnivorous flowers.

But while the space no longer resembles a medieval hall at ground level, its remote upper reaches, with their dark wood panelling, still retain an austerity. The daylight that comes in through the new glass cupola seems to take an age to fall on to the modern furniture, in the same way that a column of sunlight is slowed when it passes through the depths of the ocean, in the same way as a change in the law is stalled in its passage through the House of Lords.

Outside, it is a beautiful day. Mlle Aubert adjusts the Veg's hat to keep the sun off her face and they set out across the lawn: Cristabel leading at a martial pace carrying a bucket; the Veg tagging along singing to herself; Mlle Aubert bringing up the rear. They take a circuitous route, as Mlle Aubert insists they avoid the path that would bring them on to the beach opposite the rotting whale, because the sight of it makes her *seek*.

The whale's stay in Dorset has not been an easy one. A few days after it washed up, a very uniformed official from HM Coastguard came from Portland to stand alongside the whale's head and announce he was annexing it for the King. But it soon became apparent – after terse telegrams exchanged with palace staff – that the King would not be collecting his newest

acquisition.

The uniformed official then announced he would be auctioning the whale on behalf of the King. There followed some vocal protests from Cristabel, who was taken back to the house by Mlle Aubert, whereupon she began writing letters to the King, in which she compared herself to England's greatest explorer, Captain Scott, who had heroically fought his way to the South Pole, only to find that the conniving Norwegians had placed their flag there already. She received no reply.

Cristabel was disgusted to hear from Mr Brewer that bidding at the auction was lacklustre, but the whale was eventually sold off to a retired schoolmaster from Affpuddle for thirty pounds. The schoolmaster told the local paper he would display its skeleton in his garden and give lectures on the mightiest of God's creations. Carpenters were then brought in, with shears and saws, to debone the creation, and the Seagrave children joined a crowd gathered on the beach to watch the grisly proceedings.

It was an unnerving spectacle. Men in rubber boots crawling about on top of the whale, sawing their way through its sleek body as if it were a giant ham, its blood streaming downwards, staining the pebbles. However, it soon transpired that the retired schoolmaster had not discussed his ambitious plans with his wife, and there would be no new home in Affpuddle for the whale after all. The post-mortem was ceased and the men in rubber boots retired, grumbling, to the pub. Local boys were paid to transport any loose pieces of whale back up to the village in wheelbarrows, where the blubber was taken by cart to Dorchester market to be sold for soap, while the organs went to local hunts to feed their hounds.

Despite an increasingly gaseous odour, what was left of the partially dismembered whale remained a popular curiosity. Students of biology visited and identified it as *Balaenoptera physalus*, a fin whale. An older male specimen, far from its usual hunting grounds. They were puzzled by its unorthodox stranding but hypothesized that it was hit by a

ship. Its ongoing decay had caused the whale's head to deflate and its jaw to fall open, revealing a bristly fringe in place of teeth. The students said this material, which resembled closely packed quills, was called 'baleen' and acted as a filter for seawater in the same way as a gentleman's moustache served as a strainer for soup.

The students told them strips of baleen were used to make the stays in Victorian corsets, and the children found this a delightful concept: to use a soup strainer from the mouth of a whale to tighten the waists of women. Old photographs of Seagrave grandmothers were now seen in a different light – beneath their high-necked dresses, they had mouth parts strung about their midriffs like cannibals.

As the students continued their explanations of the whale's by-products and how they have been integral to man's advancement through the ages, Cristabel quietly laid a hand on the side of her broken creature. With its small eye placed redundantly on the side of its bulky head, she couldn't imagine how it could ever see where it was going. Its eye was like a porthole for a passenger on an ocean liner, just a place to peer out at things as they passed by.

She dreamt about the whale almost every night. In her dreams, she was again the discoverer triumphant; the whale, whole and beautiful, lying becalmed at her feet. Sometimes she dreamt that her whale was alive, and she would ride on its back as it crested the ocean, ruler of the seas, rightfully resurrected.

Cristabel is thinking thoughts along these lines, about whales and dreams, when she, the Veg and Mlle Aubert finally reach the shore. They can make out the remains of the creature around a low headland, half a mile away.

Mlle Aubert, the afternoon sun etching dark lines on her face, sits on the beach, leans back against a large rock, and closes her eyes. 'Find things to put in bucket, girls. Collect



shells for Madame Rosalind.'

This is their chance. Experience has taught them that Mlle Aubert can fall asleep within seconds of closing her eyes so, if they go quickly, they can get to the whale before she wakes up. 'Let's run,' hisses Cristabel, discarding the bucket and grabbing the Veg by the hand. They put on speed, the pebbles creaking and twisting dangerously beneath their boots.

But rounding the headland, the Veg pulls Cristabel to a halt, because there are children climbing over their whale. Four or five children scrambling over its carcass like crabs, and they are naked as savages, their bare flesh shining in the sunlight. Cristabel glares fiercely at them. It is painful to see her whale commandeered in such a way, like seeing pirates aboard a British naval vessel. One of them squats on his haunches, balancing on the whale's ribcage, and glares back. They are all dripping wet, with dark hair hanging in strands around their shoulders, and they clamber about as nimbly as the famous Apes of Gibraltar.

The Veg, red-faced and astonished, whispers, 'What are they doing?'

But there is more astonishment to come. For at that moment, they hear a booming voice coming from the sea. A bearded man is standing in the surf, and he too is missing his clothes. He is shouting, 'It is divine, the water!'

For a moment, Cristabel believes it is the god Poseidon, come from the briny depths to take them away in his chariot, but she hears answering voices, and turns to see two women capering on to the beach wearing shorts and shirts. They are carrying towels and one of them has a hamper, which she drops with a crash, shouting, 'Not as divine as champagne, I'll bet!'

'Ha!' cries Poseidon, his deep voice bouncing off the sea. 'Very good!' He falls back, his arms outstretched, to float on the clear water.

One of the women starts towards Cristabel and the Veg, waving a hand. 'Hullo,' she calls. 'Not sure we've had the pleasure.'

The Veg is only able to squeak like a mouse so it falls to Cristabel to announce they

are the Seagrave children.

‘Do you live here?’ says the woman, brushing back her hair, which is short like a boy’s.

‘We live in our house, Chilcombe,’ says Cristabel.

The other woman calls over. ‘Did the child say Chilcombe? Isn’t that where Rosalind Elliot pitched up? Mother told me, I’m sure.’

‘Rosalind Elliot? This far from London?’ says the first woman. ‘Inconceivable.’

‘Darling, that’s exactly what I thought.’

‘What on earth does she do out here? Open bazaars?’

At the mention of her mother, the Veg finds new courage, announcing, ‘Rosalind is my mother.’

‘What a turn-up for the books,’ says the first woman. ‘We must pay Ros a visit. Find out why she’s gone native. One can only imagine she’d run out of options.’

‘You are wicked, Hilly,’ says the other. ‘As is the smell from that rotting whale, my God.’

‘Don’t stand downwind, darling. Come hither.’

Now that the women are closer, Cristabel can see they look almost identical. Both are slim and flat-chested, all corners and clavicles, with cropped blonde hair swept back from angled faces. Women made of straight lines, like the illustrations in Rosalind’s magazines.

There is a crash as Poseidon exits the ocean, stumbling on the shingle. Much of his broad body is covered with curly hair; there is a line of dark fur running down his stomach.

‘Halloa!’ he cries, waving his arms in the direction of the Seagraves. ‘What is these we have here?’

Cristabel is stumped, being unfamiliar with the protocol required to greet a hairy naked man. The Veg solves this dilemma by covering her face with her hands and saying,

‘We are Florence and Cristabel. How do you do?’

Cristabel, prickled the Veg has answered before her, decides to look at the man’s beard and nothing else. When she looks up in order to locate the beard, she finds it heading directly for her.

‘This child has such a face,’ says the man, ‘I think for a moment Anna Akhmatova has followed me here.’ He reaches out a hand, damp from the ocean, and it encircles Cristabel’s jaw, like a bandage for toothache. ‘I should paint you,’ he says, and, for a moment, she believes he means to redecorate her, to cover her with glutinous paint until she is an eyeless statue. In the distance, she hears the plaintive mosquito-like summons of Mlle Aubert.

‘We have to leave now,’ says the Veg, from beneath her hands, starting to back away. ‘That’s our governess. She’s noticed we’ve gone so you mustn’t try to capture us.’

The naked man smiles benevolently and holds up his hands in an expansive gesture. ‘It is always the way, no? As soon as we meet, we part.’ His black hair is both swept back and receding, revealing a prominent forehead and dark eyes tucked deep in his skull. He has a boxer’s square cheekbones and a bullish neck.

‘I beg your pardon, but this is our beach,’ Cristabel says. ‘This is our beach and those children are standing on my whale.’

‘That’s your whale?’ says one of the women. ‘Could you do something about the pong?’

The other woman says, ‘Don’t worry, girls, we know your mother. We’ll pop over for a visit. Ros will have kittens.’

‘Won’t she, though,’ says the first woman, looping her arm around her companion’s waist so they stand linked together. Behind them, the savage children bounce on the whale. One of them sticks out its tongue.

‘Rosalind is not my mother,’ says Cristabel, ignoring Flossie tugging at her sleeve.

By now, Mlle Aubert has rounded the headland and is fast approaching, her sturdy legs carrying her across the stones. ‘*Alors! Criiistabel! Floorrence!* Get away from the stinking whale!’

The man, who has picked up a towel and is wrapping it around his waist, looks up with interest. ‘*Bonjour,*’ he cries, adding in thickly accented French, ‘What pittance do they pay you to chase their children for them?’

Mlle Aubert snaps back in her mother tongue, ‘Pardon me, but that is none of your business, monsieur.’

‘All that much, eh?’ says the man, still speaking in French. ‘Ah, but it is a privilege, no? For a servant to chase the children of the rich on a glorious day such as this.’

Mlle Aubert approaches, out of breath. ‘I am no servant, monsieur. I come from a good family.’

‘I don’t doubt that, mademoiselle. I too come from a good family, with a beautiful house in the finest city in Russia, and last year, my brother was driving a taxi around Paris while I made portraits of rich men’s wives on the banks of the Seine, and neither of us could tell you if our parents are alive or dead. It is the way of these modern times, no? That we find ourselves here, washed up on the beaches of the English.’

Mlle Aubert frowns at this curious stranger who speaks her language, and reverts to her slow English. ‘You know Paris?’

‘As I know the bodies of my lovers,’ he replies, also in English.

Mlle Aubert’s frown deepens. ‘It was my home.’

‘Then we must talk together of Paris. It is the only city, is it not?’

Mlle Aubert folds her arms. ‘For you, perhaps. No longer for me.’

‘But why?’

Mlle Aubert scowls.

The man looks at her intently. 'Let me guess. Your family is not what it was. There were hard times.'

She nods.

He continues, 'Before then, a life of pleasure. A fine house.'

Mlle Aubert laughs bitterly. 'In Faubourg Saint-Germain. Fresh flowers every day of the year.'

'Faubourg Saint-Germain? And now chasing children. *Ach*. What terrible fate befell the house of flowers?'

'That, monsieur, is not your concern.'

'It is not,' he replies cordially.

Mlle Aubert's jaw shifts from side to side. 'Do not take me for a fool.'

'I do not.'

'The house was not lost from foolishness.'

'Who would think that?'

'My father died at Marne a hero. He never believed he would die.'

'Heroes never do.'

'Now my mother lives above a shop on the Rue des Rosiers. Takes in sewing. She is hopeful a wealthy man will marry her so our family may be restored. But she is old and ruined.'

Cristabel and the Veg stare at Mlle Aubert. This is the most they have ever heard her say. Previously, they have seen her as a solid impediment in an unflattering black dress, not really a person at all, certainly not a person with a story. How intriguing to hear of people living in fine houses in Paris, and ruined mothers taking in sewing, for France is a country they know only as the place where soldiers of the Empire bravely gave their lives in the Great

War, and where Rosalind and Willoughby go to get away from the children, neither of which suggests any kind of native population doing anything interesting.

‘The clock moves slowly for those waiting for the past to return,’ says the man, and holds out his hand. ‘I am Taras Grigorevich Kovalsky. It is an honour to meet you.’

Mlle Aubert, her eyes shrunk to assessing pinpricks, ruminatively strokes the mole on her upper lip, then holds out her hand to Taras Grigorevich Kovalsky and does not seem in the least surprised when he bends to kiss it. ‘I am Mademoiselle Aubert,’ she announces over his bowed head, ‘Ernestine Aubert.’

One of the blonde women, seeing the Veg’s wide-eyed expression, says in a loud aside, ‘Everybody ends up telling Taras their life story, darling. Normally before they agree to take their clothes off for him. He’s a crafty beast, you’ll see.’

Mlle Aubert glares at the woman, then grabs the Veg’s hand and marches back up the beach, saying, ‘*Au revoir, Monsieur Kovalsky.*’

Monsieur Kovalsky, the god Poseidon, the painter of portraits, the crafty beast, waves at Mlle Aubert and the Veg, then turns to smile fondly at Cristabel, and it is as if this smile were entirely usual, merely a continuation of a line of previous smiles. He leans down and nods at the whale. ‘I have come for this creature. I want to paint a picture of it. You say it is yours.’ His eyes are black and shining.

‘I discovered it, monsieur,’ Cristabel says.

‘You have a claim to it.’

‘Precisely.’

‘May I have your permission to paint its portrait?’

She thinks for a moment, then says, ‘All right then. *Oui*. I give my permission. But make those children get off it. They should treat it with respect.’

‘It will be done.’ He puts his hands together. ‘*Merci.*’

‘*De rien,*’ says Cristabel. ‘I hope it is an excellent portrait.’

Monsieur Kovalsky turns away, saying, ‘I hope our paths will cross again, keeper of the whale.’

Cristabel runs after the Veg and Mlle Aubert. She looks back only once to glimpse Monsieur Kovalsky drinking from a champagne bottle with his head tipped back, and the two women pulling off each other’s shirts. Then Monsieur Kovalsky bellows at the savage children and they disappear from the whale as if blown by the force of his voice.

All through afternoon lessons, Cristabel continues to see Monsieur Kovalsky in her mind; she holds his image like a shell she has collected. Mlle Aubert – Ernestine! – is similarly distracted. Cristabel and the Veg catch her gazing from the window, humming an unfamiliar tune under her breath. She asks them to provide answers to the questions: *How far to the Métro station?* and *How much for the beautiful tulips?*

The blonde women had spoken of Rosalind and talked of visiting Chilcombe. But Cristabel will not share this knowledge, this possible meeting, with the magpie Rosalind, because Rosalind will want Monsieur Kovalsky and his strange companions to be her latest things. Rosalind with her cocked head, her claws. No, Cristabel will hold this treasure, this shining discovery, as long as she can. It is a seashell kept carefully hidden between her palms; the shape of her clasped hands like someone waiting to applaud.

## Welcome to Chilcombe

*April, 1928*

It is too warm to stay indoors. Mlle Aubert has the afternoon off and is writing letters, presumably of complaint, so Cristabel and the Veg are walking up the chalk headland that marks the eastern edge of their known world: Ceal Head. This is a 500-foot-high outcrop at the far end of their beach that stretches out into the ocean, resembling the long-nosed profile of a sleeping dragon. The dragon's sloping flanks are covered with green and brown vegetation; patches of white chalk show through like old bones.

Groups of schoolboys sometimes visit Ceal Head to tap at rocks with hammers in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. The rock formations here are of interest to those with an interest in rock formations, and Digby's tutor. He is now – the tutor – rummaging at the bottom of the cliff looking for fossils: a bent matchstick figure beneath the chalk face of history. Digby is standing listlessly behind him with a bucket.

The Seagrave girls follow a curving path up Ceal Head, staying close to the edge, looking down on to the undercliff, a tangled strip of wilderness that runs along the base of the headland, where they can hear wood pigeons communing with their insistent *coo-coo-cooing* and busy wheatears with their *snip-snip-peep! snip-snip-peep!* Sometimes they spy linnets, songbirds balanced precariously on the uppermost branches of gorse bushes, pouring out rippling music.

As Cristabel and the Veg climb higher, there are fewer trees lining the path, and those that remain are wind-bent and wiry. Trees in exposed locations do well to keep their sails trimmed, thinks Cristabel. She approves of things that fit their purpose. Looking behind her,



she can see a group of adults picnicking on their beach, a safe distance from her whale. Their beach is known locally as Chilcombe Mell Beach, but the Seagrave children do not know any other beaches, so have no need to name it. Cristabel can make out Willoughby and Perry. She does not care to identify the others. She wants to walk until they have shrunk to nothing.

‘Quick march, Veg,’ she says. ‘When I was your age, I used to run up this hill all by myself.’

‘That tutor guy, he’s no slouch,’ says Myrtle the American poetess, swirling her drink, and peering along the beach towards the scrabbling tutor. ‘Rocks all look the same to me.’

A picnic lunch has been consumed, mainly by the men of the party, along with several bottles of champagne. More bottles are lolling half-buried in the shingle at the water’s edge. It is a humid day, and the ocean is glassily still. The sky and sea are translucent grey, merging into each other at the horizon, creating a flat wall of sameness; there is nowhere to get to.

Willoughby, lying on his back in a striped swimming costume, says, ‘Tell me, Myrtle, are you wearing gentlemen’s pyjamas? Have you raided Perry’s wardrobe?’

‘She’s far taller than me,’ says Perry, swatting at sandflies. He is a lean, ascetic figure, gingery and pale, with the fine hair of a duckling and a slight whistle to his ‘s’s.

Myrtle laughs. ‘Willoughby, you’re a tease. These are silk beach pyjamas. I acquired them in Nice.’

‘When were you in Nice?’ asks Rosalind, a soft voice from beneath a parasol.

‘I keep a villa on the coast, so I go whenever I crave that exquisite light,’ says Myrtle, her lengthy arms cantilevering outwards. ‘But it’s getting so crowded now. I’m considering Italy next. Somewhere less *en vogue*.’

Rosalind nods. ‘Quite half the people in Cowes last year were foreigners. Where in

Italy might you go?’

‘Venice, Rome, Verona. My heart leads me, and like a dog I follow.’

‘You must read us more of your poetry, Myrtle. Perhaps this evening.’

‘You are too kind, Rosalind. I would be honoured to share my words with you.’

Willoughby rolls over, buries his face.

Reaching the summit of Ceal Head, Cristabel and the Veg look out at the sea. It is mill pond still. If they peer over the edge, they can look down on to a kestrel, and it too is hanging unmoving, close to the cliff face.

It is something though, to be higher than hawks. They can see for miles. To the east, the coastline dips and lifts its way into the distance; there are secluded bays and chalk stacks, and Cristabel has vowed to conquer them all, as soon as she is allowed to go further than Ceal Head. To the west, the view is less spectacular but more familiar. They spy the chimneys of Chilcombe and, scampering up the coast path towards them, Digby escaping from his tutor.

Beyond Chilcombe lies much unexplored terrain. On the far horizon is the seaside town of Weymouth and the Isle of Portland, tethered to the mainland by a pebble causeway and made (the girls mistakenly believe, after overhearing a conversation about the island’s famous quarries) entirely of stone: a barren, moon-like place.

In the absence of any kind of systematic education, the Seagrave children’s knowledge of the world has been patched together from disparate sources to make an occasionally workable Frankenstein’s monster of information. They know the names of most butterflies (Perry); how to skin a rabbit (Maudie); not to eat blackberries in October when the devil spits on them (Betty); and the quickest way to the village pub (Willoughby). But they do not know anyone in the village (Rosalind thinks it inappropriate) or what it is like to live

in the village (they only ever pass through it while fetching Willoughby from the pub) or what lies over the Ridgeway, apart from London, the King and a tea room in Dorchester, where Willoughby takes them for sticky buns on their birthdays.

As for the rest of the globe, they could tell you that France is across the Channel, along with the icy wastes of the Antarctic, the Wild West, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, but they have not much idea of what goes on there. Digby will occasionally pass on truncated lessons from his tutors, but these isolated islands of education are quickly forgotten; foggy outcroppings of Latin or algebra, uninhabited, left to the birds.

However, their sparse factual education has a hefty coating of fiction. Their most treasured possessions are their books, most of which were liberated from the study by Cristabel in the glorious months of freedom after her father's death, when everyone was preoccupied, and she had the run of the house.

As well as their beloved Greek myths and adventure stories, they have a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, left by a departing governess, and the girls have been named co-owners of a *Tales from Shakespeare* and an illustrated edition of *The Tempest* that Digby received at Christmas from his mother. They use them to stage productions in their cardboard theatre, with a sock puppet cast, as well as acting out scenes in the attic, using a bed sheet pegged along a clothes line as a stage curtain. *The Tempest* always stars Digby as Ariel the sprite and the Veg as Miranda the romantic lead, with an impressive turn by Cristabel as Caliban. She enhances her performance as the grotesque slave creature by stashing walnuts in her cheeks to fill out her face in a bumpy and drooling manner.

'Hold your horses, you swinish lords,' cries Digby, as he comes panting up the hill to join them.

'You'll do well to keep a civil tongue in your head, you insolent cut-throat,' replies Cristabel, pulling a tall teasel from the ground and brandishing it.

Digby stops to tighten the tea towel around his neck. ‘How dare you address valiant Robin Hood in such a manner?’ He runs to the Veg and grabs her by the hand. ‘Fair Marion! Come hither to the smugglers’ path! We fly to freedom!’

Their most-loved books have been read so many times, they only have to look at the covers to know how it feels to be enclosed within them. But the worlds contained within the books do not remain between the covers. They seep out and overlay the geography of their lives and are far more real than actual, non-fiction places like Yeovil, only heard of in tedious adult conversations about train journeys. The children feel sure a cliff path on Ceal Head is one used by smugglers in the book *Moonfleet*. (*It starts where the undercliff dies back again into the chalk face, and climbs by slants and elbow-turns up to the top. The shepherds call it the Zigzag, and –*)

“Even sheep lose their footing on it, and of men I never heard but one had climbed it,” says Digby, in a fervent whisper, pulling the Veg along.

‘I don’t want to, Digby,’ says the Veg. ‘It’s slippy.’

‘Then stand sentry at the top and use your musket well, my girl,’ says Digby.

*Moonfleet*, with its tales of maddened seas and ships dashed to pieces on a shingle bank, is also responsible for Cristabel’s notion that the pebble causeway that stretches between Weymouth and Portland is the only thing holding back a storm-tossed ocean raging on the other side. She likes to imagine what might happen if the causeway were breached, how the waves would come roaring across the bay, a thousand-strong army.

On wild nights, she will go to the window of the attic, and say to the Veg and Digby, in a voice heavy with foreboding, ‘I can hear the waves tonight. We can only hope the causeway will hold.’ When she says this, she can believe it is true, and it is a terrible thrill

that runs through her, a powerful excitement, heightened by the sight of the Veg shutting her eyes and putting her hands together to pray.

‘You should try to sleep,’ Cristabel will say. ‘I’ll keep guard.’

Digby will nod solemnly, buttoning up his pyjamas. ‘I’ll take the next watch, Captain.’

The smugglers’ path on Ceal Head is near a row of red-brick coastguard cottages, perched high above sea level, determinedly facing every weather front blowing in from the Channel. The retired coastguard who lives in one of the cottages is in his garden, a pair of binoculars in his hand. He and Cristabel exchange nods.

‘Spotted something might be of interest to you, Miss Cristabel,’ he says, as Digby and the Veg come running to join them, Digby’s cloak now tied around his head.

‘What’s that, Jim?’ says Cristabel.

‘Man with a foreign-type beard heading towards your house. Didn’t look like your peddler kind, but I ain’t seen him round here before. Had some women with him. In trousers. Afternoon, Master Digby, Miss Florence.’

‘Good afternoon, Jim,’ says Digby. ‘How is your wife?’

‘Improving, Master Digby, and that’s to be thankful for. What’s that on your head now? You playing Crusaders again?’

‘It’s a masterful disguise,’ whispers Digby.

‘When did you see this man, Jim?’ says Cristabel.

‘No more than five minutes ago, I reckon.’

Cristabel glances back down the cliff to the beach. The adults are still there, sprawled like fallen bodies. ‘I’m much obliged to you, Jim.’

‘No trouble at all, miss. I was planning to show you them reef knots, but I won’t bother you if you’re going on now.’

‘My apologies, Jim, but this appears to be a matter of some urgency,’ says Cristabel. ‘Come on, Veg, look lively.’

‘Why must there always be running?’ says the Veg. ‘Why can’t we ever sit down for a bit? There’s a lovely sitting spot over there.’

‘No time for malingering,’ says Cristabel. ‘It’s Monsieur Kovalsky. He’s coming to Chilcombe.’

‘Let us away!’ cries Digby, sprinting ahead, his every third stride a skip or a hop or a wild leap over a bush.

Down on the beach, Perry asks, ‘Are those your children up there?’

Rosalind peers at the cliff from beneath her parasol. ‘Hard to tell.’

‘They’re coming down that path at quite a pace. I think it is the three of them.’

Willoughby, still face down in the shingle, says, ‘Come now, Perry – you know Rosalind only has one child. A boy called Digby. Those girls have nothing to do with her.’

‘I confess, I lose track of which child belongs to who,’ says Myrtle. ‘Is the younger girl yours, Willoughby? The smiley one? She’s a peach.’

Willoughby gets up and begins walking into the sea. ‘Fancy a bathe, Perry?’

‘Love to, old chap,’ says Perry. ‘Insufferably close today.’

Rosalind says, ‘Myrtle and I will go back to the house to dress before dinner.’

‘I think it was the children, you know,’ says Perry, standing up and brushing the shingle from his legs. ‘I can’t see them any more.’

Willoughby disappears beneath the water.

Halfway down the cliff path, Cristabel, Digby and the Veg take a sharp right to follow a short cut. They clamber over a stone wall and are dashing through the woods that surround Chilcombe, when they hear a distinctive laugh.

‘Front lawn,’ says Cristabel, breaking into a gallop. ‘Monsieur Kovalsky is on the front lawn.’

And he is, entirely, on the lawn: sprawled flat on his back. The two short-haired women are at the outdoor table drinking and smoking, clad in matching mannish clothes: striped tops and wide trousers. Blythe, holding a soda syphon, is standing nearby with Maudie, wearing expressions of mild concern and intense interest respectively.

‘Hurrah, the children are here. They’ll vouch for us,’ says one of the women.

‘Master Digby, Miss Cristabel, Miss Florence, these visitors are here to see Mrs Seagrave. They say they have already made your acquaintance,’ says Blythe.

‘Terrific,’ says Cristabel. ‘They have. Thank you, Blythe.’

Hearing Cristabel’s voice, Monsieur Kovalsky rises to a sitting position. He is wearing an open shirt and loose corduroy trousers. His bare feet are covered in splashes of paint. ‘The child is here,’ he says. ‘The keeper of the whale with the Akhmatova face.’

Cristabel lifts her chin and walks across the lawn towards him. She extends her hand, and, when he puts his broad hand in hers, shakes it firmly. ‘Cristabel Seagrave,’ she says. ‘Welcome to Chilcombe.’ She has rehearsed this moment many times in her mind and it is perfect that it happens exactly as it should. It is hardly marred at all by the arrival of Rosalind and Myrtle, as, at the moment they appear, Monsieur Kovalsky is holding Cristabel’s hand, and this means Cristabel – for all eternity – will have always known him first.

‘Rosalind,’ she says, ‘this is Monsieur Kovalsky. He is an artist from Russia who has

spent time in Paris, in the country of France.'

Rosalind, uncharacteristically flushed after the walk back from the beach, is momentarily mute. Then one of the blonde women shouts, 'Ros! Yoo-hoo, darling! Surprise!'

'Philly? Philly Fenwick? Is that you?'

'The very same,' says Philly, lifting her drink. 'Why don't you join us? I do believe you live here.'

Rosalind approaches the table, handing her parasol to Maudie. 'Philly, my goodness, how long has it been?'

Philly half stands to embrace her. 'Absolute eons. What's that scent you're wearing? Mitsouko? My, that takes me back. You must know Hilly. Hillary Vaughan. She and I met at the Slade. Been inseparable ever since. Philly and Hilly. Well, it just had to be.'

'Couldn't prise us apart. Delighted, I'm sure,' says Hilly.

'What brings you to Chilcombe?' asks Rosalind.

Philly gestures towards the lawn with the two fingers holding her cigarette, as if waving a smoking gun. 'We're with that disreputable wretch. Became entangled in Paris. Hilly was modelling; I was taking art classes. Both of us heartily sick of the debutante life.'

'Nauseated,' says Hilly. 'Endless lunches where you do nothing but talk about lunches. All our lovers and brothers dead. What did we care for lunch?'

'He found us in a Montmartre nightclub dancing the Ki-Ki-Kari, wanted us to pose for him as twins. We drank fantastic amounts of absinthe and moved into his studio on that apocalyptic night. Quite the adventure.'

'We followed Dionysus,' says Hilly, her eyes on Taras.

'We followed a great artist,' says Philly. 'He's the genuine article, Ros. His paintings are like nothing you've seen. We're on our way to Cornwall. Thought we'd drop by.'

'Taras wanted to paint the famous whale,' adds Hilly.



‘I say, it’s delightfully quirky you still have a butler. An ancient retainer,’ says Philly.  
‘Do you have a grotto too?’

‘Taras? Taras Kovalsky?’ cries Myrtle. ‘Oh my! This is the Russian artist I told you about, Rosalind. Monsieur Kovalsky, so fortuitous to encounter you again. Myrtle van der Werff. We met in Antibes.’

Taras Kovalsky, who has been sitting on the lawn smiling at Cristabel, looks at Myrtle. ‘We have not met.’

‘It was a pool party hosted by a couple from Florida. You had a crowd of devotees, but we spoke intently about sculpture. Its elastic qualities.’

Taras hums a little. ‘No,’ he says again. ‘But we meet now, on this green lawn.’

‘I did a reading,’ says Myrtle. ‘A piece about a fisherman’s net.’

‘Myrtle is a poetess,’ says Rosalind. ‘Very acclaimed. We met skiing in Switzerland. She’s reading for us this evening. Perhaps you could join us, Mr Kovalsky? For dinner and poetry. You too, Philly, Hillary. Nothing grand. Lobster salad. Scallops. A light *mousse au café*.’

Taras stands and approaches Rosalind, takes her hand in his paint-splattered paws. ‘Call me Taras. I am grateful for your kindness. Today, I am weary. I paint, I paint, but nothing comes.’

‘A good meal may restore your artistic vigour, Mr Taras,’ says Rosalind. ‘Do you enjoy lobster?’

‘Whatever you wish to share.’

‘Maudie, please inform Betty we have extra guests for dinner. Where are you all staying?’

Philly laughs. ‘We’re bohemians, darling. Gypsies. We’ve been holed up in grubby farmhouses.’

‘We knock on doors to beg for rooms for the night,’ says Hilly.

‘Doesn’t your mother mind?’ says Rosalind. ‘You’ll stay here, I insist. At least for a few nights.’

‘It’s rather splendid actually, Ros,’ says Philly. ‘Once you learn to embrace life without fretting about money, you open yourself up to fate.’

‘Even in the smallest of villages, we can find lodgings and a local woman to come in and cook for us. We want for very little,’ says Hilly.

‘There are always those who believe in art,’ says Taras, as he lifts Rosalind’s hand to his mouth. ‘You are generous. I bring with me others. There are children.’

‘We have plenty of room,’ says Rosalind.

At that moment, Willoughby and Perry appear in the garden, with towels slung about their necks, followed by Digby’s tutor carrying a bucket of rocks.

Rosalind waves a hand at her husband. ‘Good swim, darling? We have visitors.’

‘So I see,’ says Willoughby.

Rosalind turns back to her guests. ‘Shall we say eight o’ clock for dinner? With poetry to follow. What a charmingly impromptu salon. Tell me, Mr Taras, do you ever paint portraits?’

‘My subjects choose me,’ he says.

‘We have wonderful works of art here at Chilcombe. Perhaps I could give you a tour?’ Rosalind gestures towards the house and Taras makes his way inside. She scuttles rapidly after him, saying, ‘If you’d like to turn left, you’ll find –’

But Taras is already across the hall and up the main staircase in his bare feet, passing the paintings that line the stairs with hardly a backward glance. ‘Horses, horses, dogs. What is that, a boar? The English and their animals. It is unnatural.’

‘I keep the more modern paintings on the ground floor, Mr Taras,’ says Rosalind in

pursuit, 'although there is a fine view of the cupola from the gallery. I had it installed.

There's a zodiac motif.'

Taras pauses to look over the gallery bannister to the hall below, where the children, Digby's tutor, Myrtle and Perry have gathered. Willoughby has sloped off to the drawing room for a drink, followed by Hilly and Philly. Taras points at Cristabel, his downward hand as portentous as Michelangelo's God. 'Where do they keep you, child? Where do you and your French servant sleep?'

'In the attic,' replies Cristabel.

'The traditional family nursery,' says Rosalind. 'Tell me, Mr Taras, how do you know we have a French servant?'

'Children and servants always in the roof. So much revealed by what is hidden in the tops of houses,' says Taras. 'Cristabella, show me the way to your attic.'

Cristabel runs up the stairs and guides Taras along the length of the gallery, past the adults' bedrooms and Digby's bedroom, to where a wooden door conceals a windowless corridor that leads to a narrow staircase that climbs further upwards. They are followed by Perry, Myrtle, Digby in his tea towel headdress, Digby's tutor, the Veg, and a rigidly smiling Rosalind, all strung out in a line like mountaineers.

Up in the cramped attic, Taras has to stoop. With his broad shoulders and bare feet, he seems a giant at the top of a beanstalk, shrinking each room he goes into. The girls' bedroom, with its striped wallpaper and cardboard theatre, seems fit for a doll's house, while Maudie's room beneath the eaves, with a broken teapot by the bed to catch drips from a leaky ceiling, is nothing but a cubbyhole.

The children are used to visitors circling the interior of the house as slowly and

respectfully as underwater divers, so it is exhilarating to see Taras entering the places guests never go, banging open doors without ever stopping to ask.

The door at the far end of the attic, which leads to Mlle Aubert's room, is locked and the space behind it is stiff with the kind of silence produced by someone standing still and listening hard. Taras noisily tries the handle, then moves on to an adjacent smaller door that opens on to a low-ceilinged storage space containing crates, trunks, suitcases and an ivory model of an Indian palace.

One crate has tipped on to its side, spilling out swagger sticks, scimitars and spears. Paintings and tapestries are stacked haphazardly against the walls, alongside cracked glass cases of stuffed grouse and quail, while the mounted heads of antelope lie on the floor, staring blankly upwards. At the very back, a stuffed baby elephant on wheels is balanced precariously against a Victorian child's cradle and, in a cobwebbed corner behind the cradle, there is a tower of books topped by an apple core, a notebook, and what looks to be a hand-drawn map, held in place by a turquoise stone figure.

'What is all these?' Taras asks.

'I don't come up here often,' says Rosalind, raising a handkerchief to her face. 'I believe many items were collected by my husband's father, Robert Seagrave, a great traveller.'

'Collected?' says Taras. 'As if all these were waiting about like baggage for him to take home. I suppose it belonged to nobody until the grandfather came to find it.'

'I'm not sure I follow you,' says Rosalind. 'Many of those objects are antique. They weren't lying about.'

Taras clammers into the roof space, knocking over an antelope's head on his way to pick up the turquoise stone figure from behind the cradle. There is not enough room for him to turn round so he returns backwards, like a large bus reversing, brandishing it. 'This – this

creation – she is an Egyptian goddess to be worshipped. Who worships her here?’

‘That’s a goddess?’ says Cristabel.

‘Should we give her back?’ says Digby.

‘Is it valuable?’ asks Rosalind. ‘We could move some of the more valuable items downstairs.’

‘You want it now it has a price,’ says Taras.

‘I don’t know anything about its price,’ Rosalind laughs, a dry, forced sound.

‘If you’re that keen on it, Mr Kovalsky, why don’t you make an offer for it?’ says Perry. ‘You must sell your paintings, after all.’

‘Money is the great destroyer of art,’ says Taras.

‘Is it?’ says Rosalind. ‘Many artists I know consider money to be a great gift.’

‘A gift that gets heavier and heavier,’ says Taras, who is tenderly wiping dust from the turquoise sculpture, a seated figure with the head of a lion.

‘I’m sure every family has boxes in the attic. Family treasures packed away for a rainy day,’ trills Rosalind.

‘Are not most days in England rainy days?’ replies Taras.

‘This is all very fascinating,’ says Rosalind, ‘but I must speak to Betty about scallops. If you’ll excuse me, the children will be pleased to show you about, I’m sure.’ Her neat footsteps tap away across the wooden floor. The crowd in the attic pull back to let her pass, then gather in again.

‘I say, Mr Taras,’ says Digby’s tutor, ‘did you say that item was a goddess?’

‘The Egyptians knew her as Sekhmet,’ says Taras. ‘Goddess of fire and war. She protected the pharaohs in battle and on their journey to the afterlife.’

Myrtle peers at Sekhmet. ‘I have a similar *objet* from Dutch New Guinea. Primitive art is compelling.’

‘I didn’t know it was a goddess,’ says Cristabel.

Taras turns to her. ‘But you were drawn to her, no? You kept her in your place. That is your place in there, is it not?’

‘What have you been doing in there, Crista?’ says the Veg.

‘Nothing. I go in when I want to,’ says Cristabel.

Taras nods. ‘The unconscious guides us to mystical symbols and we must translate them. Children have a powerful connection with this instinct. What else do you do in there, Cristabella?’

‘Nothing. I draw maps. I write plays. Stories.’

‘How long have you been doing this work?’ asks Taras.

Cristabel frowns. ‘It’s not lessons.’

‘You have begun the work of an artist. This is how it starts. Attics. Secret corners,’ says Taras. ‘It is your soul’s work.’

‘I’m not an artist,’ says Cristabel.

‘You doubt yourself?’ says Taras.

‘No,’ she replies.

‘Good.’ Taras brushes dust from the goddess, then hands her to Cristabel. ‘Keep this one. She has called to you.’ Then he pulls himself up and announces, as if bringing news from a distant kingdom, ‘I am hungry.’

There is a general shuffling about among the people crowded into the attic, and they are beginning to make their way towards the stairs – except for the Veg, who is squeezing herself into the storage space – when Taras turns back to Cristabel. ‘Whose child are you, keeper of the whale? You are not of that Rosalind. I cannot believe that. And you are not of the red-haired man with the womanly mouth.’

‘Mr Willoughby Seagrave,’ supplies Perry. ‘Your host.’

‘My parents are dead,’ replies Cristabel.

‘I saw nobody like you in the portraits,’ says Taras. ‘Expect perhaps the one with the rhinoceros.’

‘Grandfather Robert,’ says Cristabel. ‘I have his hunting knife.’

‘But he does not have your ferocity. Perhaps only a woman can have such ferocity. Where are the paintings of your mother?’

‘There aren’t any,’ says Cristabel.

Perry interjects smoothly, ‘Perhaps I can be of assistance. I believe the portraits of Annabel, Cristabel’s late mother, were returned to her family estate after her death.’

‘Where is her family estate?’ asks Taras.

‘It no longer exists,’ says Perry. ‘Cristabel’s mother had two brothers, both killed in the war, and a pretty younger sister who went off to India to get married, so the Agnew estate went to some distant cousin in Suffolk, if memory serves. Heard he sold off both home and contents to cover some sizeable death duties. A sad tale, but not an unfamiliar one.’

‘Nothing left for the daughter of a dead daughter,’ says Taras.

Cristabel is staring at Perry. ‘This is my family estate,’ she says. ‘Chilcombe.’

‘Of course,’ says Perry, then claps his hands together: the flat, single sound of an Englishman restoring order. ‘I don’t know about anyone else, but I could do with a drink. Shall we?’ He offers his arm to Myrtle.

‘It is hot as hell up here,’ says the poetess, and the party troops off, leaving the children in the attic.

The Veg, cobweb-strewn and sweaty, reappears from the storage space pulling the stuffed baby elephant behind her. Digby helps her drag it free, then turns to Cristabel, saying, ‘Did Mr Taras say your goddess looked after people in the afterlife? Maybe it came from a tomb.’

‘Probably, Digs. Might well be cursed,’ says Cristabel.

The Veg looks up from affectionately patting the head of the elephant. ‘I am feeling mystically drawn to this elephant. Doesn’t he have an agreeable face? I shall call him Edgar.’

Digby steps closer to his cousin. ‘Crista, did you mind about Uncle Perry –’

‘Uncle Perry knows this is my family estate,’ says Cristabel. ‘He was talking about another place, that I never even think about. I never even think about that.’

‘You don’t,’ agrees Digby.

‘You poor unfortunates might want to forget all about your mother,’ says Cristabel. ‘She’s going to make a fool of herself in front of Monsieur Taras. You know she goes swoony for an artist.’

The Veg nods. ‘She’s always wanted her portrait painted.’

‘We found him first, Veg,’ says Cristabel.

‘He definitely likes you, Crista,’ says Digby. ‘He wants to paint your whale.’

Suddenly, the door behind them opens and Mlle Aubert steps out of her room. The children quickly blurt out their obligatory *bonjours* and she replies in her brusque manner, then adds, with a sly expression on her face, ‘You know, *mes enfants*, Monsieur Taras speaks good French. Perhaps you might want to work on your own lessons, *non*? Then we could all talk together. As a conversational exercise.’

Cristabel remains poker-faced until Mlle Aubert has left the attic, then turns to the others. ‘Does your mother understand French?’

‘*Non*,’ says the Veg, wiping the dust from the elephant.

‘So if we learnt French to talk to Monsieur Taras, she wouldn’t be able to tell what we were saying?’

‘She only knows the names of perfumes,’ says Digby.

‘*Formidable*,’ says Cristabel. ‘A secret code.’



‘When did you find this place, Crista?’ asks the Veg, looking into the storage space.

‘After Uncle Willoughby married your mother. She kept throwing my things out. I needed somewhere safe.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us about it?’ asks Digby.

‘You were babies. Babies can’t be trusted. Besides, every ship’s captain needs his own quarters,’ Cristabel says, before heading to her room to stand the goddess Sekhmet on her bedside table.

## Facts Learnt by the Children

**When they creep out of bed and conceal themselves behind the coats in the small cloakroom behind the main staircase in the Oak Hall during that night's dinner party**

1. It can be very warm in April, at night, if you are concealed behind coats in a small cloakroom.
2. Adult voices increase in volume after each course of dinner, apart from Perry's, which remains a controlled, level murmur: a calm river snaking through the mountains and valleys of conversation.
3. Servants repeatedly dispatched below stairs to fetch cigars, champagne and port can and do swear in many fascinating ways under their breath.
4. Monsieur Taras considers art to be the only sane response to an insane world.
5. Willoughby thinks this is absolute arse.
6. Willoughby believes that the finest minds were lost in the war. What's left, he claims, are the ridiculous so-called Bright Young Things bed-hopping around London wearing each other's clothes and bugging each other.
7. There is something called bugging.
8. There are Russian people called Lenin and Trotsky that Willoughby and Perry only ever refer to with the appellation 'that': 'that Lenin chap', 'that Trotsky fellow'.
9. Rosalind wonders if Hilly or Philly has ever met any of the so-called Bright Young Things or been to their parties.
10. In Russia they believe an empty bottle brings a curse upon your family.
11. It is possible to tell when Myrtle has begun reciting her own poetry as the poem

will begin with three or four words proclaimed loudly and ringingly at the same pitch and pace, as if she were banging the words together: 'BLUE ATLANTIC OCEAN LIGHT', 'HEART BLIND, I STUMBLE', 'OH, THIS CALLOUS WORLD'.

12. Taras went to France to be a painter, as he could not paint as he wished in his own country. He asks his fellow guests to remember that they do not live in a country that regards painting as an act of defiance.
13. You can identify the owner of a coat by its smell.
14. Taras has a Russian accent, which means that he places unusual EMphasis on unexpectED syllables while his vowel sounds roll and yaw. Some words are stretched almost beyoooooond endurance while others are pushed. Out. With. Dis. Gust.
15. Rosalind believes it is wonderful England is a free country and wonders if anybody at the table knows how to shimmy.
16. Taras says that in England freedom is measured out in silver spoonfuls to those who can afford it.
17. The sound of breaking glass can, after a while, cease to be startling.
18. Perry wonders whether anybody ever wrote to Annabel Agnew's family, to let them know how Cristabel was getting on.
19. Rosalind believes Jasper was worse than useless at any kind of correspondence and that he was probably supposed to do it but never did.
20. Rosalind says if she could find a way to dispatch such an impertinent child to another family, she would.
21. Rosalind says she is joking.
22. Willoughby will not permit jokes at his niece's expense.

23. Philly keeps a little something in a cigarette case that peeps people up if they start to flag.

**Things the children would have learnt had they not fallen asleep in the very warm small cloakroom behind the main staircase in the Oak Hall and been taken upstairs to bed by Maudie Kitcat and Mr Brewer who had been alerted to their whereabouts due to the Veg snoring**

1. Some dinners go on so late that, after pudding has finished, the guests can demand they now be served breakfast by shouting EGGS-EGGS-EGGS-EGGS.
2. Rosalind has spoken to Mr Brewer and arranged for Taras and his entourage to stay in an empty cottage on the edge of the Chilcombe estate by the sea.
3. Rosalind has not consulted Willoughby about this.
4. At the end of dinner parties, people start having the same conversations they had at the beginning, only louder and over the top of each other.
5. Willoughby believes that three in the morning is a jolly good time to take his new car for a spin and that a beguiling plate of eggs should go with him.
6. Sometimes adults will cry while at the same time saying they are perfectly all right.
7. Perry's full name is Colonel Peregrine Aubrey Blomefield Drake.
8. Servants can sleep leaning against walls.
9. After a dinner party, people will go to their bedrooms, and there will be successive rounds of door openings and closings: firstly, the brisk openings and shuttings of people efficiently using bathrooms and lavatories; secondly, the more subdued closings of people going into their bedrooms, locking their doors and

turning off the lights; thirdly, the discreetly spread-apart clicks of locks carefully being unlocked again, followed by the creaks of doors slowly opening, accompanied by tiptoed footsteps, barely audible knockings, and a hush of whispered closings, and this third round of sounds will go on and on, like an echo caught in the corridors, all the way to morning.

## Through the Bluebell Woods

*May, 1928*

April is blown away by another round of storms, thunder rolling about the bay like a wooden skittle ball, then May steps in with a curtsy, and Dorset blooms with a giddy enthusiasm, like a young girl at her first county ball spun about the dance floor by a strong-handed farmer. The hedgerows take up motion, cow parsley quivering delightedly every time Willoughby roars past in his Daimler; Chilcombe's horse chestnut trees gladly wave their ice-cream cone flowers, and the buttercup meadows are all swaying invitation. Bring a picnic, bring a rug, bring a lap to lie on, a head to lie upon your lap.

The woods to the west of Chilcombe, mostly elegant beech trees with a few oaks and pines, now stand in a sea of bluebells, a flood of flowers lit by sunlight filtering through new leaves. Here and there are clumps of geometric bracken and the white pompom bursts of wild garlic flowers, filling the air with their profligate scent.

The three Seagrave children, wending their way through the trees, find they are carrying with them a careful silence. It is mid-morning, a Tuesday in the first week of May, and since entering the woods, their conversation has fallen away. They are all listening, although they couldn't tell you what they are listening for. They know these woods well, but the bluebells have altered them; they now seem charged with a strange expectation, the kind of silence you can hear yourself breathe.

The bluebells go on as far as the children can see, and the lines of beech trees – both the vertical trunks stretching upwards and the diagonal lines of the trees receding into the distance – repeat and cross-hatch and overlap until it is hard for their eyes to follow them.

The vanishing point vanishes, the defined becomes the undefined, and the trees become an endless wall. They cannot see through it. That there is a world beyond the trees seems doubtful. There is only the wood and the stillness of the wood. Cristabel imagines Robin Hood and his Merry Men hiding in the trees; she thinks of the peasant warriors of La Vendée who could merge so silently into the bocage, it was as if they melted away.

They are making their way down a sloping path to an old cottage on the edge of the estate where Taras and his entourage have set up home. Betty has often warned them of the dangers of mysterious gentlemen found in fairy-bell woods, but they are going to meet Taras beyond the woods, and believe this will be safe. Cristabel is also largely unconvinced by fairy talk, particularly in daylight hours, though the Veg secretly hopes she will encounter someone magical – a Puck or Titania – and Digby would welcome anyone at all.

The children walk as a solemn procession in descending height order: Cristabel leading with a frown, the Veg twirling a spiral of hair, Digby casting his wondering gaze from side to side. The girls are in plain cotton frocks; Digby in shorts, shirt and tea towel cloak. All wear long greyish socks that have concertinaed their way down pale legs, and sensible lace-up boots. The Veg's straw sunhat has been pushed from her head and is hanging down her back on its yellow ribbons. Cristabel's hat hangs in a bush half a mile back. She has replaced it with a handkerchief, tied and knotted like a buccaneer. She carries with her a stick, for swiping, and her grandfather's knife, to score the trunks of trees.

Just as Cristabel starts to believe they will be walking through the bluebells until their dying days, she notices that the trunk she is scoring does not belong to a beech, but to one of the blossomy hawthorns that mark the wood's ragged border. The trio move into open sunlight with a sense of relief and a smaller, quieter sense of loss. The woods seal themselves off behind them. Cristabel, familiar with the shifting ways of trees, piles a few stones at the roots of the hawthorn so they will know where to go back in.

They follow a grassy path to the cottage, which has lain empty since the last tenants left to find better-paid work elsewhere. It is tucked into the curving arm of the bay where Ceal Head slopes down to sea level, a few hundred yards east of the whale. Honeysuckle smothers its porch, while overgrown hollyhocks and hydrangea cover the ground-floor windows. Butterflies sun their wings on its walls, while squabbling seagulls hop along the roof, yanking straw from the thatch. It is a house of flora and fauna; half consumed, half alive.

Facing the cottage is an old stone barn with a thatched roof and wooden doors. The doors are currently open, revealing Taras, barefoot in stained overalls, holding a palette and painting animatedly on a three-foot canvas propped against an upended lobster pot. The children can make out either Hilly or Philly swathed in a sheet and reclining on hay bales in the shady interior.

The space between the barn and the cottage is repeatedly criss-crossed by the savage children they saw on the beach, who are now wearing a disparate selection of adult clothes – an embroidered blouse, a waistcoat, rubber fishing boots – and shouting at each other in a mixture of French and other unknown languages. A dark woman in a headscarf occasionally appears from the cottage to shout at the children and shake a mop at them, like an angry cuckoo from a clock, and every now and again, Taras turns to bellow at them in Russian. It is during one of these outbursts that he notices the Seagraves.

‘Ah, Cristabella! Have you come to save me from these terrible people who do not know how to close their mouths when a great artist is working?’ he says.

On his canvas, the children can see a rough figure and green hills, as simple as hills drawn by a child, one curved line on top of another. Everything is cheerfully coloured and flattened out. It is not at all like the paintings that hang in Chilcombe, with their muscular



horses and epic horizons.

Cristabel moves closer, pulling off her handkerchief headpiece and nodding to the savages. One of the smallest – a girl, she thinks – smiles back and is consequently thumped on the arm by a larger one sprinting past. The child stops smiling but does not cry.

‘Gosh, that must have hurt,’ says the Veg, wincing. ‘I don’t think they have a nanny.’

‘That one’s got a toad,’ says Digby.

‘They are playing. It is a fairy story, I cannot remember,’ says Taras. He shouts in Russian, and the children run off to the beach.

‘We pretend like that,’ says Digby. ‘Pretending is my favourite thing to do.’

‘All children love the theatre,’ says Taras, swiping his paintbrush across the canvas.

‘We’ve never been to an actual theatre, Mr Taras,’ says the Veg, ‘but we have a very good cardboard one.’

Taras nods. ‘In Paris, I painted stage sets in the theatres for bread money. Lies! I painted for wine money. Then I would hide in the wings to watch the performance.’

‘You painted stage sets?’ says Cristabel, then turns to Digby with her eyebrows raised.

Digby searches her expression until he sees something that makes him nod very fast.

Cristabel turns back to Taras and says in a voice slightly louder than her own, ‘We’ve often talked about putting on a real play here at Chilcombe. There’s been many expressions of interest.’

‘Ever so many,’ adds Digby.

Cristabel continues, ‘But it has been hard to find a suitable scenery painter. Here. In the rural countryside.’

A corner of Taras’s beard twitches. ‘You are thinking that perhaps I could paint sets for you?’

‘Oh, let’s put on a play,’ calls the model in the barn. ‘It would be a hoot.’

‘Theatre is not, as you say, a hoot. It is an art,’ says Taras.

‘I would die to be in a real play, Mr Taras,’ says Digby, hopping with excitement.

‘Mother would adore it if we did a play that everyone came to see,’ says the Veg.

Taras smiles. ‘Clever Miss Florence, you are correct. The lady Rosalind has taken me in like a stray tommy-cat in the hope that great art will happen. We cannot disappoint her.’

Philly – for it is Philly wrapped in a sheet on the hay bales – calls, ‘What a jolly troupe we shall be! I’ve always wanted to play the Dane.’

Hilly, who has emerged from the cottage wearing a man’s shirt, hands Taras a drink and says in her cool voice, ‘The Dane? Or a pantomime dame?’

‘No whispering, darling,’ calls Philly, adjusting her sheet.

‘Because Philippa Fenwick never whispers, does she?’ says Hilly.

‘Enough,’ says Taras sternly, though he has his arm about Hilly’s waist and is patting her fondly with the hand that still holds a paintbrush. Behind them, the mop-wielding woman hurls a bucket of dirty water into a hydrangea.

Hilly says, ‘I rather suspect Rosalind will want to be centre stage once she hears there’s a show on.’

‘Rosalind can’t act,’ says Cristabel.

‘Oh, I think she can,’ replies Hilly.

‘What play shall we do, Taras?’ calls Philly. ‘*Romeo and Juliet*?’

Taras faces the children. ‘Cristabella, tell me. Do you have a favourite story? One you tell yourself in bed at night. I was a lonely child in an attic. I know how it is to tell yourself stories.’

Cristabel doesn’t hesitate. ‘*The Iliad*. I tell it to Digby and the Veg too.’

‘Perfect,’ says Taras. ‘We will create for you a Troy and a wooden horse for you to

hide inside.’

Cristabel is so pleased by this development that she manages to stop herself from reminding Taras that the Trojan horse doesn’t actually appear in *The Iliad*, it is in Homer’s other great work, *The Odyssey*, but she cannot *not* say anything at all, so she steps briefly to one side and issues the correction to a confused Veg in a low voice.

‘The wooden horse what?’ says the Veg.

‘There is a big picture of a horse on a hill not far from here,’ Digby is saying to Taras, ‘it’s made from chalk. They made it for the King. But the King was cross because they did him riding away from the seaside when he should have been riding towards it. So the poor man that drew the horse hung himself from a tree.’

‘Betty says he haunts the woods to this day,’ adds the Veg.

Taras laughs, a noise like the booming of a bull seal. ‘Artists and patrons. It does not always end well. Let us try not to displease the lady Rosalind. I do not wish to swing from trees.’ He turns to his canvas and paints a swift outline of a horse on one of the hills. The children are delighted to see their conversation so casually included in his work.

‘We will work like billy-o on the show, Mr Taras,’ says Cristabel, turning her hands to fists and placing them stoutly on her hips.

‘What fun,’ says Hilly, her voice flat as a pond.

Philly heaves herself up from the hay bales. ‘Hilly, do you have a ciggie? I’m all out.’

Taras turns, waving his brush. ‘I do not release you,’ he shouts, ‘*back, back, back, back, back, back, back, back!*’ His voice is so loud it makes the children jump, but they have never seen an artist at work before, and assume it is part of the process.

Taras then returns to jabbing at his canvas, as if the children were no longer there. His lack of interest in them means they can examine him properly, their first real artist. From the front, he is commanding: black eyes, dramatic beard. But from the back, he is workmanlike

and oblong. There is a weightiness about him, an accumulation of meat over muscle, and his hefty arms hang like joints in a butcher's window. If the front of Taras is the artist-entertainer, the back reveals the lifter-labourer – the graft behind the artistry. The combination is something akin to a circus strongman.

The Veg points at the painting, whispers, 'Is it meant to be Miss Philly? It hasn't got legs.'

Taras says, 'You want legs? A machine can do legs. Art comes from within. From dreams.'

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on,” quotes Cristabel.

Taras nods. 'You have it. These others? *Psh*. Now I must work.' He flaps a hand at them.

Cristabel accepts the dismissal and walks away, Digby and the Veg following. She is glad to be on the move as the idea of doing a real play of *The Iliad* is an expanding bubble of excitement in her chest and she wants to take it away before anyone can burst it.

Up until now, she has had limited resources when putting on plays. Only socks, bits of cardboard, and the Veg and Digby, occasionally supplemented by pliable servants or Betty and Mr Brewer's young son, a solid toddler who looks so like Mr Brewer they call him Small Bill, and who, being unable to talk and preoccupied with knocking things over, is not much use. She and Digby have long talked about putting on a show one day, but she had never imagined it happening at Chilcombe, with a real artist and a real cast with adults in it. It is as if her private imaginings have inflated and burst their way free from the attic, like Alice in Wonderland after drinking a potion.

As they head into the woods, Cristabel's mind turns to the savages, their unruliness, how the older one had thwacked the younger one. She would never hit a girl. Not even the Veg. But she appreciated the effectiveness of the blow. There was a fierceness about the

savages she rather admired, and she would need ferocious warriors in *The Iliad*. She would need warriors and gods and spears and shields and bravery and betrayal and cowardice and loyalty. Cristabel looks into the bluebell woods, senses their humming vibrancy, the silent drawing back of quivering bowstrings. These she will bring forward. These will be on her side.

Two weeks later, and at the end of a sun-filled alcoholic afternoon, Rosalind and Myrtle are following the same path through the bluebells.

‘My word, this is idyllic,’ says Myrtle, swaying along in a straw sunhat, her American voice astonishingly loud in the hushed woods.

‘My shoes are ruined,’ says Rosalind.

Myrtle sighs – a great prairie wind through the trees – and says, ‘If I lived here, I would walk these woods in the moonlight. With a lover.’

‘Walk about at night?’

‘Did your handsome husband never lead you into the woods, Rosalind? In the halcyon days before he was your husband. Spill a little.’

Rosalind shakes her head, wrapping a shawl about herself. ‘There weren’t any woods. It was simply something that happened. We turned to one another for comfort, after the death of my first husband. Like many do.’

‘Death inspiring the sex impulse. How very Freudian.’

‘Most things are, I’m told. Although Willoughby wouldn’t have any of that.’

‘Willoughby who married his brother’s widow,’ says Myrtle.

The two women are one behind the other. Rosalind leading, head bowed, dropping her conversation towards her feet; Myrtle following, chin lifted, letting her words rise.

‘Sometimes I think he believes I arranged it all,’ says Rosalind. ‘Isn’t that ludicrous?’

‘How so?’

‘We had been together, he and I. The night of the accident. It was Willoughby’s birthday. There were silly games. But I certainly didn’t intend it.’

‘You woke from your widow’s grief to find Willoughby – and to find him beautiful,’ says Myrtle. ‘He is rather beautiful. That flaming hair.’

Rosalind smiles automatically. She often receives praise from women on behalf of her husband, like diplomatic gifts. ‘Do you think so? You wouldn’t be the first.’ She pulls at a tree branch, then adds, ‘It wasn’t solely grief, you know. There was an understanding between us. Before.’

‘Before? You surprise me.’

‘I’m sure I don’t. You’ve been to all sorts of funny places.’

Myrtle laughs, lifting one hand so the bangles on her arm rattle downwards.

Rosalind continues, ‘You think me inhibited because I don’t talk about – shall we say, “intimate relations” – the way you do. Don’t you find it rather spoils it, if you’re always examining everything and having discussions?’

‘*Au contraire*. I find the mystery only deepens.’

They walk in silence for a while, then Myrtle says, ‘You’re so alone with yourself here. In the city, everything distracts. But in the country? Listen. Nothing. Only your heart. And all its attendant terrors.’

‘It can be very quiet.’

‘I’m telling you, Rosalind, spend a weekend at an English country house and you die a thousand deaths. The longest hours of your life spent sitting waiting for someone to bring you a cocktail. Of course, when they finally do arrive, holding your drink and wearing a well-cut Savile Row suit, you fall desperately in love with them. Because what else is there to do?’

Why else do we go to these big houses with their infinite lawns? All these perfectly manicured empty spaces – they demand we find some way to fill them, some meaning to justify the empty hours.’

‘It did feel empty here. After the accident. Willoughby couldn’t get away fast enough.’

‘Men do like to leave at speed.’

‘He bought himself an aeroplane. Vanished for weeks. Couldn’t bear the thought of being trapped at Chilcombe. I couldn’t either. But I had no choice.’

Myrtle picks a bluebell, tucks it behind her ear. ‘What brought him back? Willoughby the runaway brother.’

‘I sent him a telegram. We were to have a son.’

‘Digby.’

‘I knew it would be a son. Willoughby says I couldn’t possibly. But I did.’

‘A changeling child. Those innocent eyes.’

‘I gave him a son and heir. The Seagrave line would continue. There was no reason at all for him to be cold with me.’

‘They don’t always need a reason,’ says Myrtle. ‘I got married once. Isn’t that comical? He was a writer. We met in Greenwich Village. Married soon as we could.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘I went home to Boston to tell my parents, to break my daddy’s heart. When I came back and walked into our apartment, I was crying my eyes out. I so wanted to be embraced but my new husband didn’t even look up. Simply held out a dirty coffee cup and said, “Be a dear.”’

‘What did you do?’

‘I went into the kitchen and washed it.’

‘I rather thought you were going to say you left him.’

‘Three years later, I did,’ says Myrtle. ‘Love is stubborn.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, even when you’re standing in the rubble, you can usually convince yourself it’s habitable, that with a good rug you could make it homely,’ Myrtle laughs. ‘We’re still married, but I don’t often disclose it. Men treat you differently if they know.’

‘I try not to talk about money,’ says Rosalind. ‘It makes everything unpleasant. Willoughby doesn’t like to think his money is actually mine.’

‘Is it?’

‘It’s Jasper’s life insurance and my inheritance. But he’s my husband, so of course it’s his.’

A pause in the conversation. The stillness of the woods swallowing all sound. The silence a kind of erasure. When the women look behind themselves, the path has vanished.

‘Chilcombe is hardly my native milieu, but I do my best,’ says Rosalind. ‘He doesn’t even notice.’ A bramble catches her hem. Tugging it free, she wobbles forward in her delicate shoes, saying, ‘I hope this won’t end up in a poem, Myrtle. You could leave things out though. If you were to write about me.’

‘Peregrine said much the same yesterday. That he liked poetry, but he preferred it without people. Landscapes not portraits.’

‘Do you like Perry? He’s ever so rich.’ Rosalind flicks a quick look over her shoulder.

Myrtle pulls herself up to her full height. ‘Darling, I’m ever so rich. My daddy didn’t work all his life for nothing. I might have disappointed him, but I’m still his little girl.’

The women find a scene of bustling industry. Hilly and Philly have propped pieces of



hardboard against the barn wall and are painting them to look like castle ramparts. The woman in the headscarf is sitting in the cottage porch sewing a long gown. Taras is in the middle talking animatedly to Cristabel. He sees Rosalind and throws his arms wide. 'Ah! Never let it be said that the gods do not listen. Perhaps we will have a Helen.' Even from a distance of twenty yards, Rosalind can hear Cristabel sigh.

'Do you need some assistance?' says Rosalind, walking towards him. 'How fortuitous. That's why we're here.'

'Eager beaver volunteers,' says Myrtle, with a Boy Scout's salute.

Cristabel, who is wearing a sheep's wool beard, beckons Taras. He leans down to confer with her, stroking his own beard thoughtfully.

Rosalind feels the tight annoyance she knows as Cristabel rising in her chest. 'Is something the matter?'

Taras says, 'Cristabel says you can play Helen, but you will not need to learn any lines. She says you are to be a mute witness to bloody scenes of horror that you have brought about.'

'I assumed you would be overseeing the production, Mr Taras,' says Rosalind.

The Veg appears at Rosalind's side with a pillowcase belted around her middle. 'Are you to be Helen, Mother? Her face sank a thousand ships! Cristabel is Zeus. I'm Hector.'

'A man?' asks Rosalind, caught between her usual disparagement of her daughter and her keenness that her daughter should not reflect badly on her. 'What about you, Mr Taras? What part do you play?'

'Achilles. I come to burn the city. Inside the walls, Helen hides with her lover Paris.'

'Who's Paris?' asks Rosalind.

Taras points to the beach, where Digby, in shorts and a paper crown, is pacing to and fro, occasionally stopping to gesture. '*Et voilà*. The boy prince, learning his lines.'

‘Isn’t he a little young?’ says Rosalind.

‘It is perfect,’ replies Taras. ‘Everything is said by the portrayal of Paris as a child of privilege.’

‘Inspired,’ murmurs Myrtle.

Philly steps forward, waving her cigarette. ‘I’m the Greek soldiers, darling. We’re very cross about the whole thing. Hilly is the Trojans. All besieged and moany. Typical Hilly. We’re going to have identical costumes in different colours. Little tunics. Up to here.’

‘Identical because there are no differences in war,’ says Hilly. ‘All sides equal in their futility. Particularly Philly’s.’

‘Is the play set in Greece?’ asks Rosalind.

‘Almost, darling. Thereabouts.’

‘So my costume could be something flowing, in white or cream,’ says Rosalind. ‘Like in the paintings. Which reminds me, how is your art coming along, Mr Taras? I hope this isn’t distracting you.’

Philly exhales a plume of smoke. ‘His art is going marvellously, Ros. He has a new model. Apparently, she’s the cat’s meow.’

‘Gosh, who’s that?’

Taras rubs at the corner of his mouth. ‘Ernestine has been kind enough to sit for me. Work is – it is progressing. It is work. It is slow.’

‘Who is Ernestine?’ asks Rosalind.

‘Mademoiselle Aubert,’ says the Veg. ‘We all practise our French together.’

‘Mademoiselle Aubert!’ says Rosalind. ‘I’m not paying her to have her portrait painted. Is she here?’

‘You can’t really tell it’s her in the painting,’ adds the Veg. ‘It’s all pink.’

‘Hardly appropriate,’ says Rosalind, and her hands lift to pat her newly shingled hair.

‘We talk of Paris,’ says Taras. ‘The tree-lined boulevards. As we talk, I see it again.

*Je reviens.*’

‘Do you have any other models in mind?’ says Rosalind. Again, the hands lift and pat.

‘They choose me,’ he says, and walks away.

Rosalind has a powerful urge to run after him and push him over, send him scrabbling on to the dusty floor of the barn, and to rip the paint-stained shirt from his back.

‘We’re rehearsing tomorrow, Mother,’ says the Veg, ‘I could go through the script with you.’

‘I don’t need help,’ says Rosalind. ‘Bring it to me. I’ll look at it.’

Taras’s voice comes from inside the barn. ‘The giantess can be Ajax.’

‘Guess that’s me,’ says Myrtle.

Cristabel nods. ‘Ajax has a shield made of seven cow skins.’

‘Who doesn’t?’ says Myrtle. ‘My, would you look at that incandescent sky!’

Rosalind deploys her automatic smile, casting it blindly about herself. ‘You must all come for drinks soon. We can play boules on the lawn.’ Then she turns and heads back along the grassy path. She can hear Myrtle rhapsodizing, the insinuating murmurs of Hilly and Philly, and the children’s babble. She enters the wood. Leaves them all behind.

Rosalind Seagrave walks through the dappled trees. The sunlight has stretched across the woodland floor throughout the day, across the celandines, anemones and dog violets. And this light will go on into the night, because the sky, on these shining spring days, does not want to go black. Even after the sun has gone, there remains a strip of amber across the horizon, and above that, a pale wash reaching upwards to a band of aqua and above that, a deep blue that is the colour of the very edge of space, and then and only then, high up and forgotten, the indigo black of the night sky, waiting in the wings, carefully holding the golden bauble of envious Venus.

## **Black Flag**

*May, 1928*

The evening is mild, a fuzz of soft greys and greens. Mist has sidled in from the sea and draped itself across the hilltops, cutting Chilcombe off from the rest of the world. It is gone nine when Cristabel steals out of the attic. The adults have left for a party in Somerset, leaving the house to those who are confined to it: servants and children. Nobody is eating or drinking or making demands, so most of the servants are asleep in their beds or playing cards by candlelight down in the kitchen.

Cristabel creeps down the main stairs into the Oak Hall, which is lifeless as a crypt, dim light falling through the cupola onto the grand piano. The piano is rarely opened. Despite Rosalind's oft-stated wish that the children should 'be musical', nothing has been done to further this aim. One of the governesses offered piano lessons, but only the Veg persevered long enough to pick it up, and only the Veg sits at the piano to practise, determinedly plonking her way through melodies until she has mastered them, changing direction with each wrong note, like somebody blindfolded colliding with furniture.

Cristabel collides with nothing. She deftly crosses the hall and slips out of the front door into the misty night, where she spies the narrow shape of Maudie rounding the side of the building. For a moment, they stare at each other through the murk like alley cats, then Maudie nods and vanishes. Cristabel knows she is released, sight unseen. She also knows that whatever Maudie is doing is not something to be enquired about.

Stealthy as a poacher, Cristabel hurries across the garden. She is wearing her lace-up boots and her coat done up over her nightgown. She carries with her a handkerchief dyed black and tied to a stick: a black flag – the international symbol for parley. Even pirates

recognize the black flag. It means they are being offered a chance to sit and talk, man to man, weapons put to one side. She also carries a chunk of sponge cake and a silver trench lighter, two peace offerings shoved in her coat pockets, and her grandfather's hunting knife concealed in one of her sleeves as protection.

She reaches the edge of the lawn and is about to dart into the trees, when she hears a noise behind her. Digby. Barefoot in monogrammed pyjamas. Rubbing sleep from his eyes. Wavy hair standing up from his head. 'I heard you go past,' he says. Digby's bedroom is on the first floor, though he sleeps there only occasionally, preferring to stay with the girls in the attic. 'Where are you going? Why didn't you wake me?'

'I'm going to talk to the savages. Thought it best to go alone.'

He frowns. 'Why?'

She waves the black flag. 'I'm going to seek a parley.'

'You never do things without me.'

'Only one person seeks a parley.'

'I can help,' he says. 'I'll be your squire.'

'Very well, but I'll talk to them by myself. You're to stay in the woods.'

'In the woods?'

'Keeping watch,' she says. 'As soon as I need you, I'll give you the signal.'

'All right,' he says. 'Race you there.'

They spring through the woods like athletes, hurdling tree roots, making sure that any fears lurking in the shadows are outdistanced. When the cottage comes into view, Digby hides himself behind a hawthorn and draws back an imaginary bow and arrow. Cristabel nods at him, then leaves the woods, her heart pounding in her chest.

The flower-covered cottage by the sea is quiet, but it is a different kind of quiet to the staged and weighty stillness of Chilcombe. The cottage has all its doors and windows open. Candles wedged into empty wine bottles flicker on the window sills. Interesting smells are exuded: spicy food, turpentine, tobacco, and something else, rich and heady. Cristabel can hear low voices inside and is moving forwards to hear what is being said, when a twig breaks behind her.

She turns to find the tallest of the savage children, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. He has come out of the barn. The others are scrabbling down from the hay bales to gather behind their leader, numerous as rats.

Cristabel waves the black flag, then puts it on the ground. She reaches into her pockets and holds out the cake and the lighter. The tall savage grabs the cake and tosses it over his shoulder to the smaller ones. He then takes the lighter, turning it in his hands to examine it. Carefully, Cristabel reaches out to spin the file wheel with her thumb, sparking it into life. 'It's a decent lighter,' she says, 'my Uncle Willoughby had it in the desert.'

The savage is so close to her, she can smell his skin. His shadowy face, lit from beneath by the lighter, is sharply angled, fiercely browed. He is a head taller than her and holding a cigarette in the corner of his mouth like a cowboy. Skinny and broad-shouldered, with shoulder-length dark hair and the wispy beginnings of a moustache. She thinks he must be about thirteen; old enough to consider himself an adult. She can hear the sea close by, its hiss and rattle on the pebbles.

She says, 'I come to offer you parley. I need people. For my play. For *The Iliad*. I know you like pretending. I've seen you do it. You dress up.'

He leans towards her. When he speaks, and it is the first time she has heard him speak, it is with a mixed-up accent and elongated vowels. 'Go home, little girl.'

He tries to put the lighter back in her hands, but she resists, pushing it towards him,

saying, 'I'll make you an offer. If you appear in my play, I'll teach you to fight with a sword.'

She raises her voice so the younger ones can hear. 'All of you. I'll teach you to fight like warriors. My uncle taught me. I know how to do it.'

The savage laughs. 'I know how to fight, little girl. The only thing I would do with a sword is rid myself of the blonde whores in my father's bed, *comprene?*'

For a moment she is confused. 'Blonde whores?'

He nods at the cottage.

'Wait,' says Cristabel, 'your father is Taras? He doesn't act like your father.'

The savage gives a snort. 'How does a father act?'

Cristabel is stumped. Over his shoulder, she can see the savages watching her. They all have black hair. 'Don't tell me he's father to all of you,' she says. She had assumed Taras's entourage was made up of disciples, not relatives.

The boy throws his cigarette to the ground. 'Why do you think we are here? We are children of the great Taras. Perhaps we will get a blond brother soon, eh? Maybe two. My mother can look after them like she looks after the rest of his bastards.'

'Who's your mother?' Cristabel suddenly remembers the woman in the headscarf. 'Do you mean the one that does the cleaning?'

The boy pulls back sharply. 'My mother is his wife.'

'I didn't know Mr Taras was married.'

'Why would he tell you? He prefers to forget.' The boy hoicks up a mouthful of saliva and spits it, a quivering froth, to the ground. 'But I can tell you something, little girl – one day, we will be rid of those blonde devils, and we will go home.'

'Do you mean Hilly and Philly?'

'They are not the first devils. There was one in Nîmes. One in Bruges. Sometimes, we collect the children. My mother becomes their mother. You understand?'

‘I’m beginning to,’ Cristabel says. ‘Hilly and Philly are blonde devils, and you believe they are usurpers.’

The boy frowns.

‘Usurpers,’ she says again. ‘They have taken your mother’s rightful place.’

He nods.

‘I didn’t know,’ says Cristabel. ‘*Pardonnez-moi*. Do they make you sleep in the barn?’

‘We choose the barn,’ he says. A hysterical shriek of laughter comes from inside the cottage, as if to explain why. The boy tenses his jaw.

‘How does your mother stand it?’ asks Cristabel.

The savage shrugs. It is a complicated feeling, the one she has at that moment. There is something in the boy’s expression she recognizes; something about what it is to be burdened with adult foolishness – and she will always be on the side of the usurped, the powerless. However, she cannot bring herself to be against Taras, her god from the ocean, the artist bringing her theatrical dreams to life. There is much that requires consideration. But there is also a task in hand. She has a play to produce, and she needs these half-naked foreigners to make up the numbers. She remembers a line from a Henty book: *An Englishman must always somehow or other put his foot down and square his shoulders in a way that a Frenchman never could.*

Cristabel clears her throat. ‘I came to parlay. To strike a deal. Tell me, are you French?’

The boy shakes his head. ‘Half Belgian, half Russian.’

‘But you speak French.’

‘French, Russian, Flemish, English. Do you have a favourite?’

‘English, naturally. Let me be clear: I need a cast for my play. I want you and your



brothers and sisters to be in that cast.'

'Do you not have little friends to play with?'

She considers her answer for a moment before opting for the truth. 'No. We do not have friends. That is why I require you. In return, I will teach you to fight. Or I could get you things from the house. What do you want? Cigarettes? Chocolate?'

The savages whisper 'chocolate' among themselves like an incantation.

The boy says, 'Why should we trust you? You could steal for us, then call us thieves.'

'I give you my word of honour,' says Cristabel.

'I know nothing of your word.'

Cristabel thinks for a moment. Then she reaches out and flicks on the lighter, which the boy still has in his hand. She flattens her own hand and holds it above the flame. 'Watch,' she says, 'this is my word.' She lowers her hand towards the lighter, keeping her eyes fixed on his as her eyelids begin to flutter with pain.

The savages edge closer. The boy waits until Cristabel is holding her shaking hand very close to the flame, furiously blinking back tears, before he moves the lighter away and pockets it. Cristabel clenches her hand to her chest, taking deep breaths.

'Cigarettes, yes. Chocolate, yes,' says the boy. 'One more thing. I want to learn to drive a motor car. You fix that, we talk about plays. *Oui?*'

Cristabel nods. She is not yet in control of her voice.

He watches her for a moment, then says, 'We also do not have friends.' Cristabel is not sure if it is a statement of empathy or of threat.

She strides towards the woods, managing a shaky, 'Monsieur, I will consider your terms.' She has left her black flag on the ground.

He calls after her. '*Bonsoir, mademoiselle. Je m'appelle Leon.*'

Digby is in the trees waiting for her, shivering in the night air. She manages a smile,

then sniffs, wipes her eyes. 'Burnt my hand.'

'You didn't give me the signal,' he says. 'Does it hurt?'

She nods.

'Did the savages do it?' Digby asks.

'No,' she says, 'I did. To prove my worth.'

'You did it?' he says. An owl hoots in the woods and Digby shivers again. 'Why didn't you signal me, Crista?'

'I knew I could do it, Digs.'

He is silent for a moment then, in an actorly voice, says, 'We must hasten to the castle to tend your wounds, my liege.' He leads the way through the trees, occasionally glancing at her over his shoulder, as they make their way home.

In the darkness of his bedroom above the stables, Mr Brewer lights a cigarette as Maudie pads down the stairs and out into the night as silently as she had arrived. Weekends when his wife and son are away, Maudie has taken to slipping in and out of his bed like a cat.

It wasn't something he remembered trying to arrange – there were old acquaintances of that sort in Hammersmith he could visit if he felt the urge, grateful women who called him Billy, who remembered him as an ambitious young man, well known in the pubs of West London, a man who made it his business to make it his business – but it hadn't been entirely surprising when Maudie appeared late one night, materializing in the dark like something he'd dreamt up.

She hadn't ever offered him a reason for her late-night activities, she didn't talk much at all, which Bill Brewer – a man who navigated the world by anticipating demand and minimizing damage – appreciated. Ask no questions and all that. Only once, in a moment of

idle curiosity, had he said to her, ‘What are you doing here then, Maudie?’ and she had eyed him assessingly from her preferred position, looking down at him, her hands resting on his chest as it rose and fell, and said, ‘Practising.’

## Rehearse

*June, 1928*

*Scene: A tumbledown cottage by a pebbly beach. A thatched barn full of half-painted canvases and a stuffed baby elephant on wheels. A stage set depicting a castle wall. A rehearsal.*

**TARAS:** [*drawing a line on the ground*] The audience will be watching from here. The lights go up. Cristabella, now you begin your production.

**CRISTABEL:** Enter Achilles.

**ROSALIND:** Achilles is Mr Taras?

**CRISTABEL:** A thousand times, yes. The narrator starts our story.

**DIGBY’S TUTOR AS THE NARRATOR:** Me now? Very good. ‘Achilles’ wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumber’d, heavenly goddess, sing! That wrath which hurl’d to Pluto’s gloomy reign the souls of mighty chiefs untimely slain; whose limbs unburied on the naked shore . . .’ Oh, what’s next?

**CRISTABEL:** ‘Devouring dogs and hungry vultures tore.’

*[Enter savage children on all fours, snarling and barking]*

**CRISTABEL:** The Greeks gather to make the case for war against the Trojans.

**PHILLY:** *[waving a painted sign that says WAR]* War. War.

**HILLY:** A little more oomph, darling, come on.

**ROSALIND:** Where should I be?

**THE VEG:** Over here with me, Mother. We're in Troy.

**TARAS AS ACHILLES:** 'Why leave we not the fatal Trojan shore, and measure back the seas we cross'd before?'

**THE VEG:** *[whispering]* Achilles doesn't want to fight, Mother. He wants to go home.

**CRISTABEL:** Can we have the people creating the sea effect on now?

*[Betty Brewer, Maudie Kitcat and Mlle Aubert, backstage assistants, costumers and goddesses, run on trailing blue ribbons]*

**DIGBY'S TUTOR AS THE NARRATOR:** 'The goddess-mother heard. The waves divide and like a mist she rose above the tide; beheld him mourning on the naked shores . . .' Naked shores again? Is that right?

**CRISTABEL:** Goddess, centre stage. No, we decided we didn't need the fish.

*[Savage children enter and exit with fish]*

**MYRTLE AS AJAX:** 'The limbs they sever from the inclosing hide; the thighs, selected to the gods, divide.' It's not my line, but I adore it.

**MLLE AUBERT AS GODDESS:** 'Shall Troy and ze adulterous spouse, in peace enjoy ze fruits of broken vows?'

**ROSALIND:** Why is she looking at me?

**THE VEG:** You're the adulterous spouse, Mother.

**ROSALIND:** She needn't look at me quite so hard.

**PERRY AS NESTOR, KING OF THE GREEKS:** 'Who dares, inglorious, in his ships to stay, who dares to tremble on this signal day; that wretch, too mean to fall by martial power, the birds shall mangle, and the dogs devour.'

**WILLOUGHBY:** [*lying on the ground in the middle of the audience space*] Bravo, old chap.

**DIGBY'S TUTOR:** This play is full of dogs.

[*Savage children bark*]

**CRISTABEL:** [*banging scenery*] No more barking!

**LEON THE SAVAGE AS PATROCLUS:** [*gesturing at savage children*] *Quand allez-vous faire les choses, vous écervelés fils de putes? Zut alors.*

**CRISTABEL:** Paris is snatched away by Venus. Mrs Brewer, that's you. If you can't lift your arms in that costume, just beckon with a finger.

**ROSALIND:** Do I do anything here?

**CRISTABEL:** No.

**TARAS:** But you must show through your face that you know the man you love is a dilettante. A man who chose beauty over wisdom.

**WILLOUGHBY:** I'm going back to the house for a drink. You're all doing marvellously.

## The Mysterious Travelling Ways of Voices at Night

*June, 1928*

She gives him the signal after supper – an earlobe tug, a sniff – and that means: up. Tonight, we go up. They meet in the girls' attic bedroom. Then, using a chair shoved under the window as something to stand on, and employing the Veg, who does not like high places, as corridor lookout, they heave each other out of the window, working like acrobats, each pulling or pushing in turn.

Once on the roof, they rest against the gable for a moment, before beginning their monkey clamber up the tiles to the apex, sending clumps of moss flying off the roof edge. Their destination is the group of chimneys at the roof's highest point. Between these altitudinous columns, Cristabel and Digby have made their nightly nest.

Sitting side by side, they occupy the same air space as bats, owls and moths: fellow travellers on the night air. The rapid swirl of bats, thrown rags of flapping chaos; the ghost float of white-faced barn owls in their Elizabethan ruffs; the soft thumps of bumbling moths against the attic windows. Occasionally, they can make out someone far below, like Perry wandering the lawn with his pipe, a circle of thinning hair on the top of his head. 'Nobody ever looks up,' Digby says, resting his chin on one hand. 'I must always remember to look up.'

A biscuit tin wedged behind a loose chimney brick holds cigarette cards, a French dictionary and a notebook. Digby and Cristabel leave letters for each other there too, so it serves as a private postbox. A candle stub jammed between roof tiles gives enough light for reading or writing, and Digby's tin soldiers are lined up in the guttering along the roof edge: a

thin line of defence. Sometimes they hear people calling their names, and how delicious it is to remain silent and fugitive together.

Cristabel retrieves two apples from her pocket and hands one to Digby, being careful not to use her burnt left hand.

For some time, there is nothing but companionable apple-crunching, then Cristabel says, 'I've been imagining the first performance. Over there. Beyond the trees.'

'Everyone watching,' says Digby.

'Hector stepping out from the walls of Troy to defend his home.'

Digby carefully rolls his apple core down the roof edge into the guttering, then hugs his knees and says, 'Flossie does that scene perfectly.'

They pause for a moment, to listen out for the snores of their faithful lookout, their noble Hector, who always, without fail, falls asleep at her post in the attic corridor, often with one of her music books open on her lap, as she likes to practise the piano even when not at the piano, her small fingers dutifully making their way along invisible keys.

Other sounds from Chilcombe's inhabitants float up to the rooftop like balloons. Rosalind's voice, just then, as high and ringing as a handbell: 'Wind the gramophone, Philly darling.' Willoughby, his warm baritone adorned with the clink of heavy-bottomed glasses: 'Need a top-up, old chap?' Myrtle following Perry around like a rumour, her invocations all treacle: 'Peregrine, won't you dance with me.' The mysterious travelling ways of voices at night.

Digby continues, 'Flossie told me she imagines she's defending Chilcombe, not Troy. Isn't that splendid? We will always defend Chilcombe, won't we? When it's ours.'

Cristabel spits out an apple pip with a rapid *fft*. 'Your mother says Chilcombe will be all yours. I imagine she'll have me and the Veg sold for scrap.'

'I would never let that happen,' says Digby. 'That would be a travesty.' He leans

against her to find her hand, laces their fingers together, then bumps this single knotted hand on his knee.

He has never got out of the habit of holding her hand. If it were anyone else, Cristabel would think it mimsy, but his natural affection reaches across her straight-backed reserve (just as, nearly forty years before, the amiable toddler Willoughby would constantly grab the hand of the awkward adolescent Jasper), and once Digby has her hand, it is as if the annoyances and impediments that restrict her are loosened, and things are simpler, more possible, and it is no bother at all to lean together, knocking knees: brothers, outlaws, mountaineers, castaways. It is easier when it is the two of them.

Digby says, 'Think of all the plays we could do, if we were in charge. We could hire renowned actors.'

'We don't have to wait till then, Digs. We should do plays now, while Taras is here,' says Cristabel. She is crunching her way through her apple core until there is nothing left but the stem. 'I've an enormous amount of ideas. Brilliant ideas. This is my soul's work.'

Digby says thoughtfully, 'It isn't always the people you think will be good at acting who are good. I thought Mother would enjoy it, but she doesn't.'

'People have unexpected qualities,' says Cristabel. 'I thought Uncle Perry would think it was silly, but he's terrific.' She efficiently flicks away the stem of her apple, then pulls her cardigan down over her knees. The rooftop air, even on this spring night, is cold and celestial. The sky above them is full of stars.

'Crista,' says Digby, 'I noticed something at the cottage. There's only two bedrooms.'

'Yes?'

'The savages sleep in the barn and the dark woman goes in one room. But that only leaves one bedroom for Hilly, Philly and Taras. They must all sleep together. Crista, do you think that Hilly and Philly want to be boys?'



‘What?’

‘The clothes they wear, their hair. Perry says they look like Etonians. He says if he’d had a fag like Hilly, his school years would have been very different.’

‘They might find trousers more practical. I might wear trousers soon.’

‘Sometimes they wear dresses,’ says Digby. ‘Remember the ones with the glittery beads? It’s as if they dress up as different people.’

‘I did actually see them once,’ says Crista. ‘Taras and Hilly and Philly. I meant to tell you. I had gone through the woods.’

‘You went without me again?’

‘Digs, it was important. I had to meet with Leon to finalize our agreement.’

‘I don’t think he’s a very good actor,’ says Digby. ‘He never remembers his lines.’

Cristabel bumps him with her shoulder. ‘I’m telling you what I saw. In the cottage. Two blonde heads, one dark. Lots of legs. Hard to tell what was what.’

‘In one bed?’

‘Yes.’ Cristabel remembers the tangle of limbs, the casual intertwining of anonymous bodies lit by flickering candlelight, and a sickly pulse thumping in her chest. This was somehow linked with the memory of Leon’s voice in her ear – *those blonde whores in my father’s bed* – and then meeting him on the beach with no one else around, to promise him Uncle Willoughby would teach him to drive. She had even sought out Willoughby when he was at his most drunk and cheerful, to make sure he would agree, and the calculatedness of this made her chest thump harder.

‘Why do you think they do that, Crista?’ says Digby.

She shrugs. ‘I don’t know.’

In truth, Cristabel feels she does know some of why the trio in the cottage share a bed; she has the outline of it. There were jokes she’d heard Willoughby make, muttered comments

from village boys, certain sections in books Myrtle left on the lawn. But much was unclear. Even Maudie, their frank if erratic guide to the adult world, was reluctant to be drawn on the subject, simply smiling and pulling at strands of her own hair. Cristabel thinks again of the three bodies: their closed eyes, their absence from themselves. All the windows of the cottage open, as if it had been abandoned, as if they had gone on a journey.

Digby knocks his knee against hers. 'What do you think it will be like?'

'What?'

'Our play.'

'Oh. Nerves giving you trouble, Digs?'

'No, I'm trying to imagine it.'

'I can see how it should go in my mind and I think it probably will go like that and it will be a great success. The first of many.' She squeezes his hand. 'You're not to worry. I'll be there.'

In the house, a clock strikes midnight. As the night tips over into the small hours, the adult voices inside gain in volume but disintegrate in clarity. No longer gently rising balloons, they become shards and fragments, loud exclamations snapped in half by doors slamming and bursts of brassy music on the gramophone.

'I smell bacon,' says Digby.

'Bacon and eggs, I'll warrant, for those still up. Did you know if you throw an egg from this roof on to the lawn it won't break? I've done it ten times in a row before.'

'No!'

'I'll show you tomorrow. We should get some sleep.'

'Can I go in with you, Crista? I don't want to go back to my room.'

'Long as you don't kick me.'

So they snuff out their candle and slither and slide down the bumpy roof to the

window and throw a blanket over their snoozing sister and jump into bed to close their eyes and let the night sky turn and wheel about without them.

### *The Iliad*

*June, 1928*

To Cristabel, Chilcombe and its environs had always been a place of constancy. The sun followed the same course every day, arching over her head like a well-struck cricket ball. The pebbles on the beach clacked ruminatively as the tides moved in and out. There were fields, rounded fields, and ancient trees upon which she and only she had carved her initials. A reliably quiet place – which was always the first thing visitors remarked upon after the noise of their car engines died away. ‘Gosh, isn’t it quiet?’ The answer was invariably, ‘Yes, do come inside,’ as if being exposed to such a large amount of quiet was somehow unwise.

However, on the morning of their performance of *The Iliad*, when Cristabel opens her attic window, she feels a new air come rushing at her from many miles away, flying across the glinting sea, fast as the shadow of an aeroplane. It is here. The day. Her day.

Nothing is as it usually was. There is a wriggling knot in Cristabel’s stomach like a nest of mice. Eating breakfast seems nonsensical. The Veg is mumbling her lines while chewing her porridge, her woolly beard already hung round her neck, and Digby is bouncing about the attic on one foot. There are sounds of frenetic activity elsewhere in the house. Food being delivered. Chairs carried to and fro. Trestle tables arriving from the village.

This unusual bustling continues all day, with Rosalind at its heart, overseeing decor and catering, accompanied by Betty with her mouth full of pins to make any last-minute adjustments to costumes. Blythe and Mr Brewer are dispatched to decorate the path through the woods with Chinese paper lanterns and, by early afternoon, the cottage itself has been transformed by Taras, Hilly, Philly and Myrtle. Lengthy pieces of fabric are draped from the upper windows and pegged into the ground, creating a tent for Greek war leaders, and a flag painted with a galleon flies from the chimney pot. In front of the barn stand the plywood battlements of the besieged city of Troy, decorated with seashells by Taras. Coloured glass bottles holding candles mark out the front of the stage area.

All the weeds and brambles have been removed, the grassy area between the buildings has been mown, and borrowed wooden chairs and deckchairs fill the audience space. Cristabel carefully places one of her handwritten programmes on each seat, while the Veg, following Rosalind's orders, puts a cut rose from the garden on each programme, with a pebble to hold it in place. On the beach, a driftwood bonfire stands ready to be lit in the final act, so that the last scenes will play out against a backdrop of rising flames. Everything is poised and ready; an empty church awaiting its congregation.

But will they come? Cristabel had delivered all the local invitations herself. She borrowed a map from Mr Brewer, commandeered a bicycle from the butcher's boy and – after a painful afternoon teaching herself to ride it – spent a week whizzing through the countryside carrying invitations to the great and the good of South Dorset.

It had been thrilling to seek out addresses, following a map like an explorer. She had never known there were so many villages tucked away in the valleys. Osmington, Sutton Poyntz, Chaldon Herring, Tyneham. The thick summer hedgerows hung so far over the narrow lanes that, from a distance, they looked impassable, but as Cristabel approached, with her brakes squealing, the way through was revealed, like a series of concealed passageways.

The warm evenings stayed light as she freewheeled past fields full of cows solemnly masticating, the cuckoo's echoing call following her through the dusk.

Rosalind may not have known anything about Helen of Troy, but she did – Cristabel reluctantly conceded – know something about how to put on an event. There was an admirable cunning in how she gathered in what she needed. She had recruited a dressmaker friend of Philly's to design costumes and sweet-talked the vicar into lending her practically everything he owned. Rosalind even wrote the invitations herself, saying, 'The personal touch is everything, if you want the right guests.'

Myrtle, smoking in her battle gear during a pause in rehearsals, had replied, 'I'd certainly want to come along.'

'Darling, they all want to come along,' Rosalind had said. 'People are dying to meet Taras. But won't this be a novel way to introduce him? The great artist in a theatrical production with the children.'

Now the big day is here, and the time written on the invitations – *7 o' clock for pre-performance cocktails* – is ticking ever closer. Cristabel sits down under a tree and waits. There is nothing more to be done.

She hears their voices first. The voices of people walking up the driveway. Mr Brewer guides them on to the lawn, where maids with olive wreaths in their hair wait with trays of cocktails. Cristabel sees a few men who know Mr Brewer making jokes about his bare legs and leather tunic. Friendly winks and insults. She has never seen Mr Brewer behave in such a jovial way before. Then cars start arriving. One after the other, crunching up the gravel. Rosalind's high call of greeting floats across the garden, like the triumphant cry of the peacock.

A crowd begins to gather on the lawn, holding their cocktail glasses. They are all

eyes, swivelling about, taking in the ancient house, the secluded garden, the other guests, and even occasionally examining Cristabel herself. She recognizes a couple of Uncle Willoughby's land-owning friends, porcine and bristling, along with a few straight-backed chaps he and Perry knew in the army. A group of intense young adults, with interesting haircuts and skinny wrists, she decides must be Hilly and Philly's art school friends, who Philly says all live in bedsits with gas-rings on the floor, surviving on boiled eggs and frantically copulating to keep warm.

There are grand elderly women, weighty with the jet-black jewels of a previous age, talking loudly about Taras and his ART, and she assumes these must be the patrons he refers to as 'English old ladies with big purses'. She also catches the tail end of some of Rosalind's gushing introductions and divines there is a 'celebrated restaurateur' and a 'modern sculptress' among those milling about. Nearly fifty people, if not more.

Ten minutes till curtain up. Cristabel runs down to the cottage. She needs to put on her costume and make her final preparations. Meanwhile, Blythe begins to lead the audience through the woods. It is a quite magical experience, they will all later agree, to wind through the trees on a midsummer's eve, following a path decorated by paper lanterns. When they arrive at the cottage, they realize – why hadn't they realized this before? – that it is in an idyllic spot, nestled in a grassy dip of land by the beach. House martins and swifts swooping in circles. Exhalations of honeysuckle sweetening the air. The lulling sound of waves on the shore. Barely a whiff of whale. They take their seats and pick up their programmes.

A hand-drawn picture on the cover depicts a furious man waving a spear at a castle. Below this, in inky letters, is written:

TONIGHT THE SEAGRAVE ESTATE IS PROUD TO PRESENT THE FIRST PRODUCTION EVER STAGED IN THE COUNTY OF DORSETSHIRE OF THE RENOWNED STORY OF *THE ILLIAD* BY

NOBLE MR HOMER

DIRECTED BY MISS CRISTABEL ELIZABETH SYLVIA SEAGRAVE ESQUIRE (ZEUS)

ART DIRECTION BY MR TARAS GRIGOREVICH KOVALSKY (ACHILLES)

PLEASE NO TALKING OR INTERRUPTIONS

Cristabel Elizabeth Sylvia Seagrave, now backstage and peering through a slit in the walls of Troy, studies the audience as they look at her programme. Ordinarily, she doesn't like unknown people, but she is beginning to feel a fondness for her audience. It rises in her as an approving warmth that has to do with their willing acquiescence; how they are paying her programme due attention and leaning towards each other to point out features of the scenery.

She leaves her viewing place to go into the barn to pull on her costume. In contrast to the quiet expectation of the audience, inside the barn is a frantic, overexcited place, repeatedly rocked by explosive emergencies that run through the assembled cast like fire.

*Patroclus has lost his shield! Hector's got her thumb stuck in her beard!*

Taras, the still point in the eye of the hurricane, sits on an upturned lobster pot, sipping vodka, in a short tunic that reveals his incredibly thick legs, each the size of a child's torso, and covered with black curly hair like a satyr. Hilly and Philly flit about him, slim as reeds in their soldiers' costumes, with their hair slicked back and eyes encircled with kohl. Perry, pale and upright in the suit of armour, stands nearby. His decades of military life, normally well concealed, are now curiously visible, as if the role of Nestor has allowed him to lift some kind of internal veil to reveal Perry the colonel, Perry the man at home in warfare. Mr Brewer too has resumed his soldierly bearing: a calm, tucked-in competence; the faintly amused fatalism of the capable lower ranks.

There is the Veg pacing solemnly back and forth with her wooden sword, very like

her father in her beard, her tubby roundness never more affecting; she makes Hector a brave barrel of a man, valiant despite the odds. Myrtle, tall as an Amazon, fitting her helmet over her bleached hair while leaning casually against the elephant. The younger savages darting about, shaking their spears; Leon carrying a bucket full of rabbits' blood for the final battle (parasols are to be handed out to the front row during the interval). Digby, the beautiful prince, a loop of flowers in his dark hair. Rosalind, a trembling column of white. The three female servants in their draped goddess costumes: Betty all overflowing bounty; Maudie a wild-haired wood nymph; and Ernestine Aubert, solid and immovable as destiny.

Cristabel loves her cast. She realizes that now. She loves them as the gods love mortals: benignly, and with forgiveness. They had been infuriating in rehearsals, utterly rage-inducing, but now, by some mysterious alchemy, they are perfect. She takes a breath and begins to climb the stepladder propped against the side of the barn that will allow her to appear above the city of Troy, as if floating in the sky, at the moment of her first line, approximately ten minutes into the first act.

From her concealed place near the top of the ladder, she can see Digby's tutor, the narrator, as he steps out on to the stage, the first performer to appear from behind the wooden ramparts. A hush falls over the audience. A few discreet coughs. A gull cawing, then –

*Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring*

*Of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess, sing!*

It has begun.

At first, Cristabel keeps her attention firmly on the narrator, reciting his lines in her head as



he goes along, but as he becomes more confident, she turns her attention to other members of her cast. She watches each of them step on to the stage, sees each begin to find their way. Quavering voices become stronger, nervous gestures more defined. Perry even exchanges a few dry asides with the audience. Eventually, Cristabel is able to turn her gaze to the crowd and take in their rapt expressions.

It pleases her immensely that she has created this. It reminds her of playing with the cardboard theatre in the attic, how her favourite part was lying on the floor, doing the voices, making the characters interact, and watching Digby and the Veg lying on their fronts, faces propped in their hands, transfixed by the story, as if it were unfolding all by itself. It was a conjurer's magic, a divine power.

She would never tell Digby and the Veg that when her time came to say her first lines as Zeus she felt true fear, a blood rush of terror that ran through her from head to toe, spinning her heart like a mill wheel. But as soon as she starts to say his lines, she is Zeus, king of the gods, and she knows how to be that.

Although her audience pays her polite attention, she, as a good director, can see there are more natural performers emerging from her cast. Perry, for example, with his knowing and easeful air. But their favourite by far is Digby. Even when he isn't saying anything, she notices their eyes seek him out. Nudges and nods ripple through the crowd whenever he appears.

She catches his eye once and sees that her own Digby is very far back. It is Paris who returns her gaze. While performing in front of grown-ups makes Cristabel feel a little hot and awkward, fearful she might be laughed at, for Digby, who sees no difference between himself and anybody else, it is as straightforward as breathing. His natural honesty means there is nothing between him and the part he plays, no complicating barrier of self-consciousness.

Then there is Taras as the warrior Achilles. When the other characters are onstage,

there are moments of complicity between audience and cast, a sort of warm acknowledgement they are muddling along together. But whenever Taras appears, there is no interaction. His Achilles is a killer. A man aware of all the souls that must be sacrificed in order for him to obtain immortality, and exactly how they must die and the sounds they will make as they do so. He takes this awareness and lays it on those watching, with no quarter.

The performance flies past. The final scene – fallen Hector/Veg dragged behind her elephant, with the beach bonfire aflame – even has members of the audience dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs, fluttering white flags of surrender. Then *applause*, *APPLAUSE*, the most wonderful sound, rushing around them like waves as they take their bows, rising in crests as Digby steps forward. And again for scene-stealing Perry. And again for the great Achilles. And again for Betty, nearly falling out of her bounteous outfit. And again for all of them. A held note of *clapping, clapping, clapping* that Cristabel hopes will never end.

Afterwards, the performers hurry backstage, slapping each other on the back. They keep breathlessly going over the play, re-enacting it to each other, the parts that had nearly gone wrong – *I almost forgot to kneel!* – and the parts that had gone well – *You did that speech better than ever!* – as a way of keeping it alive, tossing it between themselves like something that cannot be allowed to touch the ground. They garland each other with praise, clasp hands, spin about like dancers. Audience members find their way into the barn too, to congratulate them and shake their hands; slow-moving civilians meeting the glamorous dramatists. Cristabel has never had so many people talk to her, never heard so many people say her name.

Eventually, the audience and cast begin to make their way back up to Chilcombe. Leaving the barn, Cristabel catches Leon's eye. He is stained with rabbit's blood, his grinning

face caked and filthy. He holds up a packet of cigarettes and nods towards the bonfire. She shakes her head. She wants to be at the house now. She finds the Veg and Digby, and together they sprint through the woods in the twilight, still half costumed, flowers flying from Digby's hair like moths.

Rosalind is already there, greeting each member of the audience as they return. She has a comment for each one, her manner tailored to fit each guest. For the rich old ladies, she is a gracious debutante; for the easily flattered old buffer from the neighbouring estate, she is a sparky coquette; for the weak-chinned vicar, a demure mother. Cristabel notes, with some frustration, that Rosalind seems perfectly capable of acting when not onstage.

The house itself forms a perfect backdrop. All the windows are wide open, the front door too. Chilcombe has been creakingly prised open like a doll's house, revealing an interior lit with bowls of floating candles, glowing and flickering like a treasure cave.

As the children file past, Cristabel hears her stepmother say, 'Your production has received positive reviews, Cristabel.'

Digby and the Veg continue into the house. Cristabel stops.

Rosalind speaks without looking at her. 'If there were to be another play, it should be done differently.'

Cristabel says nothing.

Rosalind waves at someone across the garden, then says, 'There should be strings of electrical lights in the trees, and the stage itself should be lit. Mr Brewer can arrange this. The costumes should be professionally made. There's a woman in Hampstead, I have her details.'

A pause. The hubbub of guests, of champagne, of success. The rooks cawing in the trees.

Rosalind continues, 'I won't be in it. I have too much to do. But Taras must be involved, Digby will have the main part, and it will happen by the end of the summer. The

Veg can perform something on the piano in the interval, Myrtle tells me she's rather good, but none of that fiddly music she likes. Something everyone will like. We will invite people from the newspapers too.' She glances at Cristabel to check she's been heard, then adds, 'Tell Digby to mingle. Everyone's desperate to meet him.'

Cristabel says, 'I have some ideas.' Like Rosalind, she speaks into the air, as if musing out loud. 'Ideas of my own.'

'I'm sure,' says Rosalind, in her hostess voice.

'Perhaps I will write a list for you,' says Cristabel, and waits, unmoving. She doesn't often stand near her stepmother and is pleased to discover that there is no longer much between them in height.

Rosalind purses her lips, like a gambler mulling at a card table, then says, 'Very well.'

Cristabel nods, then joins the throng pouring into the house. She notices, with some surprise, that her entrance into the Oak Hall causes a stir. She hears whispered comments, mentions of her father's name. A few people even smile in her direction. She gives brief nods in return, offers a handshake here and there. It is, she supposes, important to greet people. Make them feel welcome. Things of that sort.

She spots Digby and the Veg eating chocolate cake by the fireplace, which Rosalind has filled with an exotic floral display, and heads towards them, slipping Myrtle's unattended cigarette case from the top of the piano into her pocket as she passes.

'Your mother wants us to do another play,' she tells them.

'That's terrific!' says the Veg, in an explosive scattering of crumbs. 'I'm so delighted! This has been the most perfect day in history! Look at all these people!'

'The greatest news I ever heard,' says Digby, shaking his head. 'We could do one of our Shakespeares, Crista.'

'We could, Digs, we could,' she replies, taking a chunk of cake from his plate. As she

eats it, she examines the people looking at them, smiling in their best clothes, holding their cocktails, and she thinks about *The Iliad*. She thinks about what happened afterwards, in the next story, when the cunning Greeks finally made their way into the city of Troy to win the war.

After the body of brave Hector had been burnt on a pyre, the Greeks constructed a huge wooden horse, to be presented to the people of Troy as a gift. A mighty stallion on wheels, hollow on the inside, and they had filled it with silent soldiers, packed together, gingerly stretching cramped limbs, and carefully running their thumbs down the sharpened blades of their swords.

If you find a way to give people what they want, they let you in, thinks Cristabel. If you make a creature to hide inside, they open the doors and pull you through.

## Noises Off

*A bedroom in the cottage by the sea*

**HILLY:** You were the best, darling.

**TARAS:** Yes.

*A guest bedroom at Chilcombe*

**MYRTLE:** You were the best, darling.

**PERRY:** Please, Myrtle. Enough.

*The main bedroom at Chilcombe*

**ROSALIND:** Digby was the best, don't you think, darling?

**WILLOUGHBY:** Left my ciggies downstairs.

*A field halfway between The Shipwreck pub and the Chilcombe estate*

**PHILLY:** I wondered which of us you would choose. My London friends had a wager. Good old Hilly was the favourite. Odds on, apparently. They didn't think I was your type.

**WILLOUGHBY:** Darling, you're not.

**PHILLY:** You say such awful things so charmingly. One could almost believe you have no malice in you at all.

**WILLOUGHBY:** I don't believe I do.

**PHILLY:** Why do you carry on in such a way? All the women, the affairs.

**WILLOUGHBY:** I wouldn't call this an affair. Besides, you're besotted with that Russian ogre. You're only here because it's Hilly's turn tonight.

**PHILLY:** Taras likes to drive women mad because he believes madness is a supreme form of expression. What's your excuse? I believe you secretly despise women.

**WILLOUGHBY:** You all seem to loathe each other quite enough as it is. Never understood why women can't get along. Always bitching about everything. Making life complicated. Cigarette?

**PHILLY:** Why even make love to me?

**WILLOUGHBY:** You talk as if I dragged you here by your hair.

**PHILLY:** Do you have a light?

**WILLOUGHBY:** [*after a pause*] If you've been doing something for a long time, it becomes a habit, I suppose. When I was in the army, there were things I did every morning without fail. Boots, buttons, hat. After a few years, I didn't even notice I was doing them. They simply got done.

**PHILLY:** A perfect definition of the unconscious drive. How easy it must be to be you.

**WILLOUGHBY:** Nobody ever says no, darling. Whose fault is that?

## To London

*July, 1928*

It was Perry who suggested it, at dinner. ‘Why don’t you take the children to the ballet with you? They’re becoming rather feral.’

‘Feral?’ Rosalind had said. ‘Do you find them disagreeable, Perry? The girls have a degree of backwardness, I’ll admit, but Digby has beautiful manners. We could take Digby.’

‘A jaunt to the capital would be good for them all. Civilizing,’ Perry replied. ‘I’m in London next week, I’ll meet you there. Treat them to afternoon tea at The Ritz. My grandmama used to take me when I was a boy.’

Myrtle draped her long hand on Perry’s arm like a napkin. ‘What an inspired idea, Peregrine. The children’s eyes must be opened to the forces of enlightenment.’

‘Must they?’ said Rosalind.

‘Oh, Rosalind,’ said Myrtle. ‘It’ll make them more interesting at parties, if nothing else. Frowning like that will give you lines.’

‘I rarely frown,’ said Rosalind. ‘It’s simply the thought of Cristabel galumphing about the streets of London. She mustn’t take the sword.’

‘Has it occurred to you that Cristabel might be less of a galumpher if she visited London more often?’ said Perry. ‘Has she ever been there? Has she ever been anywhere? Astonishingly, it won’t be that long before she’ll be a debutante. She needs to learn how to behave. Nobody minds a spirited girl from the shires. A practical sort. But they will mind if she won’t use a fork.’

‘Surely she uses a fork?’



Willoughby laughed. 'I'm afraid not, my dear. She's taken to eating off her hunting knife. Like a pirate. I rather enjoy it.'

'You both know about this,' said Rosalind.

The two men, handsome in their evening wear, smiled at her ruefully across the dining table, blameless and assured.

Cristabel gazes up at the locomotive engine and whistles appreciatively. 'A magnificent beast. Look at the size of the thing!'

The Seagrave children, much to their surprise, have been dressed in their best clothes and taken by car to the railway station at Dorchester where they are now waiting to board the 8.15 to Waterloo with Myrtle, Taras, Hilly, Philly and a strained-looking Rosalind on a sunny Wednesday morning in July 1928.

The station is bright and smart, bedecked with hanging baskets of red geraniums, while the train – black and gold and shining – is the most impressive machine the children have ever seen. The highly polished cylindrical engine. Six smart carriages. It basks in the sunshine like a panther, giving off a potent whiff of hot metal.

They are off to the Princes Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue for a matinee performance by the legendary Ballets Russes during the last week of the company's summer season in London. Myrtle has a costumier friend who has arranged it and Myrtle is hopeful that Taras will meet Sergei Diaghilev, a man she describes as 'the company's famed impresario' as if she were reading it from a brochure.

She is saying this again, loudly, as a porter heaves the party's bags on to the train. 'And Diaghilev – the company's famed impresario – is said to be in town this week. Such a fortuitous opportunity, Taras. You'll adore him, he'll adore you, and *voilà!* You'll be the

artist designing his next wonderful production. They say he holds court in The Savoy after every show, so that, darling, is where we'll go.'

'That, darling, is where Hilly and I will be during the show,' says Philly. 'We saw the Ballets Russes in Paris eons ago. They were truly avant-garde then.'

Philly and Hilly are cutting quite a dash at Dorchester Station, in vivid emerald and saffron drop-waist dresses with matching headscarves. Myrtle, alongside them, wearing her turquoise turban and a Chinese fringed shawl, looks like an elongated genie.

Hilly, in saffron, says, 'Nowadays, Diaghilev peddles popular nostalgia for the masses.'

'He might as well work in advertising,' sniffs Philly. 'All those onion-domed churches applauded by people with no understanding of the Russian soul.'

Taras gives one of his bull seal laughs. 'Women! They want their artists to be poor and unsuccessful.'

'A true artist will always succeed,' says Hilly. 'But Diaghilev is a money man before he's an artist.'

Philly adds, in a lascivious tone, 'I've heard he's mainly interested in the contents of his male dancers' tights.'

Myrtle clutches her necklace of Venetian glass beads. 'I don't blame him. The thighs on Nijinsky. Eye-watering!'

'He's awfully short, Myrtle. Dwarfish. You'd crush him like a snail.'

'Diaghilev is interested in what?' enquires Rosalind.

'Enough of this chitter,' exclaims Taras, who is sporting a wide black hat and an embroidered shirt for his trip to the capital, along with checked trousers and lace-up shoes without socks.

As if in agreement, the waiting train lets out an irritable hiss of steam, and the women

of the party shriek and laugh. The two other passengers waiting at the station – a farmer’s wife and a shop girl – politely ignore them.

The station master blows his whistle, and the children climb aboard, making their way into the First Class carriage. The compartment they are to travel in is like a little room, with a door and windows and velvety seats with embroidered antimacassars that smell faintly of tobacco. Cristabel immediately busies herself working out the correct way to operate the window that allows access to the exterior door handle, so she will be able to properly exit the train when they arrive in London, while the Veg fiddles nervously with her hat. Digby is so overwhelmed he can only stare at the overhead luggage rack. The adults head further up the train to the dining car, where they plan to have scrambled eggs and champagne for breakfast.

Cristabel is saying, ‘I like this window very much. Look. You pull down on this leather strap to open it,’ when the train makes a sudden lurch to announce its imminent departure. There is a great *ffffffflump, fffffffflump*, like the sound of an immense mattress being turned over, as the engine starts to heave its way forward; a triumphant *hoo-hoooooo* from its whistle as it leaves the station; and then the *rickety-tack-rickety-tack-rickety-tack* of the carriages clattering over the railway lines at increasing speed. The children rush to lean from the open window so they can gaze along the long snake of the train, which is interspersed with the heads and upper bodies of fellow window occupants, fresh-air enthusiasts holding on to their hats and grinning.

‘I wish I had a whistle,’ shouts Cristabel, over the noise of the engine. ‘I’ve asked for one every Christmas.’

They rocket through the countryside, white smoke pouring from the train’s chimney. Sometimes, when the train rounds a bend, the angle of the track gives the children a glimpse into the engine cab where the grimy fireman is frantically shovelling coal into the glowing firebox, the ravaging industry powering the huge machine, and how thrilling it is when they

plunge into a tunnel, the smoke swirling about them, an enveloping blackness roaring in their ears.

‘Are we still in Dorset?’ asks the Veg, after a while, settling herself back on her seat.

‘Or are we somewhere else?’

The children look at each other.

Digby shrugs, ‘I don’t know how to tell.’

‘Probably over the county bounds by now. I’ll check with the guard for you,’ says Cristabel. ‘Heavens, look at all those cows. You only ever seem to see cows side-on, have you noticed? Very rarely face-to-face.’

The countryside continues to hurtle past, vast acres of it. Orchards, farms, beehives. Shepherds with sheepdogs. Children balancing on gates, waving hankies. Passengers get on and off the train at every station, and each station has a different name. Wareham, Hamworthy, Parkstone. Sometimes, other trains come into sight, travelling in the opposite direction, and the sound as they approach is a relentless galloping that builds and builds until they pass each other in a rapidly screaming blur, the noise a terrible sundering. Brockenhurst. Southampton. Winchester. There are bungalows, hospitals, churches, boating lakes, docks, many-funnelled ocean liners, lamp posts, schools, cricket pitches, cinemas. And people. So many people. It has the effect of subduing the children: the rushing mass of it all; its impassive busyness. It is hard to believe it has always been there, going on without them. There is so much of it.

When Cristabel imagined the train to London, she had thought of it as simply that: a train that would leave Dorchester and pass through some countryside that looked much like the countryside she knew and then reach London. But it transpires that there are many places between Dorchester and London. The line between Dorset and the capital is not a single sweeping stroke, but a wiggly squiggle, full of pauses and interruptions. There are countless

towns and villages she has never heard of, and all seem to be populated by people merrily going about their business, unconcerned by the mysterious unknownness of their locations. Whatever could they all be doing? What was there to occupy the inhabitants of Beaulieu, of Sway, of Hinton Admiral? They weren't in any books. Nobody had ever mentioned them.

There was another peculiar thought that niggled at Cristabel: none of them knew her. None of them knew her name. Even the guard on the train didn't know her name, and she had rather expected he might.

After some time, the guard pops his head into their compartment to say they are approaching London. They look out of the window in anticipation, but it is as if they are coming into the city through its backstage area, as the view is a succession of unattended functional places: blackened industrial buildings, scrubby yards, outhouses, tangled fences. But the buildings pull themselves up, increasing in size and grandeur as they near their destination. They catch a glimpse of Big Ben, and then Waterloo Station itself appears round a corner, a huge open-ended warehouse, its roof a latticework of sooty glass and cast-iron arches, with sparrows and pigeons flying around inside, and a great clock hanging from the interior ceiling.

The train wheezes up to the platform, pulling up alongside others of its kind. Then carriage doors bang open and there are porters shouting and trunks being unloaded, and flower stalls and newspaper sellers, and people on the platform waving and calling. The Seagrave party disembark, and Hilly and Philly immediately set off at the brisk pace adopted by many of their fellow passengers.

'Toodle-pip, darlings,' calls Philly. 'We're lunching with Hilly's parents. Duty calls.'

'We can't take Taras,' adds Hilly. 'Last time, Daddy tried to stab him with a toasting fork. See you at The Savoy.'

The children are shepherded through the busy station by the unlikely duo of Myrtle and Taras, the tall American and the sockless Russian, with a sweating porter carrying their bags and Rosalind trailing behind, murmuring uncertainly, ‘When was I here last? I can’t remember the last time I was here.’

At one point, Taras turns to them, his eyes wild above his black beard, and shouts, ‘Breathe in the restless city, children of the big house! Let it enter your veins.’

They do. There is an open-top car waiting outside Waterloo for them – Myrtle has arranged this – and, as it drives them through the noisy, fume-filled London streets, the children gulp in everything they can. The towering buildings; the policemen in white gloves directing the swarming traffic; the countless red motor-buses, each with a curving staircase on its rear end to take passengers to the top deck, staircases that twist upwards like decorative sashes bearing single, incomprehensible words: DUNLOP. CUSSONS. SCHWEPES. As the car crosses a bridge over the Thames, the children can see working cranes lining the water’s edge; tugboats chugging industriously about, and barges piled with black coal ploughing their way along the river.

Myrtle takes them to a clamorous restaurant, the interior of which is decorated with reflective surfaces: mirror, silver and glass. Every time the children look up from their pork cutlets they see multiple images of their fellow diners, fractured and scattered about. They have never eaten with adults before, and it is a disorientating experience.

Rosalind is glancing about, saying, ‘I don’t think I’ve been here before. No, I don’t think I have.’

‘You should insist that Willoughby take you to London,’ replies Myrtle, from over a cairn of oysters. ‘The spirit withers if left too long in the countryside. Too much scenery; not enough theatre.’

Taras, through a forkful of potato, adds, ‘The modern city is a fuel. A petroleum.’

‘Willoughby doesn’t take me anywhere,’ says Rosalind.

‘Leave the man alone,’ says Taras, adding a slosh of wine to his mouthful of potato.

‘You are always under his feet like a cat, tangling yourself about.’

‘Could somebody tell me,’ says Cristabel, waving her eating knife to attract attention, ‘what an “impresario” is? Like Mr Diaghilev.’

‘He is the person in charge of a theatrical company, Cristabella,’ replies Taras. ‘He finds the money, decides the productions. He is the locomotive.’

‘I don’t think I like wine,’ says the Veg, pushing away her glass.

‘Add more water,’ advises Taras, pushing it back.

‘You know, Taras,’ says Myrtle, who has moved her oysters aside and is smoking from a jewelled pipe, ‘the more I think about it, the more I believe I might be useful for you. And you for me.’

‘Is that so?’

‘My poetry will always be my life’s work, but I have a vision: a poster on the wall of a Tube station advertising a new exhibition by Taras Kovalsky brought to you by the kind patronage of Myrtle van der Werff. No! Brought to you by the Van der Werff Society for the Arts. Oh, but my daddy would just love for me to have a Society.’

Taras smiles. ‘I would be delighted to help you spend your daddy’s American dollars.’

‘Well that,’ says Myrtle, ‘is what I was hoping.’

There follows much dull adult conversation of galleries and opportunities, but also good puddings: baked bananas served in rum with thick dollops of cream.

After lunch, they adjourn to the Belgravia home of a friend of Myrtle’s so they can change

their clothes. When they arrive at the Princes Theatre, numerous taxi cabs are pulling up in the street outside, depositing people dressed in glamorous evening wear, even though it is a sunny afternoon. They crowd through the entrance into the theatre's tiled lobby area, which is ringing with the expectant voices of those waiting to be seated.

The children, under Myrtle's wing, are guided to their places at the front of the circle. They watch as the multitude of theatregoers find their places in the stalls beneath them. Beyond the stalls and the orchestra pit, where the musicians are warming up with a see-sawing cacophony, a red stage curtain hangs from ceiling to floor. The curtain is lit from beneath. It glows.

Then the house lights dim and the murmuring audience quietens. The conductor raises his baton, the violinists tuck their instruments beneath their chins, and everyone breathes in. They wait. Rosalind coughs. The curtain goes up.

From the wings, a long-haired figure comes running, leaping high as a deer, arms raised, legs fully extended, a body in the air at full tilt. Through the small binoculars she has found in front of her seat, Cristabel watches intently. She can see puffs of dust rise from the stage boards as the dancer thumps down to earth.

The conductor gives a flourish, and the orchestra begins to play. The dancer, a muscular figure in a skintight costume, responds to the music with exaggerated movements that extend through every sinew. Some movements are graceful and arching, but some are jagged and functional. Movements that implore, soothe, reach; others that deny, stomp, insist.

More dancers run on from the wings. Lit by the stage lights, they fling themselves about, their faces emphasized by dramatic make-up. Through her binoculars, Cristabel decides some must be women as they are wearing diaphanous dresses and dancing on the tips of their toes. She has never seen people move in this way before, and none of them seem embarrassed by what they are doing. The stage set is also intriguing. There are patterned



shapes arching in from either side to create a forest bower, but when the lighting changes colour, the shapes resemble other things: a church nave, the beams of a workshop, the belly of a ship.

She trains her binoculars on the first dancer again. Despite the transparent costume, it is not immediately apparent as to what lies beneath, but she is fairly confident that the bulge at the top of the muscular legs indicates a thing that indicates a man. It is fascinating, almost shocking, to see a body so outlined and revealed. He looks naked. Cristabel glimpses drops of sweat flying from his forehead as he spins, but his face never betrays the effort he is making.

His face is bold. His eyes ringed. He is a man, but not one like Perry or Willoughby, closed off and wry. He is expressive, sensual, his arms outstretched, his mouth ajar. Occasionally, his hands frame his own face like an actress posing in a magazine. His jumps seem physically impossible – he can leap straight upwards from a standing position like a cat. He reminds her of the slender sprites that climb trees and make mischief in the Arthur Rackham illustrations in *Tales from Shakespeare*. Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ariel from *The Tempest*. Neither good nor evil; male nor female. Something else entirely.

Cristabel hears Rosalind whisper to no one in particular, 'I don't know quite what to make of that one.'

The music swells and there is a sustained note from a violin that floats high in the air and a cello part that sways underneath it, and the dancers lift each other and spin in unison and all the moving parts suddenly seem to be tied together, and there is an uprush of emotion in Cristabel's chest, which takes her by surprise. She doesn't know how to describe what she is feeling or how she has been made to feel it. But whatever it is, and however it is done, it appears to be contagious, because, glancing to the side, she sees the enraptured faces of Digby and the Veg staring at the stage, eyes shining.

She looks again at the performance, at how everyone involved is concentrating on the

same aim, from the principal dancer spinning centre stage, to the unseen man high in the rafters controlling the spotlight, to the patient percussionist counting out the empty bars of space before his single soft *tink* on the triangle. It moves her the way that stories about soldiers uniting to go into battle move her, a collective endeavour in service of a single cause. She would like very much to be a part of that. No. She would like very much to be in charge of that.

After the performance, when the audience are all filing back out on to the street, blinking in the sunlight, there is a kind of milling about where they keep looking at each other's faces, as if trying to see if the show has left a mark. Cristabel frowns at her feet. She does not want to be examined.

Myrtle is swollen-faced and exultant, blotchily streaked with her own make-up. She grabs hold of Digby's hands and exclaims, 'The ballet always moves me to tears – oh, I drown! Did you love it, beautiful boy?'

'Ever so ever so much,' says Digby. His eyes have widened to dinner plate proportions. 'I could jump like that, if I practised.'

'We'll make a dancer of you yet,' says Myrtle.

'Some of the dancing was divine,' says Rosalind, cooling herself with a lace fan, 'but the music was a little coarse.'

Taras offers his arm to the Veg as they begin to stroll southwards towards The Savoy. 'Tell me, Miss Florence. Did the ballet move you?'

The Veg says in a quavering voice, 'Goodness me, Mr Taras. I feel as if my heart is bursting out to pieces at the seams. The orchestra was so wonderful – and the magic toy shop story! To see the dolls come to life like that! *Ç'était très bien.*'

‘What are you saying? The one at the end? With the puppets?’ says Rosalind, who is walking behind them.

‘Yes, *La Boutique Fantastique*, Mother. The dolls loved each other so much they couldn’t bear to be parted,’ sighs the Veg. ‘I was thinking though, Mr Taras, because their love was so strong, they might meet in the afterlife. Like how in the Greek stories, people don’t actually die, they go and live with the gods. Do you think dolls get to go to the afterlife?’

‘It is entirely possible, Miss Florence,’ says Taras, in the oceanically deep voice that reminds her that he came from the sea and is familiar with gods and love and all else unknown.

Digby, who is bounding his way along the pavement in a series of leaps and pirouettes, adds, ‘Flossie, remember, they have to do it again tonight. And tomorrow. And the next day. So they will be together again and again.’

‘Also true,’ says Taras. ‘The doll in the story, Miss Florence, did he love with all his heart?’

‘He did!’

‘But what enables us to know that he loves? His dancing. That is what we will remember, long after love is gone. Art will outlive us all.’

‘Ah,’ says Myrtle, ‘but what inspired his art? His love. Love inspires art. Without love, there is no dancing.’

‘You are too soft,’ says Taras, not unkindly. ‘It is your poems that will suffer.’

‘I believe that’s The Savoy over there,’ says Rosalind. ‘Has my hair survived the journey?’

Taras pauses to direct the Veg’s attention towards her half-sister, who is walking behind the rest of the party, scowling at the floor, her closed-off face furrowed and intent.

‘Look at Cristabella. She is already at work. Picturing her future productions. The American is right to say love inspires art, but not only love. Art inspires art. Anger, hatred, hunger – these can also inspire. But whatever it is, however it comes, there always is the work. The work of art is never done. Even when my hands are empty, I am still painting.’

The Veg nods thoughtfully. ‘Cristabel is very good at puzzling away at things. For ages.’

‘Many people give up,’ says Taras, ‘but it would surprise me if she were to be one of them.’

At The Savoy, the children are left to linger in the lobby, waiting for Perry to arrive and take them to The Ritz, while the adults head further inside, to where Mr Diaghilev sits behind a piano surrounded by admirers. The children catch a glimpse of a round man with a neat moustache and melancholy downward eyes, a dapper walrus patiently accepting compliments while expertly noodling on the piano. Gathered around him are smartly dressed men and darkly sparkling women with the tightly strung calves of dancers, and their conversation is like a song in which the verses are sung by the visiting Russians, low and rumbling, and the choruses are sung by their eager followers: the extrovert laughing Americans, the politely applauding English. *A ha ha ha! A ha ha ha! A ha ha haaaa quite right.*

It is a relief when Perry hoves into view in his colonel’s uniform, hat tucked under one arm. The pale gingeriness that makes him so translucent in civilian life is eradicated by his military outfit, which fills him out, makes him a reassuring presence.

‘I see the acolytes have found their target,’ he says, ushering them out. ‘I can’t stand bohemians en masse, all shouting their radical opinions over the top of one another. Let’s see how long it takes for Rosalind to notice you’ve gone.’

‘We shouldn’t upset Mother,’ says the Veg.

‘I’ll leave a message with a bellboy,’ says Perry, and hails one like a cab.

Entering The Ritz alongside Colonel Drake and being guided to a table in the Palm Court – a yellow and gold room of chandeliers and potted palms – is like the parting of the Red Sea. Chairs are pulled out for them; napkins flourished; enquiries made about the health of Colonel Drake’s parents; benevolent smiles bestowed by staff and diners alike. A tiered cake stand arrives, bearing dainty sandwiches and scones to be eaten with clotted cream and strawberry jam. Perry orders champagne, saying that his grandmama believed every visit to The Ritz deserved champagne, and they each have a glass. Its sneeze-making fizziness makes them giggly and emboldened.

‘I don’t think I will ever go to school,’ proclaims Digby grandly.

‘This is a very sophisticated place,’ says the Veg. ‘I wonder, Uncle Perry, do you think Mr Taras will marry Hilly or Philly?’

‘Hillary,’ replies Perry. ‘There’s cold marital steel in her eyes and, unless he marries her, she’s no different to all his other girls. Although, Kovalsky will have to get shot of his cumbersome first wife before the nuptials proceed.’

‘Mr Taras has a wife?’ says the Veg.

‘That’s right,’ says Cristabel, knocking back her champagne. ‘The woman with the mop. Leon told me. She’s his mother. They lived in Brussels. But she’s actually Belgian. Comes from Flemish.’

‘Other way round, dear girl. The wife is Flemish. Comes from Belgium. Quite a talented artist in her own right, I’m told,’ adds Perry. ‘Or she was before she married Kovalsky and started popping out Russian babies.’

The Veg looks perturbed. ‘I hope when I fall in love with my husband, he doesn’t have a wife.’

‘Don’t be a ninny, Veg,’ says Cristabel, through a mouthful of scone.

‘I’m not being a ninny.’

‘You are being a ninny, you ninny. If he has a wife, he can’t be your husband. Leon believes Hilly and Philly are usurpers, and he’s right.’

‘I’m not being a ninny. There is such a thing as a second marriage, isn’t there, Uncle Perry? Mother had two marriages. She says only the uneducated disapprove of true love. And do you know what,’ says the Veg, who is becoming flushed, ‘I don’t think I want to be called Veg any more. It’s not a pretty name. It’s not even my name.’

‘It isn’t,’ concurs Digby.

‘Digby never calls me Veg, so I don’t see why the rest of you can’t do the same.’

‘You’re Flossie,’ says Digby and takes her hand.

‘I am.’

Caught off guard, Cristabel flounders for a moment, chewing her scone.

‘Flossie suits you very well,’ supplies Perry.

‘It does,’ says Flossie, blinking rapidly. ‘I think it does.’

‘Who would like to hear about the time I won a medal in India and rode an elephant?’ says Perry, while simultaneously indicating to a passing waiter that he would like a whiskey and the bill. ‘I had to steer it with its ears.’

After the elephant anecdote, the conversation turns to the other medals and stripes on Perry’s uniform and what they mean and where they came from – the brushes with death, the hair-raising escapades and the bravery of soldiers who defend the Empire. Then he tells them it will soon be time for them to catch the train home and asks if any of them can remember the name of the train they arrived on.

‘Did it have a name?’ asks Cristabel.

‘They usually do. And a number. Can you remember what colour it was?’

‘Blue,’ says Digby.

‘No,’ says Cristabel, ‘black and gold.’

Perry nods. ‘It is a useful habit to cultivate, remembering the details of trains. A good memory exercise. Next time, I will expect you to know the name and number too.’

After that, Perry sends for a car to take the children back to Waterloo. It is driven by a uniformed soldier who salutes the children as they climb in and again as they climb out at the station, which is emptier and echoing now.

Their train is waiting for them at the platform, so they run to it, and it sets off almost straight away. It has been such a treat to go to the ballet and The Ritz and have champagne and be driven through the city by a soldier, but now they are heading home, and it all seems to have come to a rather sudden end. Perry has told them he will arrange for Mr Brewer to pick them up at Dorchester, so there is nothing left for them to do but sit on the train as it gathers pace, heading away from the city and back towards Dorset. It is dark now. The day has ended.

When they had left Dorchester in the morning, the noise of the train had been regular and companionable – a mechanical horse, cheerfully galloping forth. But now they are leaving London and the train noise has become a desolate roar. It is a monster. It is a factory. Its black windows show only the reflections of those on board, looking tired and haunted.

Digby watches his own image carefully, lifts his chin, holds his hands to the sides of his face like the dancer, then shifts his gaze so his reflection looks back at Cristabel. She studies him, examines their monochrome side-by-side faces, then turns to her half-sister, who

is reading the ballet programme for the third time.

‘I will, you know,’ says Cristabel.

‘Will what?’

‘Call you Flossie. If you like.’

‘I would like that. If it’s all right.’

‘You should have said.’

‘I have now.’

After a pause, Cristabel says: ‘Perry’s elephant story was first rate. You like elephants, don’t you?’

Flossie nods. ‘I do like elephants.’

Cristabel turns and looks out into the darkened countryside. She can see a few isolated lights in the distance like ships out at sea. Cars, she supposes. Farms. Things carrying on.

Somewhere between Southampton and Bournemouth they all fall asleep, rocked by the motion of the train, shivery with tiredness and huddled beneath a woollen blanket loaned to them by the guard. Cristabel in the middle with a protective arm round each of her charges: the softly snoring Flossie; the deeply dreaming Digby.



## Maudie Kitcat's Diary

22nd July, 1928

*Mister Willoughby off in his aeroplane again so Mrs Rosalinds in a blather. Maudie do this Betty do that. filling the house with orders. Betty is my seam straight. Maudie stop staring. You can't miss nuthin but you can't get caught watching her. Like how Bill never looks at me when his wife's around but I know what he hides behind his closed door face.*

*Bill keeps saying, you be careful, Maudie, but no one cares what i do. they'd only care if i got a bun in the oven. that won't happen now Bill got those things. Mister Willoughby has some too. inside pocket of his dinner jacket. don't seem to notice when some go. they forget I turn out their pockets. they forget I empty their slops & wash their bed sheets. they forget me altogether. i see them asleep sick drunk bare as babes but when they wake and find me lighting the fires, they act surprised, pulling their sheets up all modest.*

*apart from mister Willoughby, he dont care. Splayed out shameless as a cat in sunlight. Like that tiger they had at the circus in Weymouth. opens his eyes and doesn't say a word. watches me work. watches me look.*

## Picture It

*July, 1928*

As the summer goes on, the children slip through the widening gaps in their timetables. Mlle Aubert becomes increasingly laissez-faire about lessons, while Digby's tutor is distracted by the pursuit of fossils, and Rosalind preoccupied with her guests. Everyone has wandered away from what they were meant to be doing. It's that time of year. The July sun rests on its laurels in a wide blue sky, comfortable and unthinking. Any other weather is very lightly done, just casual wisps of high cloud.

Into this unattended golden space comes Flossie, pulling her wheeled elephant and leading a group of savage children down to the beach. She is developing a game called 'our school' in which she is a kindly teacher, providing singing lessons and rides on Edgar. Cristabel and Digby are also passing through the sunlight. Whenever they grow tired of planning theatrical productions, they visit the barn where Taras paints. Sometimes, they talk to him in French, but mostly they sit watching him work, while he pays them the compliment of ignoring them entirely.

When Taras is painting, he frequently stops and shuts his eyes, as if trying to picture something or remember something. Cristabel and Digby notice this can happen when he is away from his work: his eyes suddenly close, mid-meal, mid-stroll, as if something has surfaced within and demanded his attention. Even when open, his eyes are often inaccessible, furtive black currants. They tightly seal off the workings of his mind, but Digby and Cristabel

are conscientious observers.

They have seen that, although Taras cheerfully agrees to Rosalind's frequent requests to go up to Chilcombe to meet visitors, he rarely returns from the house empty-handed. Not only does he seem adept at acquiring useful items, like teaspoons for the cottage or the details of a man who supplies oil paints, he usually comes back with something else too: subject material.

Familiar faces begin to surface in his paintings – the vicar and the local MP – along with images found in the portraits of ancestral Seagraves, suggesting that when he grows tired of the people talking to him, he turns his attention to the silent ones on the walls. His lazy geniality begins to appear more like that of the crocodile lying in the shallow water with its great jaws smilingly open. The children like him all the better for this.

They also admire his ability to always be Taras. They are frequently obliged to become cleaner, politer versions of themselves, but Taras never changes. He addresses everyone in the same manner, wears whatever he likes, and is always stained. Paint embeds itself under his fingernails, soaks into the lines on his palms, and splatters his rolled-up shirt cuffs. He carries his work with him, along with the liquorice smell of turpentine. While most people zigzag through their days, trundling between obligations and meals, desires and interruptions, thinking about politics or pilchards or whatever else is coming along next, Taras follows a single path, that of Taras the artist.

One by one, he takes members of the household off to the barn, saying, 'But now I must make your portrait.' They don't know how to say no. There doesn't seem to be a way to do that. Sometimes they arrive to find a canvas already half filled, or a selection of props waiting for them, which gives them the simultaneously pleasurable and unnerving sensation they have already been thought about. For Mlle Aubert, there is a kitchen knife. For Mr Brewer, a handful of coins.

When Taras brings in each new model, he places them inside the barn, where they are framed by the doorway. Then there is a series of adjustments, as he positions and repositions both easel and subject. When he finally begins painting, his attention becomes disconcertingly inconstant – focused not on the person in front of him, but circling round them, repeatedly checking the light, the sky, the light, the sky. The children watch intently, hoping to pinpoint how it happens: the transfiguration of their lived reality.

Sometimes, Taras is frustrated by his work before he even starts. Once, when Mr Brewer had arrived for a sitting, Taras had punched his fist through a blank canvas, placed it on the floor, then walked calmly across the barn to pick up a new one.

‘Everything all right, sir?’ said Mr Brewer.

‘The many times I will get this wrong,’ said Taras, ‘already tire me.’

Mr Brewer scratched his moustache. ‘Whenever you’re ready, sir.’

‘No need for sirs,’ replied Taras. ‘We paint a little then have a drink, you and I, yes? I am Taras, you are Bill. Let us proceed, my friend.’

The children observe this too: his ability to acknowledge futility yet have a go anyway. To set off optimistically even if you soon find yourself back at the start. They are accustomed to all their attempts at anything being marked with a definite cross or a tick, but Taras does not appear to mind a cross. He even gives them to himself. It is a topsy-turvy way of thinking, but there is an intriguing ease to it, a widening of space. It seems a good way to do things, especially now, in this summer of laxity, this time of slack water.

Occasionally, Taras will go to the beach to do charcoal sketches of the whale, and Digby and Cristabel tag along. He is drawn, he says, to the bones of the creature, which are becoming ever more visible as scavengers pick away the flesh. He asks them to look at the bones and

tell him what they see. Bones, they say. No, he says. Again. The ribs are a basket; the spine, a piano; the jaws, a wish bone. Better, he says. Again. The ribs are hands praying; the spine, a crenellated castle wall; the jaws, a pterodactyl's beak. Better, he says. But always again.

As they walk back to the barn, Digby asks, 'When you paint Hilly or Philly, why do you chop their heads off?'

'So I don't have to listen to them when I am working.' Taras laughs, then adds, 'A woman's body is majestic. I celebrate it.'

'You celebrate the bit without the head,' says Cristabel.

He shrugs. 'Perhaps I enjoy to chop the heads off.'

He gives Cristabel a few pieces of paper and some charcoal and tells her to practise her portraits, while Digby climbs about on the hay bales at the back of the barn, pretending to be a cowboy. Cristabel draws Taras as a crocodile coming from the sea; she draws herself as a whale beneath the waves.

'What about Miss Florence?' Taras asks.

'A song thrush? No, a dormouse. No, a field mouse,' says Cristabel.

'Where is she living? What is her home?'

'She likes to be snug. A snug nest with soft jumpers.'

'Cushions to sleep on,' adds Digby, who is half listening. 'Woolly socks.'

'Show me,' Taras says, so she draws it for him. Then he asks, 'How do you draw your home, Cristabella?'

Home? She never thinks of the word 'home'; she thinks of an attic at the top of a house. She draws a thin shape for the attic, then a funnel beneath it, filled with a swirl going round and round like a whirlwind. She already knows what Rosalind is: a magpie.

Willoughby: a sword. Flying things. She adds them to her drawing.

'You see,' Taras says, tapping the top of her head with the end of a paintbrush. 'You

have it already. All you need. Don't forget to put your name on it.'

They work on their respective pieces in comfortable silence, Taras standing at his easel, Cristabel lying on her stomach on the grass nearby. After a while, she gets up and approaches Taras with her paper in her hand, saying quietly, 'I don't know how to draw Digby.'

She has tried, but every time she puts her piece of charcoal to the paper, she stops, because she immediately has it wrong. They both look over to Digby, who is lying on the hay bales, caught in a dusty shaft of light.

The trouble is, he is many things. The brother she wanted and the brother she has, two different notions entirely, and cousin Digby, who is not really her brother, and actual Digby, her most faithful and cheering companion. He is a drawing scribbled over and screwed up and unscrewed again and kept in a pocket always. His presence in her life like a dog sleeping on the end of your bed: a loyalty so fond and constant, you only notice it on the rare occasions when you wake up and it's gone, and then all you want to do is get up and find it, so you can go outside and play. Or perhaps he is simply too close to her for her to see him properly, like a mirror held right in front of the face.

'Do another one of me instead,' suggests Taras.

Digby turns to them excitedly. 'There's an enormous spider over here.'

Soon, it is Rosalind's turn to stand in the barn, holding a bouquet of roses provided by Taras. She desperately wants her portrait to be painted, particularly as sullen Mlle Aubert and flighty Maudie have already had theirs done, but finds posing an uncomfortable experience. It is frustrating to be unable to see how he is depicting her.

'Can I see it?' she asks, but whenever she looks, there is only the outline of her body

and a swirly blur where her face should be. In fact, as the painting develops, the void where her face should be becomes more of a void, while the flowers in her hands are lavished with detail.

‘When do you think you will do my face?’ she asks, glancing at the sky to see what on earth he keeps looking at.

‘I am doing it,’ Taras says, with satisfaction in his voice, using his thumb to smooth out ridges in the paint. ‘It is a polished surface.’

‘When do you think it will be finished? Properly.’

She wants it to be finished and framed. She dislikes unframed paintings. Nothing but bits of canvas stapled to wood. She and Willoughby had once gone for dinner at a house full of unframed paintings by a fisherman that resembled drawings done by a simple child. The guests exclaimed rapturously over them, but Rosalind likes her art to be more accomplished and behind glass.

Unframed paintings remind her of when Hilly and Philly had taken her to a party in an artist’s studio in Fitzrovia after they’d been to see the Ballets Russes. Finally, she’d thought, as they climbed a staircase to the studio, a chance to visit bohemia. But bohemia had proved small and messy. No furniture to speak of, and the space crowded with canvases covered with garish images of typewriters and escalators. Canvases were stacked on the floor and propped up along the walls, and people in shapeless clothes were leaning against them, covering them with wine stains and cigarette ash. Someone was singing a sea shanty; a Hungarian composer was banging a saucepan; the air was thick with incense; and a Welshman with a spittle-filled beard kept shouting into her ear about cubism. They all had loud opinions about art, and they all kept tripping over it drunkenly. It was as if they had gathered together to reassure each other they were the beating heart of everything, but then had a terrible feeling that they weren’t, so kept doing noisy, careless things to cover up the gaping hole in the middle of it

all. 'WHAT IS SO VERY POWERFUL IS THE SENSE OF A MALEVOLENT TECHNOLOGY UTTERLY BLIND TO HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS,' bellowed the Welshman. I would like a chair to sit on, thought Rosalind.

As Rosalind stands in the barn in front of Taras, she has that thought again: I would like a chair to sit on. A triangle of sunlight comes through the open doors straight into her eyes. She remembers that Myrtle (who adores the faceless portrait of Rosalind and has asked Taras if she can buy it) knows an Italian artist who produces the kind of paintings Rosalind covets. Floor-to-ceiling portraits of women wearing gowns in Venetian villas. An artist who would make her look like a real person, but taller. It is frustrating that her artist, the one she is housing and feeding, will not look at her in that way. She can picture it clearly.



## Wings and Bones

*August, 1928*

If you were, like Willoughby, flying above Chilcombe Mell in a single-seater aeroplane on a summer's evening, the view would be as follows: fields, hedges, cottages, a church, and then a thicket encircled by a crowd of raggedy rooks. Not a sign of the house concealed beneath the trees until you were directly above it, then a fleeting glimpse of chimneys and a snippet of lawn, before you shot out over the glimmering ocean.

Willoughby believes the view from an aeroplane accurately depicts man's general irrelevance. Seen from the air, human structures are foreshortened, merely the temporary perching places of birds. England is nothing but a Hornby train set, a model village: predictable, ticketed and neat. But beyond it lies the sea, the sky, the horizon: endless places as vast as Willoughby's beloved Egyptian deserts. A few lines of poetry from his schooldays float into his mind –

*. . . Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

– but waft away before he can remember who wrote them.

He adores flying in the realm of the white clouds; enormous structures, casting shadows big as citadels as they glide along, moving with the slow dignity of things that believe themselves to be immensely solid. When trapped in drawing rooms, Willoughby will

seek out windows with views of skies and follow the clouds as they pass, remembering that he has moved among them.

Reluctantly, he descends to earth, heading for a farmer's field about half a mile from Chilcombe, where he can land safely, and a couple of obliging farm workers with a tractor will manoeuvre his aeroplane into a barn if the weather turns. He switches off the engine for the final section of his flight, leaving just the air whistling through the wires and, somewhere below him, the rooks congregating. Their varying cries – a harsh *caw*, a ruminative *aarrrrrk*, a jocular *akakakakaka* – echo about the valley. A constant call and response: ays and nays; a corvine filibustering. Jasper claimed there was a local legend that if the rooks ever left Chilcombe, the Seagrave family would fail. Cristabel feeds them buttered toast every morning.

Willoughby purchased his aeroplane in the dreadful time immediately after Jasper's death. Days when he would wake with a jolt before dawn, his head pounding, and it would all come rushing back: his birthday party, a game of sardines, hiding in a back room with Rosalind, the window seat behind the curtains, his hand over her mouth. Then the shouts from outside. The whinnying of a horse. Someone banging on the front door. Mr Brewer running in.

It was always four in the morning when he woke up during those fraught and funnelled weeks. The sudden start of the guilty heart. Sometimes, when he came to, he would be lying in Rosalind's bed, her body entwined around his, and that would give him a second start. He would slink back to his room, usually wretchedly hung-over, to endure the interminable wait before daylight and his first allowable drink, which would lift him enough to get through to the next allowable drink. He would resolve not to visit her room again, but she would seek him out: her brimming eyes, her pleading need, her well-chosen nightwear.

He was weak. He was the roguish brother. He might as well accept his part in proceedings.

Two weeks after Jasper's death, he bought his first aeroplane – a plucky little Sopwith Snipe, built in the final weeks of the war, too late to be called into service – and that lifted him higher. He called it *May*. His favourite month of the year and one of his most favourite words when used in conjunction with the word 'you'. *May I? You may.*

Perhaps it was bizarre he was even thinking of such things – aviation, women, what Jasper called his 'bachelor activities' – when Jasper had so recently died. But his mind seemed unable to keep company with the fact his brother had gone. It was desperate, laughable, and in the face of such nonsense, his mind kept jumping up and scampering off to its favourite haunts. Even as he was walking behind his brother's coffin with little Cristabel holding his hand, he was trying to remember the name of a lissom Italian actress he'd met in Covent Garden.

Like a crude jester with a stick of jingling bells, his mind would occasionally jab him with a reminder that he had been engaged in 'bachelor activity' with his brother's wife when his brother died. It seemed terribly unfair, that combination of events; something that could never be undone, a judgement, a branding. Particularly unfair, given that he hadn't approached his brother's wife in his usual way. It had come from somewhere else, yet ended up in the same place, only worse.

What was to be done? Poked by the stick, burnt by the brand, Willoughby fled. He crossed the skies in *May*. Spent Christmas gambling in Monte Carlo. Went skiing with an Austrian fencing champion called Gretchen. Filled a bath at The Savoy with bubbles and showgirls on New Year's Eve. As long as he kept moving, it was all right. On and on and on. His flight both resistance to and acceptance of the mark singed into his side.

Whenever he soared over Chilcombe on his way somewhere else, he would feel rather sorry for it, the saggy old heap, empty and ownerless. But it wasn't empty at all. It was full of

females: a newly wealthy widow, a baby girl, an orphan daughter, a flock of agitated servants, and poor Blythe and Mr Brewer left holding the fort, two stalwart men drowning in a sea of women. It wasn't ownerless either: it was waiting for the sole remaining Seagrave to give up the game and come back to earth.

But every time he returned to England, it felt fusty and small. *May's* wheels would bump down on the turf and there would be a tingle of something bitter at the back of his nostrils as he inhaled his foggy homeland. A damp dog smell. Sodden moss. The cold green-grey of ivy. Elderly England: familiar; unimpressed; chuntering along as ever. He would refuel as quickly as he could. Get up to the clouds. Wings on his heels.

When he finally did go home to Chilcombe, after receiving a telegram telling him he was to become a father, Rosalind had clutched at him and said, 'You came back for me. I was sure you would. Please don't leave me again. I couldn't bear it. I think I would die.'

She said, 'Perhaps it was meant to be all along. You and I.'

She said, 'We're to have a son. A Seagrave son and heir.'

She said, 'So who is "May"? Is she someone I know?'

That was that. The trap was sprung. The mechanism whirred into life. There was the story Rosalind told about them – the graceful love story, the blossoming discovery, the younger Seagrave brother and the tragic Seagrave widow *turning to each other for comfort, as so many do* – and there was an intricate machinery set to spinning beneath it. It wasn't that he didn't trust her. (Although, did he?) It wasn't that he didn't want her. (Although, now he had her, did he? Off and on, he did. Off and on.) There was merely something that niggled. Something he glimpsed sometimes, between her slow blinks; something in the way her long-toed feet reminded him of a monkey seen in a Cairo market.

In sharp moments, he suspected she knew he knew she was not all her saucer eyes proclaimed her to be, but it was easier for them both to go along with it. Her devotion was

soporific. He was Odysseus to her Calypso: the adventurer ensnared by a sweet-voiced nymph on an island of pleasure. He was Paris to her Helen: the beautiful stealer of beautiful ensnared wives. It was better not to question where her devotion came from or what it wanted. It was better not to look at things too closely, as a rule.

After they married – a discreet London ceremony that took place quickly enough to claim Digby (a conveniently small August baby) was born unexpectedly early – he found his view of her changed again. She seemed to meld with Chilcombe itself, like a hermit crab, so that when he thought of her, she was part of the house and all its expectations. There was Chilcombe and there was Rosalind inside it, wanting things done, fussing with furnishings. The way she would rush to greet him with attention and questions, her hands seeking out the flesh at his waist, her fingers pressing, kneading, and tiptoeing up on to their sharpened ends, so he felt her nails digging in. A line of tiny smiling bites.

That she was his wife seemed rather unreal. Inconsequential. The fact he was married would occasionally pop into his mind during turbulent flights, when the slim possibility of his own death bounced into view; but rarely before, and never after. Even then, he only remembered it in a distant, *oh yes* sort of way, as if it was something he'd seen on holiday once – a waterfall; an ostrich.

So he returned to Dorset as the owner of Chilcombe, as husband, father and owner of the estate. He set *May* down in a field. Took off his flying hat and goggles. Then slowly followed the meandering path along the cliff edge, back to his waiting obligations.

As he does this, on a balmy August evening in 1928, he thinks that a decent summer's day in England goes some way towards redeeming the country's usual dispiriting weather. The long grass whispers and shifts. There is the *futz* of a bumblebee close to his ear.

Emerging on to the lawn, he sees, once again, preparatory activity for a theatrical production. The door to Chilcombe is wide open and Blythe and Betty are overseeing the movement of furniture, trailed by Betty's sturdy little son, while Maudie grapples with a box of floral decorations. A few rooks are pecking at the grass, but they take off as Willoughby approaches, with brisk wingbeats of air, an efficient sound like the brushing down of an expensive suit.

Digby, wearing something yellow and voile, gambols across the lawn towards his father, followed by Myrtle, barefoot in a cerise silk dressing gown, brandishing a cocktail glass, and Cristabel carrying a huge set of cymbals.

'Willoughby Seagrave, runaway brother,' says Myrtle, 'we were wondering if you would make it in time.'

'I promised Cristabel I would be here for the rehearsal, and here I am,' he replies. 'Somebody may have to remind me what part I'm playing.'

'You're Antonio,' says Cristabel.

'We're doing *The Tempest* by a fellow called William Shakespeare,' says Myrtle, turning in circles on the lawn. 'I presume you've heard of him.'

'Always have a copy of his latest to hand,' says Willoughby. 'I'm not going to ask about the cymbals, as I don't want to give anyone a reason to make a noise with them, but I would like to know why my son is wearing tights.'

'I'm Ariel, Father,' says Digby. 'A tricky spirit.'

'You mustn't let the girls dress you up like a doll, Digby,' says Willoughby.

'I chose my costume all by myself,' says Digby.

'Can we hurry up, please?' says Cristabel, setting off along the path through the trees.

Willoughby offers Myrtle his arm – 'Shall we?' – and they follow the children.

'That's quite a costume you have on, Willoughby. Is that a leather flying jacket?' says

Myrtle, bumping companionably against a tree trunk as they make their way through the woods. 'Please don't ask me to elucidate *The Tempest*. I haven't been paying a great deal of attention.'

'It has a wizard, I believe,' replies Willoughby. Cristabel is far up ahead on the path, marching briskly. Digby has disappeared from view.

'Prospero. He's trapped on an island. That's Taras,' says Myrtle, passing her glass to Willoughby so he can take a sip. 'Oh, and there's a usurping brother, I forget his name.'

'That old chestnut.'

'There's some drunken comic relief too. That's where I come in.' Myrtle takes an elaborate bow that allows her dressing gown to gape open, revealing bare skin beneath.

Willoughby glances at her swaying breasts in the benignly approving way he might look at a child's drawings. 'Myrtle old girl, you're giving me quite an eyeful.'

'Don't tell your wife. She'll have me flung out.'

Digby appears from behind a tree. 'Who's being flung out?'

'Nobody,' says Willoughby. 'Digby, when was the last time you had your hair cut? What with the wild locks and the tights, it's all rather excessive. You'll have to smarten up before you go to school, or you'll be eaten alive.'

'What does excessive mean?' says Digby.

'You know,' says Willoughby. 'Overdone. Loud.'

'Excessive!' cries Digby loudly. His voice echoes through the trees.

'My word, Digby, I think you're the first person to say anything loud in these woods,' says Myrtle.

'I like to be loud, don't you?' he says, then runs after Cristabel and grabs her hand.

'You don't need to hold Cristabel's hand any more either,' calls Willoughby. 'You're not a baby.' He glances at Myrtle and adds, 'My mother spoilt me rotten. I refuse to let

Rosalind do the same to him. Tell me, is Perry here?’

‘Unlike you, Peregrine is never late,’ says Myrtle. ‘Generally, he likes to arrive before you’ve even noticed he’s there.’

‘He would call that reconnaissance.’

‘Even when dining at The Berkeley?’ says Myrtle.

‘Colonel Drake is never off duty, Myrtle. Surely you’ve noticed.’

Myrtle turns to him. ‘Why isn’t Colonel Drake ever off duty? There isn’t a war on.’

‘There’s always a war on somewhere, darling. What is it now, Digby?’

‘Father, I asked Cristabel about my hair and she said many brave warriors had long hair.’

‘Cristabel, Digby needs to have his hair cut and that’s that,’ says Willoughby loudly.

‘Nobody goes to boarding school with long hair. Nobody who wants to survive anyway.’

Cristabel pauses on the path and turns round, holding a cymbal on either side of herself, like golden chariot wheels. ‘I thought only women cared about hair.’

‘Schools have rules,’ says Willoughby. ‘Digby needs to fit in.’

‘Says the man who arrived in his own plane,’ says Myrtle, taking a slurp of her drink.

‘So Digby has to have the same hair as every other boy or he’ll be punished,’ says Cristabel. ‘That’s a ridiculous rule.’

‘I didn’t make them, darling,’ says Willoughby.

‘You go along with them,’ says Cristabel, ‘and you make Digby go along with them, and if I went to school, you’d make me go along with them, but I’m not allowed to go to school, and that’s ridiculous too.’

Cristabel turns back to the path, leading the party out of the woods and along the grassy path towards the cottage.

‘Cristabel,’ begins Willoughby, ‘it’s simply one of those unavoidable things, I – good



God, what the devil is that?’

The scene at the cottage has once again been transformed. The performance space is now surrounded by professional stage lighting ordered by Rosalind, and there are rows of new fold-out seats. But in the middle of the stage area stands the most surprising transformation of all: the Chilcombe whale.

The large rib bones of the whale have been removed from its carcass, stripped of flesh, and positioned upright on the ground to form a curving space, six feet high, between the barn and the cottage. They resemble twin lines of giant elephant tusks arching upwards like the sides of a galleon. Behind them, the sea is shining gold in the evening sun.

The bones have been placed far enough apart that members of the cast can move in between them or huddle beneath them, as Perry, Mr Brewer and several others are doing now, pretending they are aboard the storm-tossed ship at the start of *The Tempest*. Digby and Cristabel run to join them. A couple of hikers in shorts and walking boots have paused on the beach, watching proceedings with puzzled interest.

‘It’s quite a thing, isn’t it?’ says Myrtle to Willoughby, as they stand side by side looking at it. ‘In the love scenes, it is illuminated with pink lighting. Nothing says romance like a dead whale.’

‘How on earth did they get those great bones here?’

‘I’m hazy on the details, but your wife approved it.’

Willoughby takes out a cigarette case, offers one to Myrtle, and frowns. ‘I heard some talk of an outdoor theatre at dinner, but I never imagined this.’

‘Rosalind is hopeful it will attract more artistic types,’ says Myrtle.

‘Don’t tell me you people are going to stay,’ says Willoughby. ‘Always leave them

wanting more – isn't that what they say?'

'You don't like sharing the limelight, do you?' says Myrtle.

Willoughby turns to her, his cigarette held in his mouth. 'The same could be said of you, darling.' He takes both sides of her loose dressing gown, pulls them together, then reaches around her waist to find the belt.

'What do you think a psychiatrist would make of our infantile need for attention?' asks Myrtle, swaying slightly. 'There must be something very lacking, don't you think?'

'I don't need attention,' he says, tightening her belt briskly, then tying it in a bow. 'All these theatrics, I mean, it's all right for the children, but for adults – it's hardly a worthwhile occupation.'

'And what is it that you do, that is so worthwhile?' says Myrtle. They are roughly the same height; they stand eye to eye.

When he doesn't answer, Myrtle reaches out to straighten the collar of his flying jacket, with the careful tenderness of the drunk. 'I ask myself the same question,' she says. 'What do I do? Why do I do it? Why can't I settle down? That's what my mother says. Why can't you settle down, Myrtle?'

'I do what is expected of me,' says Willoughby.

'Do you?' She squints at him.

He smiles. 'No, I suppose I don't even manage that. I do very little, Myrtle, which is also expected of me.'

At that moment, Cristabel, carrying her cymbals, clambers up on to one of the new seats in front of her cast and demands, 'Again.'

'We're in this scene,' says Myrtle, heading towards the bones and pulling Willoughby behind her.

As the actors go through their scene, Cristabel stands on the seat and repeatedly crashes the cymbals together, to represent the waves of the storm. The sound is a bright metal shock followed by a shimmering reverberation.

‘Where did she get those infernal things?’ Willoughby says, rubbing his temples.

‘The local Salvation Army band,’ replies Myrtle, reclining against a rib. ‘It’s not the only thing she borrowed from them.’

At that moment, Digby appears from the barn, calling, ‘I’ve found my flute, but lost my wings.’

‘Flossie will find your wings,’ says Cristabel. ‘All right everyone, now Ariel has his flute, can we return to Act Two, Scene One, where Ariel sends everyone to sleep with enchanting music.’

‘My son has wings,’ says Willoughby.

‘Digby looks divine,’ says Myrtle. ‘As long as you ignore the hideous noise he makes with that flute, it’s a captivating scene.’

‘Like the screeching of an owl, almost,’ says Perry.

‘Uncle Willoughby, Mr Brewer has your lines on a bit of paper if you need them,’ calls Cristabel. ‘Places, everyone.’

**ANTONIO (Willoughby):** Thank you. Where do I start? Here? Something something hope something beyond. This writing is very small. ‘Will you grant with me that Ferdinand is drown’d?’

## Enter the Whale

*August, 1928*

By the end of August, the Seagrave children have shed their previous lives like snakeskins. Now they are wild creatures who live in the sunlight with the savages, rampaging through the woods in theatrical costumes. On the rare occasions they go back into Chilcombe, with its cool stone floors, it is like stepping into a dark pond. Green-black and stagnant.

On warm nights, Cristabel, Flossie and Digby sleep inside the whalebones, huddled together under scratchy blankets, sharing stolen biscuits. It reminds Cristabel of when she would lift little Digby from his cradle and carry him upstairs to her bed where she could read him stories, how they slept tangled like pack animals to share warmth. They wake to the sound of the sea and when they run to the edge of the glimmering water, they find it pristine, newly created, a bale of blue silk unrolled at their feet.

Every morning, Cristabel looks at her bones with pride and relief. She had come so close to losing them. As the whale decomposed, local officials kept appearing to poke at it. They talked of burying it or blowing it up. Cristabel had begun to wish she could drag its broken parts out to sea, to let them sink beneath the waves, where at least nobody could touch them. She knew she must find some way to save it.

Then one night, up on the roof of Chilcombe, eating a bun and flicking through a notebook, she had seen a drawing of the wooden horse of Troy done by Digby – a horse on wheels, like an enlarged Edgar the elephant, with little people inside – and on the facing page, a note in

her own blockish handwriting, reporting that, according to the book she is reading, Mr Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the Norse kings made their thrones from the tusks of narwhals. She had turned the page, then paused, turned back. The wooden horse. The tusks. The king.

She had looked out across the trees to the ocean. Put down the bun. Picked up her pencil. Sketched lines on the page. Curved lines, like the scenery that arched over the dancers of the Ballets Russes. In between them, she drew people acting and dancing. Then she ripped out the page and clambered down the roof to find Digby.

The following day, they took the drawing to Taras, who, delighted by their ingenuity ('Ah! The jumping minds of children!'), did a more detailed sketch, incorporating wooden struts to hold the whalebones in place, and all they needed now was Rosalind's approval. In order to gain Rosalind's approval, the idea had to come through either Digby or an adult, as any approach from Cristabel was bound to fail. The children knew that leaving something so important to an adult was a risky strategy, but feared Digby may not be taken seriously, so asked Taras to put the idea to Rosalind.

Cristabel and Digby hid in the cloakroom under the stairs the next time Taras came to the house for dinner and so were able to listen in when, amid the chatter between the second and third courses, he suggested using the whale's skeleton to make some kind of theatre. It was breathlessly exciting, to have someone in that private room of adults secretly acting on their behalf. But hearing their proposal discussed was like watching a beachball being tossed about. It bounced among the dinner guests lightly, entertaining some, patted away by others, and, infuriatingly, Rosalind paid it no attention at all, instead repeatedly asking what people thought of the escalopes served with cucumber in a cream sauce.

Their idea seemed to drift away, and they thought it lost for good, but it unexpectedly floated back into view after pudding was served, when Philly joked that they should sell ice creams if they made a theatre by the seaside.

‘If we do what?’ asked Rosalind, and so Taras explained ‘his’ idea for the whale again, only this time with more enthusiasm, as the dinner had involved several bottles of wine.

It was fortunate that, when Taras talked about the theatre for a second time, Rosalind was savouring one of the moments in life she most prized: the coffee at the end of a successful dinner. Everyone aglow with good eating, flattered and replete, not yet tired or argumentative. The conversation expansive, humorous, fond.

‘A permanent outdoor theatre?’ she said.

‘An avant-garde outdoor theatre,’ said Hilly, ‘created by an artist.’

‘My dear old aunt used to put on pageants in the grounds of her house every Empire Day,’ said Philly. ‘We children would march about dressed as Boudica and Nelson.’

Rosalind suddenly remembered going to watch an outdoor performance of *Twelfth Night* at a Sussex manor. It was before the war, a time that now seemed sealed off from her. How taken she had been both with the elegant lady of the house and the perfect setting: the tiered lawn and landscaped gardens; the guests strolling beneath cedar trees. It was as if they had been given access to an enchanted place. She could remember little of the play but recalled the sound of the appreciative audience sitting on the grass, a warm collectivity that somehow mingled with the warmth of the summer evening sky. A calm and benevolent sky, overlooking human activity that was beautiful, in a beautiful place, and how rare that was.

‘Your son does love to perform,’ said Myrtle.

‘Digby has quite a talent,’ Rosalind replied, remembering too the heady sensation of seeing her son applauded.

‘A gift for pretence is hardly a talent,’ said Willoughby, leaving the table to fetch his

cigarettes. 'There's no future for him on the stage, darling.'

Rosalind watched Willoughby depart and took a sip of her coffee. She was, she felt, somehow anti-future. It did nothing, as far as she could work out, but grip too tightly on the present.

She looked at Taras, who was leaning back in his chair, his collar undone, watching her. He never bothered to conceal his watching; he was, at least, transparent in his lack of morals. The Rasputin in her dining room.

'It wouldn't be ugly, would it?' she said. 'I don't want anything ridiculous, that people might laugh at.'

'It will be magnificent,' Taras replied. 'Besides, Hillary would never let me create anything ugly. She is fastidious.'

Hilly, at his side, smiled the faint smile of the assisting woman, then looked at Rosalind with her still gaze. 'It would not be ugly.'

'Very well then,' said Rosalind. 'Create a theatre.'

So it began: the transformation of the whale. A project nominally headed by Taras, but in reality carried out by Mr Brewer and his network of useful contacts, starting with an acquaintance on the parish council, who persuaded the local fire brigade to bring their engine down to the beach, pursued by a gang of giddy village children, where they used seawater to hose the bones clean. Mr Brewer then arranged for some men from the village – a blacksmith and a carpenter – to transport the bones to their new home by the cottage, helped by Leon and the larger savages. Once on site, they were varnished and put into position.

Cristabel oversaw these operations. She carried her sharpened flagpole with her but, while she enjoyed holding it and pointing with it, she no longer had any desire to use it as a

weapon against an animal she had come to regard as her ward.

Similarly, while she composed a letter to King George to inform him she had moved the whale (mentioned in previous correspondence) on to her family estate, she couldn't bring herself to post it. She wasn't sure why. She didn't want to claim the whale any more; it was no longer a conquest, it was something else. Something better. She tucked the letter under her bed and left it there.

Mr Brewer and his team even managed to extract the enormous jawbones from the rotting whale's head, through Mr Brewer enlisting the help of the village butcher. The bones were flensed and cleaned, then placed halfway between the woods and the cottage, standing one on either side of the path that led to the theatre, forming a triumphal arch, a huge needle's eye to pass through: an entranceway.

The whiteness of the whalebones drew fluttering moths and gnawing fox cubs, and these were not the only creatures to visit. Every year, at summer's end, Betty and Maudie carried all the stuffed animals out of Chilcombe to let them air on the lawn for a day or two. But this year, Cristabel and Digby borrowed a few to serve as props and decorations. Then they took more and more, until the lawn was quite depleted and the scene at the theatre a taxidermist's ball, a cavalcade of badgers, otters and quail, dancing and fighting around the bones, occasionally toppling over like stiff-limbed drunks. One bird, a great auk, was propped on the cottage porch, while several of the tiniest songbirds were tied around the brim of a top hat that Leon had taken to wearing. He tucked his cigarettes under their wings.

One morning, Leon gathers up one of the longest fishing ropes, coils it neatly, and sets off alone towards Ceal Head. Intrigued, Cristabel trails him and finds him halfway up the coast path, peering at a tall sycamore tree near the cliff edge. He has thrown the rope over a high



bough and is tying a branch to its end to serve as a swing. Once this is done, he turns and hands it to her, with a challenge in his eyes.

Cristabel takes hold of the swing and backs up. When she has gone as far as she can go, she takes a breath and jumps on to the branch before she can change her mind. She flies past Leon, past the tree, past the cliff edge; clinging to the swing as it soars upwards on its long arc, carrying her out over the sea, which rolls and crashes a hundred feet below her. There is an exhilarating moment, when the rope goes slack and she is left hanging high over the ocean, weightless as a bird, before swooping back to safety.

For the first few swings, Leon stops her when she returns to land and checks the rope, but once satisfied it is secure, he starts to push her, so she goes even higher. Every time she goes past him, he puts his hands to her back to speed her on. Then they swap so he can try it, and they continue through the afternoon, workers on the rope, with hardly a word said between them.

One night, the children decide to have a war party, like the Indian braves of the Wild West.

Cristabel says Indian braves must make a sacrifice. She retrieves her sculpture of Sekhmet the fire goddess from the attic so they can build a bonfire in front of her. They use driftwood as fuel, and it catches quickly, sparks flying upwards between the bones.

*What now?* they ask her, their faces expectant.

First, she puts on Prospero's robes. Then she ties a stuffed weasel to a stick using shoelaces around its front and back paws, and the children parade to the fire to lay it across the flames. The weasel burns slowly at first, giving off a faintly chemical smell, then the dry rags inside it ignite and it roars into flame.

Cristabel uses a spade to spread out the glowing fire, the weasel burning in the

middle. Then she tells them they each have to jump over the sacrificial animal to prove they are warriors.

‘I will go first,’ says Leon, taking off his top hat.

‘No,’ says Cristabel. ‘I want to.’

‘I don’t know if I can do that,’ says Flossie.

‘If you jump high enough, you won’t touch the flames, Floss,’ says Digby, taking her hand. ‘We’ll go together. You, me and Crista.’

So they do, three leaping bodies silhouetted over the bright fire, hands clasped. Then the savages follow, one by one, and they all like it so much, they burn another animal and do it again.

Sometimes, when the others are asleep, Cristabel will walk around her whale. It is most clearly her whale in the solitary blue light of night, as it was when she found it. The late summer nights are windless and still, the silver sea calm in the bowl of the bay.

When Cristabel walks through the jawbones, she remembers the whale’s downturned mouth, its vulnerable eye. When she stands in its ribcage, she recalls how she had once placed her hands on the outside of its body, and now she is inside its body, in the space created by its absent life. When she looks up, she sees the bones arching over her head against the vast starry sky like roof beams, like the skeletal beginnings of a strange new home. Something she has made from what was washed up, unwanted; something created from what was left to her.

## **Cuttings Kept in a Scrapbook by the Children**

### ***Dorset Daily Echo, August 1928***

An amateur performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at Chilcombe Mell drew a considerable crowd.

Mrs Rosalind Seagrave served cream teas for those attending. Miss Florence Seagrave gave a piano recital.

### ***Western Daily Press, August 1929***

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was this week performed at Chilcombe, one of Dorset's lesser-known country homes.

The play was presented in a structure created by artist Mr Taras Kovalsky from the remains of a fin whale and used by the Seagrave family as a theatre. The part of Oberon was taken by Col Peregrine Drake, returned from a diplomatic posting in Persia.

Picture shows Miss Myrtle van der Werff, Miss Hillary Vaughan and Miss Philippa Fenwick in costume as Hippolyta, Titania and Helena, alongside Master Digby Seagrave as Puck and an unknown participant wearing the head of an ass.

### ***The Lady, August 1930***

Regular readers will know how we delight in young people's artistic endeavours, so it was a joy to watch *The Tempest* at Chilcombe, in which Ariel was played by 9-year-

old Digby Seagrave, heir to the Dorset estate.

His proud mother, Mrs Rosalind Seagrave, was in the front row – and quite right too, for her son has a natural sensitivity. Mrs Seagrave is hopeful a dramatic work by Mr Noel Coward will be added to the fledgling company's repertoire.

Master Digby, who attends Sherborne School, was quick to inform us he believes his cousin, Miss Cristine Seagrave, aged 14, to be the 'brains' behind their production. However, we suspect the presence of artist Mr Taras Kovalsky may explain the more diverting dramatic choices.

### ***Southern Times, August 1931***

This summer's theatrics at Chilcombe included a production of *Measure for Measure* in the remarkable 'whalebone theatre' along with extracts from Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

The latter was performed in the original French on the lawn of the manor. The Seagrave children are fluent French speakers thanks to their governess Mlle Ernestine Aubert, who accompanies them on trips to her homeland.

Guests were also treated to a selection of French 'vol au vents' served 'en plein air', an occasion hardly marred by the inclement weather.

### ***Tatler, August 1932***

All eyes were on avant-garde artist Taras Kovalsky and new bride Hillary Kovalsky née Vaughan on their return to England this week after a honeymoon spent dazzling even the most dazzle-resistant elements of New York society.

The sought-after newly-weds spent time in Dorset before heading to a suitably artistic bolthole in St Ives.

Sadly missing from this year's South Coast social hullabaloo was Philippa Fenwick, said to be sojourning in Switzerland. We wish her well.

***Daily Express, August 1933***

Miss Cristabel Seagrave has returned from a year on the Continent to attend this year's Queen Charlotte's Ball.

The athletic debutante, as much of a whizz on the ski slopes of Europe as she is riding out with hounds, no doubt caught the eye of many a potential suitor.

But Miss Seagrave told our reporter she will miss much of The Season as she plans to take up the reins of a production of *Macbeth* at her family's outdoor theatre. Tally ho!

Picture shows His Royal Highness Prince George arriving at the Queen Charlotte's Ball. Full details of royal engagements, page 4.

***Woman's Journal, August 1934***

The golden summer days draw to a close and that can only mean a jaunt to Dorsetshire, where Digby Seagrave took centre stage at The Whalebone Theatre as a captivating Henry V.

His cousin Cristabel Seagrave has recently returned from being finished in Switzerland. The ever-fragrant Mrs Rosalind Seagrave, fresh from cheering on her husband at Cowes, told us Cristabel relishes the foreign experience.

***Daily Mail, August 1935***

Our critic was somewhat bemused by an unusual production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at The Whalebone Theatre in Dorset in which Caesar was played by Miss Cristabel Seagrave, a young woman from a prominent local family.

However, the backdrop of the setting sun over the ocean was picturesque enough to offset any juvenile errors of theatrical judgement.

***The Times, August 1936***

The Spanish political situation found itself reflected in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, with Romeo depicted as a member of an 'International Brigade'.

The amateur performance in Dorset saw the cast perform in contemporary dress, following the current trend to make the Stratford Bard a modern man.

Digby Seagrave, aged 15, a charming Romeo, told our reporter he was inspired by British volunteers joining the battle for Spain. He added he hopes to take up a place at Cambridge alongside pursuing his theatrical ambitions.

The production also included elements of dance reminiscent of Mr W. H. Auden's experimental works for The Group Theatre, bravely accompanied by Miss Florence Seagrave on the piano and cymbals.

***Southern Times, August 1937***

A smaller crowd than in previous years attended the Chilcombe summer production.

The cast of *Antony and Cleopatra* battled against persistent rain showers but were perhaps also struggling against the appeal of comedy film *Oh, Mr Porter!* currently drawing record audiences to Dorchester's Plaza Cinema.

***Dorset Daily Echo, August 1938***

Work has commenced on Weymouth's new pier after judges decided on a winning design from a number submitted to an architectural competition.

Summer visitors have enjoyed seeing the foundation blocks of the attraction being moved into place.

Further along the coast, visitors have also been entertained by a production of *All's Well that Ends Well* on the Chilcombe estate.

**(Extract: 68,375 words)**

# Highly Regulated and Overlooked: Women Writers and Child Characters in the Big House

## Introduction

My creative project is a novel entitled *The Whalebone Theatre*: a family story about neglected upper-class children growing up in Dorset. It follows the fortunes of Cristabel, Flossie and Digby Seagrave from their eccentric 1920s childhoods, running wild in a crumbling manor called Chilcombe, to their experiences as young adults caught up in the Second World War.

My intention was to create the kind of immersive big house story I have enjoyed as a reader; one that relishes its evocative setting and follows the different generations of one family. However, I wanted to approach the topic with a playful irreverence, to give the familiar setting a new twist, and to examine the power structures embedded within the big house. I aimed to create an innovative counterpart to the traditional big house novel, infused with energy but always aware of the inequalities within the setting.

Although the novel has multiple viewpoints, its main character is Cristabel Seagrave, a commanding and imaginative girl who loves her home and feels responsible for it, but, as an orphaned elder sister — and later, as an unwed young woman — is excluded from it. Cristabel is part of the English landed gentry who, in the early twentieth century, favoured



male primogeniture. Therefore Cristabel, despite being the eldest child, will not inherit her family home. This allows me to explore the traditionally patriarchal world of the English social system from the inside out. To look at what it means to inhabit a house, and by extension, a world, that has no place for you beyond traditional expectations of passive feminine roles, but also to examine how, even within that restrictive structure, transformative spaces can be found.

The figure of the child in the big house is an important one in my novel and my critical study. The child is expected to conform to the house's codes of behaviour but can find escape through imagination. This idea is echoed through a theme of childhood reading. Cristabel and her siblings are compulsive readers, being particularly fond of boys' adventure stories, like the 1898 smuggler tale *Moonfleet* by J Meade Falkner and the work of Victorian war correspondent turned fiction writer G A Henty, as well as Homer's *The Iliad* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. They find these books in their family library as they belonged to Cristabel's father Jasper, and therefore represent approved reading for an upper-class boy in the late nineteenth century. We see Cristabel absorb these inherited stories, illustrating how children's reading can be used to promote a continuation of particular values.

Although these books represent the staid older generation within my fictional house, the attitudes embedded within them were still largely held by the traditional ruling class in England during the period covered by my novel. The gung-ho, patriotic militarism of Henty, for example, can be seen in the enthusiastic initial responses to the breakout of the First World War, when press and public alike were confident it would be a brief battle, quickly ended by a dominant England. As my character Jasper says in 1914: "England will always come up to the mark." Similarly, when Jasper gives a speech to local men leaving to fight in France, he turns to his childhood copy of *The Iliad* for inspiration, showing how men of his

era were influenced by being taught ‘classic’ works that fitted within the cultural ambitions of their time.

By exploring the cultural and social values found in books as experienced by the Seagrave family, I aim to illuminate how their reading informs how they interpret the world, but also inhibits their development, as their experiences fail to match their expectations or as their desires take them outside of the codes of behaviour prescribed within the stories. In Cristabel’s case, her childhood reading of books that idealise warfare informs her desire to play a part in the Second World War, but the social expectations surrounding her gender make this problematic.

Cristabel’s story also allows me to examine how girl readers, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often had to identify with male characters in order to become the hero or protagonist within the story – and, by extension, to become a hero in their own lives.

## **Boston and Nesbit**

Within my critical study, I reflect upon these themes – the big house, gender roles, and childhood reading – through a particular lens. I focus on two authors, E Nesbit and Lucy M Boston, who were formative influences in my own writing life. I look in particular at their books set in big houses, primarily Boston’s Green Knowe series and Nesbit’s *The Enchanted Castle*. I see my project here as three-fold: to unpack what Boston and Nesbit were doing in their texts about big houses, then to reflect upon how they impacted me as a child reader and how they influenced me as an adult writer.

This interest comes from a realisation that unfolded as I developed my novel: that I was writing a hymn to childhood imagination set in an imaginative space formed by my own

childhood reading. When *The Whalebone Theatre* was published in 2022, reviews compared it to adult big house books, such as Elizabeth Jane Howard's *The Cazalet Chronicles* and Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle*, neither of which I had read. When asked in interviews what big house books I was inspired by, the ones that came to mind were those I loved as a child. The books I look at in this study are the foundation stones of my novel.

I am especially interested in the appeal of the big house to women writers, given its typically nationalistic and patriarchal associations. What does it mean for a woman to set a story inside a building traditionally owned by men? Is there a way to imaginatively resist and reclaim the English big house? In considering how Boston and Nesbit explore the big house setting, I will draw on critical texts, including Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Both Boston and Nesbit lived in houses that inspired their writing, giving this topic a personal as well as a thematic and critical interest. I have never lived in a manor, but, as I explore, my intense reading as a child meant that, imaginatively, I grew up inside the emotional and mental landscape of the big house.

In her study of English country house novels, Kristen Ames (2014: 13) argues that, within literary representations of the house, everyday routines and intimate spaces are infused with political significance. In analysing how this space is navigated by individuals, she draws on Michel de Certeau's work *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In this, he examines how individuals can redeploy oppressive discourses of power. Certeau's tactical subject practices 'an art of being in between, in which, without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity' (De Certeau 1984: 30). Engaging in continual acts of 'poaching', Certeauvian subjects assert themselves by consuming and redeploying the language of the other. For Certeau, poaching can include such disparate activities as speaking, reading, and inhabiting a

dwelling. Elsewhere, he describes readers as ‘renters’ who ‘insinuate’ themselves into the dominant text (De Certeau 1984: xxxi).

I find the idea of ‘poaching’ useful when thinking of child characters and women writers in the big house, especially given its association with secretly stealing something from a private landowner. I feel there is a parallel with the efforts made by female writers of twentieth century children’s fiction to remain within the conventions of traditional genres in order to be accepted by publishers and readers, while finding ways to express other possibilities – practising an ‘art of being in between’ without being caught out. The idea of reading as ‘renting’ – inhabiting a space that is not owned by you – is also useful in terms of young female readers inhabiting fictional spaces that prioritise and valorise male experience.

The curious time-lag of children’s fiction means many of us grow up reading books our parents and grandparents read. Children are often given books deemed ‘classics’ and therefore, our earliest impressions of the world can be outdated, especially in their portrayal of gender. Although I grew up in the 1980s, I read books that were thirty to 100 years old. Like Cristabel, I frequently had to imagine myself into male characters to become the hero of the story. Otherwise, I was faced with a series of limited stereotypically feminine roles: Anne in *The Famous Five* (1942): weepy; Beth, Amy, Meg in *Little Women* (1868): angelic, vain, domestic; Lucy and Susan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950): vain, nurturing, unkeen on battles. My only alternative were girls who aspired to be adventurous, but were shown the error of their ways: Jo in *Little Women*: forced to tame her temper; Darryl in *Malory Towers* (1946): forced to tame her temper; George in *The Famous Five*: forced to tame her temper; Anne of *Green Gables* (1908): forced to tame her temper; Katy in *What Katy Did* (1872): forced to tame her temper after being bedridden.

But alongside these books, I read a few contemporary authors who rejected stereotypes, and therefore encouraged an awareness of their limitations. One of my favourite

picture books was Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980), which reverses the princess and dragon stereotype. Interestingly, when reading with my daughter now, we frequently encounter books that draw on old stories in new ways, like Soman Chainani's *The School for Good and Evil* (2013), which describes students learning how to become fairytale characters and complicates the simplistic binaries of traditional tales, illustrating how childhood reading has changed.

However, the options for girls in the 'classic' fiction I usually read were limited, so it was understandable that girls might imagine themselves as boys. But I am interested in what this enforced imaginative cosplay does to a girl reader (and by extension, the woman writer) – the disavowal of herself that is required in order for her to enter the world of the story. Both Nesbit and Boston have an uneasy relationship with girl characters, and the issue of gender in their work is far from straightforward.

In my novel, I show that by returning to their own wilder imaginative play, which Digby finds through acting and Cristabel through setting up her own theatre, that my characters transcend their expected social and cultural limits. I explore in my critical study how female authors have found ways to imaginatively expand the confines of children's fiction and the expectations of the big house setting, and how – perhaps perversely – the big house setting allows and encourages such imaginative exploration.

## **The Study of Children's Fiction**

Throughout my commentary, I draw on several studies of children's fiction, particularly Shirley Foster and Judy Simon's 1995 feminist analysis of stories for girls and work by Kimberley Reynolds, Professor of Children's Literature at Newcastle University, especially her proposal that children's fiction is 'replete with radical potential'. Reynolds states children's literature 'contributes to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by [...]

encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change' (Reynolds 2007: 1). She believes children's fiction can be transformative in enabling readers to envisage new worlds and one way she illustrates this is by showing how writers as ground-breaking as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath were influenced by their childhood reading. I have also drawn from Reynolds' analysis of children's fiction in the late nineteenth century and how that informs notions of passive femininity and dominant masculinity in its young readers (Reynolds: 1990).

Foster and Simons use elements of feminist theory to critique popular fiction for girls, examining how 'classic' stories construct role models which both reflect and subvert contemporary ideologies of girlhood, and reflecting on how these are elements of most girls' formative literary experience. They state that 'modern critical theory has come relatively late to children's literature' (Foster and Simons 1995: xi), as it was not valued by the male-dominated critical establishment. They say many authors felt uncomfortable writing in a genre that was considered inferior. Both Nesbit and Boston began as writers of adult fiction, with Nesbit especially regarding it as more worthwhile than her financially successful work for children. Boston's first Green Knowe book was intended to be an adult novel but was marketed to children because it contained illustrations, something she regarded as a 'step down' (Cited in Tanaka 2021: 26).

Children's fiction has generally been marginalised, despite its potential cultural and educational influence. Peter Hunt states: 'Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from, while children's books – from writing to publication to interaction with children – are the province of that culturally marginalised group, females.' He goes on to say the low profile of children's literature has its advantages, as it does not 'belong' to any particular discipline and can, therefore, be approached from any specialist viewpoint, but adds that this can make the study of children's books both complex and varied:

‘[...] just as children’s books do not exist in a vacuum (they have real, argumentative readers and visible, practical, consequential uses) so the theory of children’s literature constantly blends into the practice of bringing books and readers together’ (Hunt 2005: 1-2).

He states that children’s fiction is a place at which theory encounters real life and it is precisely this that interests me: the question of whether I can use a critical analysis of my chosen texts as a way of accessing and understanding their influence on my child self.

Reynolds says that studies of children’s literature tend to take five forms:

those that trace the history of children’s books; attempts to define children’s literature and identify its characteristics; works that consider the relationship between children’s literature and critical theory; studies that explore what children’s literature does to its readers by, for instance, encoding ideological assumptions or disseminating strategies for resisting them; and analyses focussing on the ideas of the child and childhood inscribed in children’s texts and critical works about them. (2007: 1)

I draw on elements of most of these but particularly the fourth – what literature does (or attempts to do) to childhood readers. I note too Reynold’s use of the words ‘encoding’ and ‘disseminating’ as these speak to me of the potential for covert resistance within books. I also examine how reading is depicted in children’s fiction itself, for example, characters acting out scenes from books or child narrators being self-consciously aware of the conventions of children’s fiction. Elements that show child readers as possessing a sophisticated understanding of what they are consuming, which has the potential to undermine any didactic content.

I am reminded of Reynolds' description of children's literature as a 'paradoxical cultural space' that is both 'highly regulated and overlooked' – meaning that it is viewed by critics, teachers and parents as an influence on children's development and therefore one that should be monitored, but is also a genre that is rarely given careful critical consideration (2007: 3). Curiously, 'regulated and overlooked' could also be applied to the lives of the child characters in my novel, who are simultaneously bound within specific codes of behaviour and left to their own devices.

Scholars of children's fiction repeatedly draw attention to the fact it is written by adults *for* children, making it a complicated area of study. David Rudd states children's literature addresses adult constructions of the child that display an awareness of children's disempowered status, but it is readers of the texts who ultimately determine their success (Rudd 2005: 25). Nesbit in particular plays with these many layers – the adult writer, the assumed child reader and the actual child reader – in a way that could be described as metafictional. For example, using a child narrator who attempts to use language he has encountered in children's fiction. More generally, the relationship between the adult writer and the assumed child reader, has an echo in the social hierarchy of the big house itself. The country house is a space that marginalises women and children, in a way that echoes how literary studies marginalise both women writers and children's fiction, and how children's fiction addresses an assumed construction of the child. I am reminded of a scene in my novel in which the child Jasper is summoned to greet his parents after dinner and gazes at the paintings on the wall while his father barks instructions at him and his mother sits silently.

Jacqueline Rose suggests that, despite the possessive apostrophe in the phrase 'children's literature', it has never really been owned by children:



Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple [...] If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp (Rose 1993: 2).

She argues that adults evoke this child for their own purposes, and that the child figure in texts such as Peter Pan is more of a cultural trope that stands for qualities like innocence or the primitive. This can be seen in the Victorian stories found within the library of my fictional house, which present a specific version of plucky boyhood that accords with Empirical values. Children's fiction, which is designed to both entertain and educate, is often a sharp reflection of the attitudes and interests of the dominant culture, and I will examine how Nesbit and Boston have responded to this within the big house setting.

## **Children's Fiction and the Big House**

The English country house is a feature of many classic children's books, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and the large house containing a magical wardrobe in C S Lewis's Narnia series. In her study of the house in children's fiction, Pauline Dewan (2004: 4-5) states setting is integral to children's fiction and describes the idea of 'home' as being central to childhood development – as a child's first universe and as 'a meeting place and mediator' between the self and the world. In many children's books, juxtaposed settings can be thought of as 'home or not-home' (an obvious example being Bilbo in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* leaving The Shire for adventures in unknown places). Dewan adds: 'Houses not only integrate the self and the world but also symbolise that world.'

With this in mind, the big house in children's fiction performs an interesting role, as it typically is *not*-home – but an unknown place that is arrived at or discovered. But it does in some way symbolise the world, in that it contains a social structure in microcosm and has its own customs and long history, even if these are unfamiliar. In some instances, such as Boston's Green Knowe books, it does ultimately *become* a home. This is a common pattern of children's fiction: a move from a hostile setting to a more receptive one. Child protagonists who arrive at big houses do not go on adventurous quests through unknown lands, instead they undertake a more layered and internal journey, investigating the secrets of the house and its inhabitants, until their relationship to the house is changed. Sometimes the protagonists' exploration of the house involves magical or unexplained activity, such as 'time-slips'. This trope continues to be a popular one, as in *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce (1958) or Helen Cresswell's *Moondial* (1987). However, it is notable that many stories frequently conclude with a return to traditional class values: both *The Secret Garden* and *The Enchanted Castle* end with a celebration of the restored male heir. In this they conform to the expected pattern of country house fiction, which is concerned with ideas of legacy and continuation.

Alongside looking at how Nesbit and Boston use the big house setting, I am interested in the possibility their stories were set in big houses partly as a result of psychological and emotional needs within their authors. In her biography of Nesbit, Julia Briggs describes Nesbit's stories that feature an idealised home as 'wish-fulfilment', linking them to the early death of Nesbit's father and the disruptions to her childhood that followed (Briggs 2007: 19). Meanwhile, Boston has described her writing of the Green Knowe stories as a way of fictionalising the house she actually lived in, The Manor at Hemingford Grey, as well as a way of providing it with an imagined lineage (Boston 1978: 218). I return to the idea of an imaginative reclaiming of property in my final chapter, when I explore ideas of ownership

and readership through the image of the library in the big house, as a space that symbolises the male-dominated canon.

In my conclusion I review the relationship between my chosen authors and my own fiction, exploring what Juliet Dusinberre calls ‘the symbiotic relationship between children’s books and adult writing’ (Dusinberre: 1987). In her memoir, author Penelope Lively described how childhood reading was a space of freedom and power:

Here I was without inhibitions. I could march in and make it mine, manipulate the resources to my convenience [...] I would usurp other parts, walling in vicarious experience, hidden away in my secret place [...] I would re-enact it all, amending the script, starring in every episode. I was Helen, languishing in the arms of Paris. I was Achilles, nobly dying [...] I ceased to be a podgy child daydreaming in a hedge, and shot up and away into a more vivid place where I controlled everything, where I was the heroine and the creator all at once, where I set the scene and furnished the dialogue and called the shots. (Lively 2006: 107)

I have quoted her at length as her account tallies so well with my character Cristabel’s experience of reading – that it allows her the freedom to imaginatively march into a place that might exclude her and gives her access to a place of radical creative control, to be ‘heroine and creator’ – and my own desire to write. Francis Spufford states that the books we love as children ‘build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination’ (Spufford 2002: 21-22). In my study, I will explore how writing a novel has sent me back to re-examine the stories I loved as a child and to investigate their authors and their work, as a writer as well as a reader.

# **Chapter One: The Grandfather Clock: Children and Time in the Big House**

*“It was worn and crumbly, crooked and weathered and gentle, like the two grandmothers, but truly itself still. ‘O my house,’ he thought. ‘Live forever!’” – The Stones of Green Knowe, Lucy M Boston*

The children’s fiction of Boston and Nesbit bookends the first half of the twentieth century, with Nesbit publishing from 1899 until 1913, and Boston publishing from 1954 to 1976. While both react to the political climates of their respective lifetimes, there is a common thread in their work: both use the traditional country house as a setting that unlocks history or allows a movement through time, and this can be seen as representing an alternative to the received, ‘official’ version of history.

## **The Country House in Children’s Fiction**

The English country house in fiction is primarily a symbol of patriarchal power and is representative of a system that marginalises women and children. In Tereza Topolovská’s study of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century English country house fiction, she traces its origins to the country house poems of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which idealised a house and its inhabitants. She states this has influenced country house fiction in that it tends to depict a mythologised, idyllic state, an Edenic grandeur (Topolovská 2017: 11). Topolovská notes too, that as country houses declined or were demolished, their popularity both as a visitor attraction and a setting for books, films and television series, increased. The country house

novel emerges in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the first stage of the historical decline of the houses themselves and gathers pace throughout the 1920s and 30s. The economic and social age of the country house was arguably over by the end of World War One – and my own novel starts immediately after the war – but the stories of grand houses in the countryside continue to proliferate. Their increasing rarity or the sense that they encapsulated a time that was under threat or already extinct, made them only more attractive as an imagined setting.

The fictional Marchmain family in Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*, who were closely modelled on the real Earls Beauchamp family, illustrated the financial difficulties of the land-owning upper classes. During the 1920s, the Marchmains are shown living in their grand country house Brideshead and keeping a London townhouse. However, they have an overdraft of £100,000 and mounting debts elsewhere. Their increasing money troubles force them to sell their London house, while the opening of the novel shows Brideshead requisitioned by the military.

Topolovská observes that country house fiction frequently features newcomers visiting the house and is often written from the point of view of a guest or an outsider, like Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*. The limited time allotted to the guest/newcomer and/or the unfamiliarity of the setting, plus the sense of a way of life becoming obsolete, serves to increase the intensity of the experience. In the texts by Nesbit and Boston that I look at, the child characters are newcomers to the houses they encounter. This makes them discoverers, explorers.

The big house has been a feature of children's fiction from its early stages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, if we include castles in our thinking, we can find big houses in some of the oldest and best-known fairy tales: Sleeping Beauty's castle, for example. Humphrey Carpenter notes the first work of fiction in which 'children's propensity to naughtiness is actually enjoyed by the author, even praised' was a 1839 novel called *Holiday House* by

Catherine Sinclair, which described the pranks of two children left alone in a big house (Carpenter 1985: 9). Prior to this, Carpenter states that the depiction of children in fiction was frequently pious or spiritual, with child characters often being nothing more than miniature adults with a moral lesson to impart. But here, the big house is seen a place of riotous freedom. Carpenter also identifies Charlotte Brontë's classic big house novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) as being one of the first novels to give a child character a comprehensive vision of the world, an idea later taken up by George Eliot and Charles Dickens. So the fading country house, with its many empty rooms and air of exciting opportunity, is a place of potential discovery, and – in the case of *Jane Eyre* – one that encourages a child's awareness of self. The absence of parents and its rarefied status as a place outside of typical family life also has the effect of prioritising the child's point of view.

A key feature of the big house story for children is often the surrounding gardens. A huge but enclosed garden is like an enormous private park. This sense of privacy is key to a child explorer (and by extension, the child reader who identifies with the child protagonist) as it allows for undisturbed imaginative exploration. In *The Secret Garden*, Hodgson Burnett links the garden with a sense of undiscovered possibility and with the imaginative spaces of fiction:

The Secret Garden was what Mary called it when she was thinking of it. She liked the name, and she liked still more the feeling that when its beautiful old walls shut her in, no one knew where she was. It seemed almost shut out of the world in some fairy place. The few books she had read and liked had been fairy-story books, and she had read of secret gardens in some of the stories (Hodgson Burnett 2012: 107).

While in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, the protagonist Tolly finds the garden is a timeless place of sensual exploration:

He began to feel that he knew every bush and hollow of the garden – knew it with his nose and lungs, with his ears, with his feet and with his palms that handled all the boughs as he climbed, even with the inside of his knees as he swarmed, and with his back and stomach as he lay on the grass. It was very much his own and the weather was hazy, balmy and trance-like (Boston 2003a: 109).

In both extracts, the children's feelings towards the gardens are expressed in terms of ownership. Mary names her garden while Tolly feels it is 'very much his own'. The seclusion of the gardens – the only people who ever appear are gardeners – plus Mary and Tolly's enjoyment of nature, allow the children to forge a deep relationship with the space, and to feel a powerful sense of autonomy. The garden is also a place of renewal: the sickness and grief that dominate the opening of *The Secret Garden* are, through the transformation of the garden, turned into 'growth and happiness at its end' (Carroll 2014: 55). The garden at Green Knowe is depicted as being in relationship to the house and exploring it forms part of Tolly's ongoing engagement with the house and its history. It contains plants and creatures – such as an ancient carp – that have lived for hundreds of years, forming a continuous link between past and present.

The gardeners in both these books are older, working-class men who appear rarely, speak rarely and – perhaps crucially – show no interest in the house and are never seen inside it. They are part of the timeless natural world outside. But within the house, the characters are predominantly female. It is significant that the care of declining or forgotten country houses is often left to female staff or surviving female relatives, both in adult and children's fiction.

The symbol of the house expresses patriarchal power, but as the status of the house wanes, it is typically women who are witnesses and handmaidens to its decay, for example, the housekeeper Danvers in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* or Miss Havesham, the jilted bride, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. (It is interesting too, that Miss Havesham has the clocks stopped in her house – as if the absence of patriarchal figures has stopped the house in its tracks, or as if a life lived outside marriage was not part of time.) In *The Secret Garden*, Mary is looked after by the maid Martha and housekeeper Mrs Medlock. In Boston's *Green Knobe* books, it is the grandmother of the family, Mrs Oldknow, who is left in charge of the house. In Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*, the house is looked after by a 'drab-haired' housekeeper and her niece Mabel. Unlike the visiting protagonists, the women are long-term occupants of the house, although this is not a position that bestows power or social status. They are typically domestic servants or unmarried women with little agency over their own lives. Their needs are secondary to the needs of the house itself.

The lack of dominant male figures in the house 'opens ways for the less dominant voices, typically children' (Topolovská 2017: 113). For both Boston and Nesbit, the country house, when released from the oversight of its traditional patriarchal owners, becomes an expansive place where it is possible for children to meet people from the past; to move through time, both forwards and back, and for time to pass in unexpected ways. The children in their fiction are able to discover and access hidden aspects within the house, which increases its potential as a site of radical possibility, even as the house itself simultaneously represents the traditional patriarchal structure. As Spufford writes:

If in a story, you found the one panel in the fabric of the workaday world that was hinged [...] and you were able to pass through, that would be a moment in which all the decisions that had been taken in this world [...] would be up for grabs again. (2002: 85)



## **The Terraced House in Ealing**

In researching this study, I went to a place I had already visited imaginatively as a child: Lucy Boston's former home, The Manor at Hemingford Grey, the model for the fictional Green Knowe. I was struck by how the house, though sizeable with large gardens, felt smaller than I had imagined. As someone walking around it on a guided tour, I was only accessing the public spaces of the house, but its fictional representation made it seem an unlimited source of private exploration: a space you could disappear into. As Blake Morrison writes about the appeal of the country house to authors: 'What draws them to a country house setting is the space it offers for everything to happen under one roof; the house of fiction has many rooms, but country house fiction has more rooms than most.' (Morrison 2011).

The idea of limitless discovery was a key element in the stories I loved as a child. I grew up in Ealing in a terraced house. My Mum, sister and I lived on the top floor, while three lodgers lived on the bottom floor. There was little space and little privacy. But as a compulsive reader, I was able to disappear into imaginary houses that were so immensely large, even your escape would go unnoticed. Here I notice the presence of two parallel desires, which seem fundamental to the attraction of the fictional big house: the desire to explore/discover, and the desire to disappear/to be hidden. Both states allow the child reader to exist outside of parental supervision, and both are (rare) sources of autonomy to children. Any child that has played hide and seek will know the powerful thrill of exploring a house looking for a secret hiding place and that of being hidden while people are looking for you.

Curiously, the library in Ealing at this time was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pitzhanger Manor. My library books were not only housed within a grand manor, but they contained grand manors too. Within the pages of books, England was littered with them. Even the girls who went to boarding school lived in impressive country piles. Here is our first view of Enid

Blyton's Malory Towers: 'a big, square-looking building of soft grey stone standing high up on a hill [...] The green creeper that covered parts of the wall climbed almost to the roof in places. It looked like an old time castle' (Blyton 2013: 11).

Tatar writes that stories can 'make a kinesthetic claim on readers, enlisting something that can be called *mimetic imagination*, the capacity to enter into a fictional world and make it feel real'. She says child readers experience the world of fiction in intellectual and somatic terms, stating: 'It allows children to cross thresholds and to breathe the air of story worlds.' (Tatar 2009: 13). In C S Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy finds a 'Magic Book' that allows her to enter its pages – Tatar suggests, and I agree, that Lewis is depicting the depth of reading we experience as children. My absorption in stories was so absolute, I believed entirely in the worlds I entered – and that big houses were found by ordinary children like me (albeit not entirely like me, being familiar with boarding schools and potted shrimp), only made them more believable. Furthermore, the houses were always the location of adventures, of possibility – and that had a powerful pull on my imagination.

In my novel I describe how our imaginations are shaped and furnished by our childhood reading, and how the Seagrave children's reading 'overlays the geography of their lives' and is more real to them than their lived reality. There is a sub-text here, in that the adult reader of my novel might see that the children's lack of formal education or parental guidance has led them to construct their own alternate reality, but I was conscious of not wanting to undermine the children's enjoyment of their fictional adventures with adult interference, so the tone is kept light. I wonder now if beneath that defence of my fictional children was a defence of my own imaginative beliefs.

## Green Knowe

I will look first at Boston's Green Knowe books, a series of children's books published between 1954 and 1976. I started reading them aged ten, after enjoying a 1986 BBC TV adaptation of *The Children of Green Knowe*. Green Knowe is based on the twelfth century manor Boston bought in 1939 following the collapse of her marriage. She lived there for almost fifty years and the centrality of the house to her work is reflected in the titles of the books, which all include the words 'Green Knowe' (*The Children of Green Knowe*, *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* etc.) Boston said herself that Green Knowe is 'the underlying symbol in all my books' (Boston 1988: 216).

Each book shows the house in different time periods. Dewan states that the Green Knowe series 'embraces a vast temporal scope' (2004: 104), stretching from prehistory to the twentieth century. The majority of the books feature two story lines: one about the present inhabitants and one about the past inhabitants, with anecdotes about the past told by Mrs Oldknow, the elderly woman who lives in the house and knows much of its history (as the play on words in her name suggests). The narrative weaves them together to emphasise the parallels between the dead and the living, collapsing the differences between them. For example, in the first book, *The Children of Green Knowe*, a boy called Tolly comes to stay at the house with his great-grandmother Mrs Oldknow, and encounters children who lived in the house hundreds of years before. When Mrs Oldknow tells Tolly the children died in the Great Plague, she adds, 'it sounds very sad to say they all died, but it didn't really make so much difference. I expect the old grandmother soon found out they were still here' (2006: 55).

In *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, Tolly hears about (and eventually meets) a blind girl called Susan who lived in the house in the Regency era. When Mrs Oldknow is telling him about Susan, Tolly slowly realises he is appearing in Susan's story as a presence and that

Susan's companion Jacob can sometimes hear him singing (2003a: 115). When Tolly realises this, he delightedly tells his grandmother: 'This story is all about me!' Tolly is, in effect, a ghost in Susan's story, a narrative decision that destabilises our sense of what and who is real and where the central point of the story lies. This is enhanced by the fact Susan is blind, and when Jacob tells her the singing boy isn't really there, she replies: 'Can you see people *not* being there? If I heard him, I should know he *was* there.' Susan's understanding of the world is not depicted as a limited one, but one more attuned to the layers of historical reality within the house.

Green Knowe is seen as a place that muddies past and present, and is a site of continuous time. In *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, Tolly rescues a boy from the past in a tunnel near the house, and when he recounts this to his grandmother, she exclaims: 'I might have known it was you! I was going to tell you about the strange boy who came in the nick of time and was never seen again. I always thought it was Alexander' (2003a: 140.). She knows of this incident, but she doesn't know which child from which era it is.

Victor Watson states that Boston has a 'firm conviction that nothing is lost in Time, that all things remain in all things. Although her characters travel backwards and forwards in linear time, the novel's structure somehow suggests a circularity, or at least a coherence' (Watson 2000: 152). Mrs Oldknow's reaction to Tolly when he first arrives at the house emphasises the circularity of time. She greets him saying: 'So you've come back [...] I wondered whose face it would be of all the faces I knew [...] They always come back' (Boston 2006: 8). There is a striking moment later which illustrates Boston's depiction of time being constant and ever-present, when Tolly and Mrs Oldknow can hear a woman from the past singing to a baby 'now, and so long ago'. The passage ends with Tolly singing 'while, four hundred years ago, a baby went to sleep' (2006: 103).

This depiction of time recalls the quilt that is made by Mrs Oldknow in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*. The quilt is created by patches of fabric from the clothes of people who have lived in the house at different times; sewn together they make a single object. These patches are often used by Mrs Oldknow to tell Tolly more about the previous inhabitants. Tolly, considering his home-made bed quilt, muses: ‘There are bits of these people everywhere’ (2003a: 20).

Boston herself enjoyed quilting. There are frequent mentions of sewing and fabric in her fiction and memoirs, and she made quilts to furnish her home. She used needlecraft to a sinister effect at the end of *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, where a gypsy instructs Susan’s mother Maria to create an image of the house sewn in human hair if she wants to find her missing jewels (2003a: 172). Despite secretly making this strange cannibalistic image – a human patchwork that serves as a dark echo of Mrs Oldknow’s quilts – Maria does not find her jewels, but Tolly does. He studies the picture, which still hangs in Green Knowe, and notices the colour of the hair used to depict the chimney, which provides a vital clue. Here, as in the stories told through quilts, Tolly learns more about the house by looking closely at what is typically overlooked.

Elements of magical possibility increase as the series goes on. In the first book, *The Children of Green Knowe*, encounters with what might be supernatural presences in the house are frequently ambiguous, and Tolly is unsure if the children are part of a game he is playing with his great-grandmother. The stories his great-grandmother tells him about the children – his distant relatives Toby, Alexander and Linnet – are as important to Tolly as his (initially frustrating) attempts to meet them himself. Later books in the series are less ambiguous, but this early blurring of distinctions between the real and the fantastical, and the slow introduction of supernatural elements has the effect of leading the reader ‘into a fantasy world that seems plausible’ (Dewan 2004: 113).

Though Boston first began writing her Green Knowe books in the 1950s, when she was in her sixties, the era of the story itself is curiously hard to fix. Tolly and his grandmother live in a world that has cars, railways, and margarine, and Boggis the gardener mentions his grandson was killed in the last war and his sons were killed in the first, so we know we are somewhere in the late 1940s or early 1950s. But the isolation of the house and Tolly's intense involvement with its past, primarily through the ghost children he meets there, have the effect of making the present seem irrelevant, distant. For Tolly, its past is its present. This arguably allows for a fluid present, that would be recognisable to both a child reader in the 1950s and a ten-year-old in the 1980s, meaning the child reader can easily imagine themselves in the story. It also diminishes the importance of the present, thus allowing the continuities provided by engaging with the past to appear more vital and lasting.

Tolly finds Boggis the gardener's tales of recent history uninteresting, saying: 'The queer thing was, that the nearer to the present time they were, the more remote they seemed.' He would rather hear about the children in the 1600s than his own father in the 1940s (2006: 92). When Tolly receives a letter from his father, it makes him feel 'further away than ever' (2006: 99) and he puts it in the fire. Although Tolly's interest in the past is understandable, there is a suggestion he is avoiding an uncomfortable present-day matter: that of his absent father. For a child reader with any kind of complicated family situation, this is perhaps a subtle reflection of their own reasons for reading the book, and not one that asks them to face that issue, but one that allows and understands their keen absorption in something other than their own lives. Certeau describes the act of reading in this way: 'to read is to be elsewhere, where *they* are not, in another world' (1984: 173). Tolly's interest in finding out what happened to the children is both a story within a story and an echo of the reading experience. Tolly is a reader of the past, as we are readers of Tolly.

Tolly's encounters with the children from the past only happen when he and his great-grandmother are alone at the house. When Mrs Oldknow leaves the house, Tolly thinks 'all the possibilities of the house had gone with her' (2006: 92). This perhaps suggests it is only children and the elderly who are able to escape the present and access the past, which reduces the power and authority of grown-ups who might ordinarily be in charge. It also emphasises the importance of Tolly's relationship with Mrs Oldknow, as she takes him and his interest in the children seriously, encouraging his belief in what might appear impossible. Running alongside Tolly's efforts to meet the children are his conversations with Mrs Oldknow, which foster his interest in the house's history and, crucially, include him in it – emphasising his family connection with the children, which deepens his sense of belonging.

The twin aspects of Tolly's initial encounters with the children – his frustration at sensing they are nearby but invisible, and then his comforting story times with Mrs Oldknow – replicate aspects of my own childhood imaginative experience. Primarily, that of being extremely keen to encounter something out of the ordinary, to the extent I often sat in churchyards willing ghosts to appear, and then finding comfort in reading about the past in my children's encyclopaedia: they are here, you just haven't seen them yet. A pattern of longing and then immersion in historical narrative was one I knew.

The image of the older woman telling stories to a curious child would also be replicated if a parent or teacher were reading a Green Knowe book to a child, thus enfolding the child's experience of hearing the book into the fictional world it inhabits. Although, this was not how I encountered the Green Knowe books. I read them on my own and identified primarily with Tolly the explorer of the unattended house, as my sister and I were 'latchkey kids', who went home after school to an empty house.

I note too Boston's frequent use of small totemic objects to link the different realities within the house: a wooden mouse, a model ship, seashells. Items that show an awareness of

the importance of small treasures to a child's imagination. During a tour of Boston's house, I learnt she hid items from the books about the house for child visitors to find, demonstrating an understanding of a child's engagement with such objects. In a discussion of child development, Spufford highlights objects as a key element of children's books: recognisable, touchable items from a child's world (2002: 47). My four-year-old self carried a plastic tractor in her pocket, because this connected her to the colourful tractors in Richard Scarry picture books. There was a talismanic connection between the vivid life in the book and the object in my hand. When I came to write four-year-old Cristabel Seagrave, I gave her important things to keep in her pockets: scraps of paper and stones with faces. Both Boston and Nesbit imbue ordinary objects with magical possibility. Boston's wooden mouse comes to life when Tolly sleeps, while a ring in Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* has magical powers, as does a charm in Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet*, which is found in an antiques shop near Tottenham Court Road.

Objects in Green Knowe link past and present. Tolly is often upset by the sudden disappearance of the children, but, as Nobuhiko Hishida (2021: 56) notes: 'Tolly and the children maintain their relationship by detecting each other's existence through the traces they leave.' When Tolly finds an old bracelet, he is comforted, saying: 'They always leave something where they have been.' (2006: 78). Academic Rebecca Long says that by interacting with objects, and learning about the past, Tolly taps into 'a collective or even familial memory'. It is 'imaginative play' as a 'form of remembrance' (Long 2017: 89-101). Here we can see how Boston portrays a child's instinctive love of play in a positive light. The last book of the series, *The Stones of Green Knowe*, returns to this idea of powerful objects when Roger, a Norman boy, states 'magic dwelt in so many things – stone and wood, and iron and wells, and hawthorn trees and rings and cups, and even sometimes woven cloth'



(2003b: 22). There is an implication that modern people, modern adults, have forgotten the power of objects.

Long sees Tolly's journey towards recovering a sense of belonging through the house's objects and history as one aimed at a British readership reeling from the traumas of World War II, but also for a 'broader child readership disconnected from history and communal memory' (2017: 89-101). Just as most child characters in the Green Knowe books have a traumatic or broken past, many child readers – me included – seek the deep comfort of a story that enables them to imagine living in a place where they form a part of a long lineage, and of finding objects that might link a fractured story back together. Boston wrote that a 'love of the past' is natural to small children, adding: 'It gives them comfort, security and a pattern' (Boston 1977: 218). A desire for a settled home may lie behind a love of a fictional home. I was absorbed in these stories just after my parents' divorce, when we moved house, and I changed schools.

The 'ghosts' in Green Knowe are not frightening gothic ghosts. The presence of Toby, Alexander and Linnet in the house is never a sinister one – rather a playful one. They move toys about and can be heard giggling. Boston depicts them as ordinary children who simply exist at another time. The house is not haunted but rather pre-inhabited – or even co-inhabited. In this, Boston's work resembles those magical realism authors that present ghost characters as unquestioned in material reality, such as the accepted supernatural elements in Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1982). When Toby eventually realises the children are dead, it is a moment of loss, rather than horror:

He must have known somehow that the children could not have lived for so many centuries without growing old, but he had never thought about it. To him they were so real, so near, they were his own family that he needed more than anything on earth. (2006: 54)

As this quote suggests, that the house allows Tolly to interact with people from the past satisfies an emotional need in him. Several books in the series show a character moving from feeling lonely to finding happiness by engaging with the past. The house itself is described as very ancient – Tolly thinks it ‘looked like the ruined castles he had explored on school picnics’ – but its great age is depicted as something sheltering, comforting. In *The River at Green Knowe*, Ida says: ‘I can’t imagine fearful things happening near Green Knowe. I know it is very old, but it feels like a refuge, something to be trusted’ (2007: 88).

Linda Hall writes about women writers of children’s fiction who use the setting of a house as a place that allows ‘time-slips’, meaning access to movement through time and meetings with people from the past. She describes this depiction of time as being in opposition to a traditional, rational understanding of history, and different to straight-forward historical fiction written for children, stating:

Time for them seems to represent the opposite of what we understand by the word *history*. Whereas history, and especially the history we are taught at school, is perceived to be about *change* (usually presented as for the better, though this need not be the case), *time* becomes the focus for intuitions about the changeless, timeless matters of human existence and for fears of the loss of such necessary continuities. As a result, time-slip occupies a philosophical cum poetic terrain that the materialist nature of history has largely denied itself. It is inevitable, therefore, that time-slip engages with more intangible matters than historical fiction does. These matters are not trivial for they address compelling emotional and psychological needs (Hall 1998: 223-236).

Tolly engages with children from the past primarily because of his emotional need for a family. As a whole, the Green Knowe books can be seen as describing a series of different children from different times meeting each other, until in the final book, *The Stones of Green Knowe*, they are all brought together – including Tolly’s grandmother, who joins them as her younger self. Similarly, Nesbit’s time-travel books typically end with the reunion of missing family members or the restoration or establishment of a family or home. Many of the child protagonists in the Green Knowe books are lonely children, but their absent or inattentive parents allow them freedom to access the house’s time-bending properties, which enables them to meet new friends and to feel more intimate with the house itself. It is almost a substitute parent. Green Knowe shows ‘how place is continuous in time, just as time can be accessed through space’ (Long 2017: 89-101), echoing the child’s twin desires for stability and escape.

Like Tolly and, indeed, Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*, Susan Oldknow in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* is left alone largely because her father is involved with British business overseas. Susan is living in the Regency Era, and it is her father’s overseas trade that leads him to find Jacob, who is sold as a slave in the West Indies and given to Susan to keep her company. Neither of Susan’s parents have any awareness of the magical properties of the house. Susan’s vain mother is uninterested in her daughter and prefers to live in a newly built annex of the house. This excludes her from the ancient building that Susan, Tolly and Mrs Oldknow inhabit, which is a ‘house where anything might happen and where children could play hide and seek from one century to another’ (2003a: 11). Here time is depicted as a playground for the child characters, while the house is a place of possibility, a portal.

Within the house itself are numerous symbols that suggest other potential realities or the ability to access other times: shadows, mirrors, and even a doll’s house that is a miniature version of the house itself. Family names are repeated through generations, in a way that

suggests some form of reincarnation or doubling, which is in itself a challenge to the idea of linear time. Tolly says: 'In this house, everything is twice!' (2006: 10)

Even the illustrations in Boston's stories, done by Boston's son Peter using scraperboard, suggest to me both a reversal and an uncovering of what has been hidden, as they are white images on a black background, created by scraping away sections of a painted board. In these illustrations, the house and its contents are depicted in a way that suggests photographic negatives, with what should be black appearing as white and vice versa. This is perhaps a way of suggesting that the books depict the house from an unusual perspective, one that foregrounds the intangible and one that reveals what lies beneath the ordinary. Watson states this scraperboard technique is good at depicting 'scenes of darkness, whether cosy or claustrophobic' – something he states is especially apt in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* in which a blind character is at the heart of the narrative (Watson 2021: 89). The technique is also effective in showing the river that surrounds Green Knowe and the reflections on its surface – Watson sees examples of reflection, both in terms of a doubling and in terms of reflection as contemplative thought, throughout the books.

When Tolly first arrives at Green Knowe, Boston describes the scene in a way that emphasises its potential multiplicity and its status as a gateway to other times:

The entrance hall was a strange place. As [Tolly and Boggis] stepped in, a similar door opened at the far end of the house and another man and boy entered there. Then Toseland saw that it was only themselves in a big mirror. The walls round him were partly rough stone and partly plaster, but hung all over with mirrors and pictures and china. There were three big old mirrors all reflecting each other so that at first Toseland was puzzled to find what was real, and which door one could go through straight, the way one wanted to, not sideways somewhere else. He almost wondered which was really himself. (2006: 6)

There is also a theme of sight or lack of sight within the book, which is interlinked with the layers of history in the house. Tolly is often frustrated by his inability to see the children when he wants to, but senses that ‘a great deal was going on out of sight’. There is a sense throughout the Green Knowe books, that the past continues to exist within the present, but can only be accessed by those sensitive to it – Watson notes an emphasis on ‘attentiveness’, which is brought into focus through the use of opposition. For example, Susan’s blindness makes Tolly play at being blind, which leads him to pay more attention to what he can hear. Watson also notes Boston’s frequent allusions to silence in Green Knowe – all the sounds Tolly hears seem ‘held in a very old and wonderful silence’ (2003a: 90).

In *The Stones of Green Knowe*, we go back to Norman times and meet a boy called Roger d’Aulneaux (his name a familial echo of Oldknow) whose father is building the house that will become Green Knowe. While the work is ongoing, Roger finds some stone chairs hidden beneath brambles, which are ‘old as the setting sun’ (2003b: 36). Roger wishes that the house being built would last as long as the chairs and, when he imagines the house in the future, he finds that he has travelled through time. In all the Green Knowe stories, movement through time is as simple as walking through some countryside and finding yourself somewhere else, talking to children whose clothes are slightly different – there are no magical effects. He meets Linnet, one of the seventeenth century children, who recognises Roger as one of ‘the others’, illustrating that the child characters in the series have come to accept all those they meet from the future or past.

The ending of *The Stones of Green Knowe*, the last of the series, is an ambiguous one, as the stone chairs are dug up by a mechanical digger and taken to a museum. But as Roger reminds a woeful Tolly, the Stones are still standing in Norman times. This shifting of a happy ending to the past is a neat narrative sleight of hand that utilises Boston’s idea that

nothing is lost in time but also renders the present unstable and under threat. The grandmother in *Green Knowe* is seen as a stalwart defender of the house against multiple threats that Boston linked to modern urbanisation. One of the saddest scenes in *The Stones of Green Knowe*, is when Roger travels to contemporary England and notices how much natural life has vanished. Linda Hall links this to the social and environmental changes of post-war England, saying:

Their collective sense of the England they knew being under threat and likely to be lost led to a series of time-slip stories and historical novels that nowhere overtly address contemporary national change, yet in their portrayal of old houses and magical gardens they evoke a world of social difference, in which "the ceremony of innocence" (W. B. Yeats) teeters on the edge of destruction, if it has not already been destroyed. Haunted by a sense of loss, these writers attempt to recapture and preserve in an inhospitable present a past that seems to be as much under threat as the present. The threat is manifested in the destruction not simply of buildings but of the countryside *itself*. For Lucy Boston this seems almost the greater loss. And indeed, at the center of her later book, *The Stones of Green Knowe* (1976), lies an environmentalist concern with the garden that once was England (Hall 1998: 223-236).

‘I live in paradise’, Boston said in an interview at Reading University in 1972, but added that her home was encroached upon by urbanisation: ‘Pollution is not only of the air and the water and the land, and insecticide and weedkillers do not only destroy the birds and flowers, they shrivel and pollute the mind also.’ Failure to protect this ‘teeming richness’ would starve our imaginations ‘because a whole imagination depends on, is made of, what you’re given from outside, isn’t it? If you’re not given anything from outside, your imagination hasn’t got anything to play with’. There is, in this statement, the environmental

concern that Hall identifies, but there is also a link between the destruction of the natural world and a limiting of imagination. This, I feel, situates Green Knowe as primarily a place of imaginative exploration, both through its isolation and through its great age, which allows access to the past. To defend it, as Mrs Oldknow and Lucy Boston do, is not solely to defend a house, but to defend its status as a portal to other possibilities.

Catherine Butler, while recognising evidence of an anti-modernity attitude in Boston's time-slip fiction, argues that 'any preference for the past [...] is perhaps less important than its sense of the larger interplay between endurance and change, age and newness'. She states that by having characters viewing Green Knowe at different times, Boston is inviting her readers to consider 'temporal perspective', to remember that what is now old was once brand new (Butler 2021: 50). Boston herself described Green Knowe in terms that denied it was solely backward-looking, saying: 'It's between past and future, and always aware of both' adding that the house was 'absolutely in the present' (Wintle and Fisher 1974: 278).

## **The Enchanted Castle**

Nesbit's 1907 story *The Enchanted Castle* uses the big house setting as a means of exploring time and magic. It starts as a straightforward tale of three children bored in their summer holidays, discovering a castle they believe – or convince themselves to believe – is magic, in a way that is largely an extension of their make-believe games. In her 1988 study of magic in children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva states Nesbit's influence on children's literature came from her blending of the ordinary with the extraordinary, in a way that is so familiar to us now – magical wardrobes, schools for wizards et al – it seems impossible to imagine children's books without it. Nikolajeva states: 'This clash of the magical and the ordinary, the unexpected consequences of magic when introduced in the everyday realistic life is the

cornerstone of Nesbit's fantasy. This is the principally new feature which has become the key feature of the twentieth century fantasy.' (Bowers 2004: 107)

From the start of *The Enchanted Castle*, the idea of the grand house as a possible site of magic is interwoven with ideas absorbed through the children's reading. When Gerald, Jimmy and Kathleen stumble upon an underground passage that leads into the grounds of Yalding Towers, Gerald begins to narrate their activities as if they were in a book. Nesbit writes: 'The others were used to Gerald's way of telling a story while he acted it' (1998: 16). This is something he does throughout the story (and is something found in other Nesbit books and in my novel), and it has the effect of showing the child protagonists as being aware of the conventions of stories and wanting to impose these fictions onto the everyday world. It is telling that the big house – which we later discover is just that, a house, albeit one with turrets – is described as a castle, a familiar trope of fairy tales.

The children's first encounter within the gardens of the house is also fairy-tale-esque. They find a thread with a silver thimble that leads to a girl in an old-fashioned dress asleep on a sundial. They decide she must be a princess and one of them must kiss her. When the girl wakes, she plays along, saying: 'Which of you is the prince that aroused me from my deep sleep of so many long years?' (1998: 26). In a structural study of *The Enchanted Castle*, Anita Moss states it is a fusion of the novel and the fairy-tale. Moss notes that although the romance that ends the story – that of the children's governess being revealed as Lord Yalding's lost love – has the effect of framing the story in a 'fairy-tale structure', the 'inversions of readers' expectations' throughout the story allow Nesbit to expand the possibilities of the two forms; for example, the children's discovery that becoming a statue is not to become lifeless, but a way of perceiving reality in a new light (Moss 1982: 39-45). I would say *The Secret Garden* is similar, in that it ends with father and son reunited, but the strangeness of the story that



proceeds it – where a disagreeable little girl brings a garden and a bedridden boy to life – gives an unexpectedly numinous quality to the narrative.

Nesbit shows the children as being suspicious of the girl's claims to be a princess, but it is noticeable that the house and its old-fashioned contents – suits of armour and animal skins – fit her tale. It is, to the children, exactly the kind of house a princess would inhabit. This is something they have learned through their reading: that a big house is a site of stories and magic. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy and much of what the children find at the house does have genuinely magical properties, but Nesbit continually grounds her story within the everyday. For example, the stone statues that come to life are described as resembling the model dinosaurs at Crystal Palace. At one point, Gerald says: 'I don't understand how railway trains and magic *can* go on at the same time.' The narrator adds: 'And yet they do' (1998: 158).

Even the most frightening elements of *The Enchanted Castle*, the Uglie-Wuglies, are common household objects – brooms and coats – that come to life. Nesbit's biographer Judith Briggs writes that, as a child, Nesbit saw mummified corpses in a crypt in Bordeaux that terrified her, and that later in life, she had deliberately created mummies out of domestic objects as a playful way of 'exorcising her terror'. *The Enchanted Castle* re-animates those harmless objects into the Uglie-Wuglies, something that is again menacing (Briggs 2007: 66). There is something especially horrifying about the fact the children have created the Uglie-Wuglies themselves, as a pretend audience for a play, and their creations turn against them.

Nesbit did write ghost stories for adults, and *The Enchanted Castle* is the scariest of her children's fictions in a way that echoes the more gothic strain of adult fiction set in big houses, such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). Reynolds identifies the use of fear in children's literature as a way of promoting change, saying 'narratives that make the certain uncertain and in the process point to emotional and social cracks and fissures just

below the surface of everyday reality' have the effect of calling into question 'the intentions of those in authority' and disturbing the 'adult-child power dynamic' (Reynolds 2007: 131). This idea is certainly in play in the figures of the Uglie-Wuglies, who are caricatures of English social types, but become increasingly menacing towards the children, who still have to treat them with respect, as they would ordinary adults. We can see here a pattern visible in many Nesbit stories: an everyday world transformed by magic, that then becomes dangerous, so the protagonists are glad to be released from it. Sarah Gilead suggests magic in *The Enchanted Castle* represents the 'power and danger of desire', and that each magical episode 'ultimately proves the greater desirability of the ordinary' (1991: 284).

A discussion the children have about the house illustrates this intermingling of the ordinary and magical, as well as hinting at a concern about modernity that echoes Boston's concern with modern development:

'If we were in a book it would be an enchanted castle – certain to be,' said Kathleen.

'It is an enchanted castle,' said Gerald in hollow tones.

'But there aren't any,' Jimmy was quite positive.

'How do you know? Do you think there's nothing in the world but what you've seen?' His scorn was crushing.

'I think magic went out when people began to have steam engines,' Jimmy insisted, 'and newspapers and magazines and telephones and wireless telegraphing.' (1998: 20)

The children later find out that the princess is in fact the very ordinary Mabel Prowse, housekeeper's niece, who has been playing dress up, but a ring that Mabel puts on can make people invisible and grant wishes, and this sets off a series of adventures. It can be read at one level as a conventional fairy-tale warning about the dangers of wishing or fantasy, but a scene

where Gerald walks the grounds of the castle wearing the magic ring is less conventional. As he sees the statues in the grounds moving, Gerald feels:

[. . .] well, not excited, not surprised, not anxious, but—different [...] Only a new feeling came to him as he walked through the gardens; by day the gardens were like dreams, at night they were like visions [...] And he had that extra-ordinary feeling so difficult to describe, and yet so real and so unforgettable—the feeling that he was in another world, that had covered up and hidden the old world as a carpet covers a floor. (1998: 65).

This layering of worlds is reminiscent of Tolly's sensitivity to what is hidden in the house at Green Knowe, the hint of a something outside of conventional children's stories, something more unknown or profound.

Time is also explored when Jimmy, while wearing the ring, wishes he was rich and is transformed from a child into a 'stout, prosperous, elderly gentleman' (1998: 155). In becoming an adult, he loses his identity – the children call him 'That-which-had-been-Jimmy' or 'late Jimmy'. Aging and leaving childhood is a kind of death. Jimmy no longer recognises his siblings and leaves with one of the Ugly-Wuglies to go and work at the Stock Exchange, where he talks of 'politics and the Kaffir market'. In Nesbit's view, an Ugly-Wuglie, a false creature with no insides, is someone who will fit perfectly into London society, and 'late Jimmy', now an adult only concerned with money, fits in too.

Later, Kathleen becomes a statue and meets the other statues in the garden, which come to life on moonlit nights to eat 'celestial picnics' and are depicted as Greek gods and goddesses – Eros, Phoebus, Hebe and Psyche. This link to classical antiquity also contains a criticism of modernity, as Phoebus tells the children that although all statues have the ability to come to live, those in 'ugly cities' choose not to. He tells them of special temples that are

struck by moonlight – one is in Hellas and one ‘in this great garden’. When Phoebus plays the lyre, Nesbit writes:

Those who listened forgot time and space and how to be sad, and how to be naughty, and it seemed that the whole world lay like a magic apple in the hand of each listener, and that the whole world was good and beautiful. (1998: 200)

It is notable that this description not only collapses time, but also includes childlike concerns (sadness and naughtiness) and an image from a fairy tale (a magic apple).

*The Enchanted Castle's* underlying air of numinous strangeness extends to its final scene, which takes place in an ancient setting with standing stones, a place like Stonehenge, where things are ‘understood without speech’ and time becomes meaningless:

Everything changes. Or, rather, everything is revealed. There are no more secrets. The plan of the world seems plain, like an easy sum that one writes in big figures on a child's slate. One wonders how one can ever have wondered about anything. Space is not; every place that one has seen or dreamed of is here. Time is not; into this instant is crowded all that one has ever done or dreamed of doing. It is a moment, and it is eternity. It is the centre of the universe and it is the universe itself. The eternal light rests on and illuminates the eternal heart of things. (1998: 236)

At the standing stones, the children gather with a disparate collection of other beings that are like a children's encyclopaedia come to life: dinosaurs, figures from cathedrals, sphinxes, and Greek gods. These figures gather in the light of the moon and are described in a curiously domestic image: ‘Each stone shape came gladly and quietly into the circle of light and

understanding, as children, tired with a long ramble, creep quietly through the open door into the firelit welcome of home' (1998: 237).

The mystical depiction of time in this scene is very different to Nesbit's jollier time-travel scenes in the Psammead trilogy, where magical creatures grant wishes like a genie in a lamp. This is something more spiritual, more metaphysical. It ends with all those in the scene chanting: 'The light! The light!' As a young reader, *The Enchanted Castle* was my favourite of Nesbit's books because of this unlikely combination of recognisably familiar magic – that found in castles with princesses – with a gesturing to something beyond the known. It reminds me both of the ceremonial scenes in C S Lewis's Narnia stories – which also have statues that come to life and figures from mythology – and a section at the end of *The River at Green Knowe*: on a moonlit night, the children, Ida, Ping and Oskar, encounter a primitive scene, where figures wearing antlers howl and stamp in a 'ritual dance' that is 'dreadful' and 'unnerving'. This glimpse into what appears to be prehistory, gives the children a moment of understanding:

They were standing at midnight, alone, under a sky that was there before either earth or moon had been, and would be there long after. In this agonizing second of revelation that ALL passes, the bark of a disturbed heron caused them to clutch each other, and jerked loose their tongues. (2007: 94)

It is a bleak, chilling scene but the children are comforted by sighting Green Knowe, 'gentle, heavy and dreaming, with its carefully spaced bushes and trees standing in their known positions enriched with moonlight on their heads and shadows like the folds of Cinderella's ball dress behind them'. Boston here echoes Nesbit in using a fairy-tale image to

soften her expansive vision of time. Both authors, I feel, are using the big house's association with the past to dig deeper and gesture at the grand arc of deep time, cosmic time.

There is a sense in both the Green Knowe stories and *The Enchanted Castle* that in learning about the mysterious properties of the house, the children develop an exclusive, proprietorial relationship with it. In both books, the houses are negatively affected by visitors from outside. When Yalding Hall has an open day, attracting motorcars and a crowd in 'smart holiday clothes' the children feel it 'spoiled for them the quiet of the enchanted castle and outraged the peace of the garden of enchantments' (1998: 209). Nesbit compares the 'chattering crowd' to the imagined prior residents of the house in terms that sound openly snobbish:

The terrace, where in old days, dames in ruffs had sniffed the sweetbriar and southernwood of the borders below, and ladies, bright with rouge and powder and brocade, had walked in the swing of their hooped skirts – the terrace now echoed to the sound of brown boots, and the tap-tap of high heeled shoes [...] and high laughter and chattering voices.

In her non-fiction book about the education of children, *The Wings and the Child*, Nesbit critiques the commercialism of the modern world, 'the orgy of the fancy shop', and compares it to the idea of living in one house over many years, saying:

there is a certain quality in men who have taken root, who have lived with the same furniture, the same house, the same friends for many years, which you shall look for in vain in men who have travelled the world over and met hundreds of acquaintances [...] The knowledge of human nature of the man who has taken root may be narrow, but it will be deep. (Nesbit 1913: Chapter V)

The assumed stability of the inherited property is contrasted to the rapidity and superficiality of modernity. It is followed by the statement: 'It is a mistake to suppose that children are naturally fond of change. They love what they know.'

Like Boston, Nesbit depicts the continuation of an old house as something reassuring. A desire for a settled home may stem from her own childhood, where her family moved frequently as her sister was ill with consumption, so was taken abroad for her health. But her child readers may have also been drawn to the idea for reasons of power as well as comfort. Being one of a long line of people who inhabit a single property is one of the few ways in which a child can have an importance that bears no relation to their age or abilities. You may only be seven years old but if you are the heir to an estate, you automatically hold an important position. (One of Mary Lennox's triumphs in *The Secret Garden* is to return Colin, the heir, to full health.) It is like having adult status while still being a child, a profoundly attractive idea to a young reader. My character Cristabel is also intrigued by the idea of 'the heir' ('the heir was what everyone wanted').

Nesbit's biographers note the curious contradictions in her commitment to progressive schools of thought, like the Fabian Society, with her dislike of social change; in *The Wings and the Child* she states: 'The world is much uglier than it was' (Nesbit 1913: Chapter VI). Her time travel stories often feature characters from outside Edwardian London commenting on its poverty, and there is also a nostalgic pull to the pre-industrial past, which is idealised almost to the point of stereotype, and a lack of faith in the present day. The opening of another Nesbit time-travel book, *Harding's Luck*, critiques London:

Dickie lived at New Cross. At least the address was New Cross, but really the house where he lived was one of a row of horrid little houses built on the slope where once green fields ran

down the hill to the river, and the old houses of the Deptford merchants stood stately in their pleasant gardens and fruitful orchards. (Nesbit 1910: Chapter 1, paragraph 1)

Briggs states such contrasts were frequently drawn by idealistic socialists who saw Victorian London as a place of squalor, dehumanised by the Industrial Revolution. Nesbit's *The House of Arden* (1908), with its tale of recovering a castle and a family's lost fortune, is specifically concerned with the 'possibility of reconstructing an ordered society in the midst of the social chaos and injustice of Edwardian England'. (Briggs 2007: 308). Against such rapid development, the big house can be seen as a symbol of arcadian stability, while the fact it contains magical elements also gives the house a totemic power that transcends time. *The House of Arden* also features a daughter's reunion with a missing father in a scene that almost exactly replicates the reunion scene in *The Railway Children*, which Briggs argues may symbolically suggest that the search for the past and the search for the father 'are one'. Nesbit's own father died when she was young and the repetition of the theme in her writing suggests its importance.

The main characters in *The House of Arden*, Elfrida and Edred, travel back into English history and exchange identities with children from the past. The housekeeper tells them 'There was always a boy and a girl' in the Arden family – an idea which, like the recurring names at Green Knowe, suggests both circularity of time and linked antecedents (Nesbit 1908: 54). It can also increase a child reader's identification with the past if there are children 'like them' in history.

Discussing the portrayal of time in children's fiction, Lisa Sainsbury draws on Maria Nikolajeva's idea that it is a 'symbolic depiction of a maturation process', by which books for younger readers tend to express notions of ever-lasting or circular time (*kairos*), while books for older children subscribe to linear time (*chronos*), to explore the problems of growing up,



aging and death. Sainsbury adds that a yearning for *kairos* undercuts the struggle to come to terms with *chronos*. (Sainsbury 2014: 156-172). Both Boston and Nesbit soften their depictions of *chronos* with idealised images of *kairos*. To my mind, this links to Hall's idea that time-slips address 'compelling emotional and psychological needs' (Hall 1998: 223 – 236). It is notable that Tolly, in the Green Knowe books, is an only child. His emotional need to connect with the children from the past is profound:

Tolly flung himself downwards into one of the big chairs, with angry tears. 'I want to be with them. I want to be with them. Why can't I be with them?' he cried. Mrs Oldknow came to comfort him. 'Don't cry my dear. You'll find them soon. They're like shy animals. They don't come just at first till they are sure.' (2006: 47)

It is notable too that Tolly's desire is to be reunited with dead children, rather than his living father. He says the ghost children are 'like brothers and sisters, who come and go, but there is no need for worry: they are sure to come home again'. Ironically, the fact that the children are already dead means Tolly will never lose them. In the closing scene of *The Children of Green Knowe*, after a happy Christmas Day, Boston writes: 'Tolly's eyes wandered sleepily over his room, acknowledging all his treasures, and their shadows that he loved perhaps almost more'. It seems almost a cliché to say it, but a happy ending that features ghosts and shadows rather than parents, is one that might prove particularly satisfying to a child reader with an unconventional home life. Even a child in a happy family might find the idea of having invisible and secret allies an appealing one.

*The Enchanted Castle* ends with the marriage of Lord Yalding and the saving of the house; the magic ring turns into a wedding ring. But its closing words are the narrator reassuring her readers that everything they have read is true in a way that situates her

alongside the child reader and against the magic-denying adults: 'It is all very well for all of them to pretend that the whole of this story is my own invention: facts are facts, and you can't explain them away.' These disruptive elements within stories that also feature reunited families and idyllic homes is precisely the kind of push-me-pull-you that intrigues me most about Nesbit and Boston's work. The comforting endings, especially in Nesbit, satisfy what Spufford calls 'the invariability of a story', a dependable element to storytelling that allows a child reader to feel it is safe to rely on, but often what has preceded it is much stranger and less easily explained.

## **Chapter Two: Hidden in the Attic: Girls and Boys and the Big House**

*“Oh yes, I belong here right enough, but what’s the use of belonging anywhere if you’re invisible?” – The Enchanted Castle, E Nesbit*

Like many children’s authors, Boston and Nesbit wrote fiction that reflected ideas about gender prevalent in their lifetimes. The role of the great house in their work often produced stereotypical male and female characters – the housekeepers and gardeners, for example. But the issue of gender in their work is more complex than it first appears.

### **Gender and Nesbit**

I will begin by looking at Nesbit. The complexity in her work can be illustrated by a passage from her 1902 adult novel *The Red House*, which fictionalises an imposing eighteenth century house called Well Hall that Nesbit rented with her husband Hubert Bland. The novel is written in the first person and the narrator is the husband, Len, who has moved into the house with his new wife Chloe:

I do not know which of us most enjoyed the house-work that followed. Chloe loves house-work for its own sake. As she says, it is play, because it is not what one ought to be doing. For myself, I admit that when I see my wife working about the house I experience a more intimate sense of possession even than when I walk with her in the garden, hand in hand, and certainly far deeper than I can ever feel when she is drawing away for dear life to add her

share to our income. Theoretically I know how right and proper it is that she should earn money as well as I. Practically I want to earn all the money, and to let her spend it. This is the relic of a barbarous age, and so is the delightful thrill of domestic pleasure with which I see *my* wife busy about *our* house. (Nesbit 1902: Chapter VI)

The reality of life in Well Hall was very different. Nesbit was the breadwinner of the family, while her husband did very little. Writer H G Wells visited Nesbit and recalled ‘a great, easy-going hospitable Bohemian household [...] an old moated house with a walled garden [...] those who wished to please her called her royally “Madame” or “Duchess” and she had a touch of aloof authority which justified that’ (Fitzsimons 2019: 195). In this account, it sounds as if the grand house allowed Nesbit to adopt a commanding, regal role – and perhaps it did, because she paid the rent. In an introduction to a 2018 reissue of Nesbit’s novel *The Lark*, Penelope Lively describes her domestic situation like this:

Married to a philandering husband, she had five children, one of whom died at fifteen, and accepted into the family two more of her husband’s by a mistress who was also absorbed as housekeeper and secretary. Alongside his infidelity, Hubert Bland was also apparently incapable of earning a living, which accounts in part for Nesbit’s vast working output: forty books for children, eleven adult novels and thirteen collections of short stories. She *had* to write. (Nesbit 2018: vii)

In *The Red House*, it is Len who is depicted as a writer, earning money by producing work for newspapers, as Nesbit had done throughout her life. It is also Len who enjoys watching his wife do housework, not something that Nesbit did much of, as Hubert’s live-in mistress Alice did that. Nesbit’s real life *menage a trois* and its unconventional division of

labour has been rewritten (by her) into a traditional love story. However, later in the story, Len discovers that his wife Chloe has been improving his stories before he sends them out, implying that she does have creative skill, but she insists she does not want to be credited and they should use both their names as a pen name, a typically feminine act of self-sacrifice.

There is throughout the novel an idealisation of Chloe's wifely attributes. She is described in feminine terms – she looks 'pretty in pink ribbons' – and says she loves housework, which she describes as 'play' as it is 'not what one ought to be doing'. This is partly because women of her class would ordinarily have servants (the novel features ongoing issues with staff) and partly because she and her husband have decided their future lies in creative work. By way of contrast, another woman character Yolande, who is university-educated and has 'set herself to do a man's work', refuses to do any housework. She says:

When I was quite a child, I declined to be taught to sew. I saw that even then that one's knowledge of feminine crafts is just a weapon in the eyes of the evil one, who lies in wait at every corner to keep one off one's real work. I meant to go to Girton, so when they made me wash up the tea-things, I always dropped something They soon left off asking me to wash up. (Nesbit 1902: Chapter VI)

'How horribly immoral!' responds our narrator Len. Nesbit appears to be confirming the sexist idea that an ambitious woman is both duplicitous and shirking her proper duties.

But Nesbit's apparent support for traditional gender roles is undermined not only by her lifestyle, but also by the strange appearance within *The Red House* of the Bastable children – who were characters in her own successful children's books. This may represent a semi-conscious desire to undercut gender stereotypes in what is essentially a light romance, by reminding readers of her own success, albeit without making it explicit. The Bastable

children arrive by themselves, with no adults accompanying them, and explore the house, finding an undiscovered cellar full of furniture. It is as if the discovery of hidden places in big houses can only be achieved by child characters, and so Nesbit implants some of her own into an adult novel. Indeed, Len specifically links the idea of childhood to the desire to explore (Nesbit 1902: Chapter X), saying: ‘Our cellars are large and vaulted; from recollections of my childhood, I could conceive that they might seem well worth exploring.’ Bachelard describes a house as a ‘vertical being’ (2014: 39) with a dual polarity: the attic representing airy rationality and the cellar subterranean irrationality; in this reading, it is unsurprising that it should be the uncontained, riotous Bastables of Nesbit’s imagination who find the secret cellar beneath her depiction of a conventional marital home.

Academic Claudia Nelson suggests *The Red House* can be seen as a companion piece to Nesbit’s book for children *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), which features the Bastables, but notes that though both employ male narrators, Oswald Bastable ‘celebrates masculine values at the expense of girls’ interests’ while Len ‘valorises domestic life’ (Nelson 2006: 1-13). However, Oswald’s narrative voice, like Gerald’s in *The Enchanted Castle*, is frequently undermined by humour, which allows us to see him as a child adopting a more grown-up tone of voice. Briggs says, ‘Oswald is the Victorian patriarch in short pants, and his sense of superiority [...] borders on the outrageous’. She states his confident assumptions about women ‘reflect his naivety, while mocking wider attitudes through him – possibly Hubert’s attitudes’. (Briggs 2007: 199)

I would agree that his narrative is revealed as naïve, but I don’t believe he is solely a figure of mockery. I think Nesbit treads carefully in making sure she is never unkind or sneery about Oswald; he is sincere in his beliefs and earnest in how he addresses his audience, and therefore not solely a comic invention. We also see him using his imagination to help his siblings, telling them that their tough mutton hash is in fact a venison stew and

they should pretend they are characters in *The Children of the New Forest* while eating it. Similarly, although Cristabel in my novel frequently borrows language and postures from books that are potentially humorous when used by a young girl ('An Englishman must always somehow or other put his foot down'), we see her doing this at times when she needs emotional bolstering. Hopefully, in revealing her self-doubt when she reaches for the authority of Henty or Homer, the comic moment is also a vulnerable moment. In both instances, the characters are shown as being influenced by the 'approved' books they have read, but also emotionally flexible in how they respond to the books.

Nesbit's complex feelings about writing and gender can be seen in an Nesbitian alter-ego who appears in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899). The Bastable children meet a 'lady in spectacles' on a train and she talks to them about *The Jungle Book*, thus establishing herself as someone who knows good (male-authored) children's books. She tells them she is 'a sort of poet' and shows them one of her poems. Oswald copies it down to show his readers 'that some grown-up ladies are not so silly as others'. The poem is one for children, written from a boy's point of view complaining about grown-ups: 'They will not let you play with fire/ Or trip your sisters up with wire'. (Nesbit 1981: 51-54)

Later in the chapter, Oswald describes the lady as being like 'a jolly sort of grown-up boy in a dress and hat', which seems an apt description of Nesbit's shifting, polysemic narrative voice, in that she is simultaneously a grown-up, who adopts a boy's voice, while remaining dressed within the proper fictional conventions of the time. I am moved by the fact that Oswald's father later tells the children, the lady on the train 'wrote better poetry than any other lady alive now', as I feel to include such a statement speaks of her insecurity as a writer (Nesbit 1981: 51 -54). Or perhaps it is an argument for not underestimating those who write both for children and adults.

Nelson (2006: 1–13) notes that Nesbit frequently speaks from different levels in her children’s fiction, alternating between the serious and the playful and that, within the Psammead trilogy, Nesbit valorises the masculine point of view at the moments when ‘she seems most closely identified with the “childlike” and the humorous’ whereas in her “adult” persona, she ‘takes an essentially pro-feminine or androgynous stance’. In the main, Nesbit’s child characters typically conform to common gender tropes: Dora Bastable, for example, has been told by her dying mother to look after her siblings, much as Bobbie in *The Railway Children* adopts a pseudo-maternal role. When there are exceptions, they are described in terms still grounded in stereotypes: Edred in *The House of Arden*, after a visit to a royal court, tells his sister ‘Boys have to be brave to bear sights of blood and horror’ but admits that he personally ‘liked the masque best’ (Nesbit 1908: 201).

In *The Enchanted Castle*, Jimmy and Gerald frequently criticise their sister Kathleen for being ‘just like a girl’ if she shows fear. There are other examples of stereotypical feminine behaviour: Mabel dressing as a princess; Kathleen and Mabel being excited by the jewellery in Yalding Towers, and later having a dolls’ tea party. To some degree, the big house setting prompts such behaviours – a girl playing at being in a fairy-tale castle will invariably pretend to be a princess, as that is the expected role. But as the book gathers pace, and the magic becomes stranger, the narrative voice more often sounds adult and serious, and the girls become less ‘girlish’. Mabel is brave in facing the Ugly-Wuglies – when she cries, Nesbit writes: ‘We must excuse her. She had been very brave, and I have no doubt that all heroines, from Joan of Arc to Grace Darling, have had their sobbing moments,’ (1998: 141) – and the girls are shown abandoning their tea party to return to the castle, drawn by a ‘magic impulse’. Although Gerald is often the leader, it is the girls who, by responding to the ‘magic impulse’, discover that the statues come to life.



Similarly, towards the end of the book, when the girls are imagining who they might marry, their choices – a sailor, a gypsy, a brigand, a soldier – are seen as husbands who will guarantee the girls are involved in story-tale-esque adventures. Gerald childishly responds to their list of fantasy husbands by announcing he would marry ‘a dumb girl, or else get the ring to make her so she can’t speak unless spoken to’ then launches into a dramatic monologue in which he is the ‘deserted hero of our tale’. But it is Mabel who is given the last word, and she says: ‘I think I’ll marry a dumb husband...and there shan’t be any heroes in my books when I write them, only a heroine’ (1998: 212). It is interesting to compare Mabel’s proud defiance to the self-sacrificing wife in *The Red House*, and to note how, in the children’s book, Nesbit allows herself to describe a situation far closer to her own.

As Nesbit invented ancestral houses for her stories, she also looked for one to live in. She found Well Hall in Eltham in 1899. Briggs (2007: 211) describes it as the ‘house she had been searching for’ as its red-brick walls and shady moat reminded her of her most beloved childhood home, Halstead Hall near Orpington. In *My School Days*, a serialised memoir Nesbit wrote for *The Girl’s Own Paper* (Nesbit 1896-97: Part XII), she writes about Halstead lovingly remembering playing with her brothers and early attempts at poetry. Briggs notes that when Nesbit writes about the house, she particularly remembers ‘places in which she could hide either her possessions or herself’ that ‘conferred a newly-valued solitude’ (2007: 51-52). Briggs links Nesbit’s need for privacy and secret spaces at this time in her life with her awareness of her changing body in puberty, which was soon to separate her from her brothers.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes of ‘felicitous’ or ‘hostile’ spaces that make people either feel secure or ill at ease. The country house can be seen as an

environment that is hostile to children and women, being made up of a series of spaces that excludes them or requires certain modes of behaviour controlled by adults and or/male characters representing the established social order. We can see elements of this in the work of both Nesbit and Boston, for example, how Susan the blind girl is only allowed in certain parts of Green Knowe, and how Mabel can only explore Yalding Towers when the male owner is absent. But both authors show their characters transcending these restrictions or finding alternate spaces within the house – and both authors forged relationships with their own homes.

Bachelard, when discussing the elements of a house, emphasises the stairs leading up to the attic, ‘for they bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude’ (2014: 47). He describes how fiction or daydreaming allows an escape from the hostile environment. The young Nesbit found a corner in the roof of her childhood home that provided a space to read and write, ‘invisible, or at least unseen’. She found ‘nooks’ in shrubs where ‘one could hide with one's favourite books and be secure from the insistent and irritating demands so often made on one's time by one's elders’ (Nesbit 1896 - 1897: Part XII).

Bachelard also discusses the idea of ‘corners’ in a house, saying ‘every inch of a secluded space where we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination’. He links the idea of the restrictions of the corner – a ‘sort of half box’ – with immobility, which in turn, makes it ‘the space of our being’. He examines writers who have described hiding in corners as children, examining the forgotten objects they find there and writes: ‘from the depths of his corner, the dreamer remembers all the objects identified with solitude’, suggesting a kind of kinship with overlooked items (one that recalls Tolly’s engagement with objects in Green Knowe), adding ‘the corner denies the palace, dust denies marble’ (Bachelard 2014: 155-161). Here, the corners of the house are seen as sites that rebel against the status of the main house and allow a child a place of solitude where he or she can

daydream among a fellowship of unwanted items. In *The Whalebone Theatre*, Cristabel hides with a notebook in a dusty corner of an attic that I filled with dated objects that her fashionable step-mother has removed from the main house, reflecting Cristabel's identification with items that her step-mother does not like.

The image of the girl writer hidden in an attic is a resonant one. Jo March, the aspiring author in *Little Women*, is so associated with the attic that a recently published collection of Alcott's 'potboiler' magazine stories was given the title *From Jo March's Attic*. You can find a girl writing in an attic in C S Lewis's Narnia story *The Magician's Nephew*. His character Polly is described as using 'bits of old packing cases and the seats of broken kitchen chairs' to sit on. In her 'smugglers' cave' she keeps a 'cash-box containing various treasures, and a story she was writing and usually a few apples'. Her friend Digory is allowed in, but Polly will not 'let him see the story' (Lewis 2015: 12-13). When I re-read this book, the illustration of Polly hiding in her attic was so familiar to me, I realised I had given Cristabel an almost identical hiding place, without once suspecting I had borrowed it from Lewis. There was clearly something about that girl writing in a cramped space that stayed with me; I had even given Cristabel an apple. A girl hidden in a house with a secret notebook was a feeling I knew – and it is one that Nesbit knew too.

The reality of Nesbit's writing life may be reflected in the constraints of the girl hidden in the attic, who must conceal much of herself to be accepted, but her books featured women who were accepted into the social world of the main house through traditional means. In both *The Enchanted Castle* and in her adult novel *The Lark*, Nesbit writes about women who win the right to live in a beautiful old house through marriage. In *The Lark* two spirited young women are tasked with looking after a big house and they give it a new lease of life, but it ends with the heir, Mr Rochester, proposing to one of the girls called Jane, while her friend is allowed to stay in a cottage on the grounds. The women can remain at the house –

but they will not own it, so the social order is not disturbed. The tone of the ending is happy and there is nothing to suggest any tension between the women or a disappointment over the end of their time in charge of the house.

The character names, with their echoes of *Jane Eyre*, show Nesbit is clearly aware of and able to play with the lineage of big house stories, although her Jane and Rochester, with their light-hearted happy ending, are nothing like their literary forebears. Briggs (2007: 54). suggests the theme of a romance that results in a home may stem from Nesbit's desire to restore her childhood home of Halstead Hall, but I suggest it might also stem from a desire to escape the complications of adult relationships and financial concerns and return to the simplicity of an old-fashioned romance plot, with a devoted suitor complete with large inherited fortune.

Nesbit's time in the big house where she would live for twenty years was not always happy. Not long after moving into Well Hall, Nesbit lost a baby while Hubert's mistress Alice gave birth to his child, a son called John. In *The Red House*, Nesbit ends the novel showing her fictional newly-weds with a baby daughter, perhaps situating this child in opposition to her husband's new son. There is a strain in her work of lightening or re-writing her own life in a way that conforms to what was socially more acceptable at the time or perhaps what she emotionally desired. It is difficult to separate out what might have been altered as a form of wish fulfilment and what might simply have been altered to make a story more saleable. Several critics have noted that Nesbit is inconsistent in her work, lacking a single moral or philosophical code. Given her domestic situation, an easy explanation for this might simply be that much of her work was done quickly and for commercial magazines, and that she produced what she knew she could sell. The mother in *The Railway Children* works as a hack writer in much the same way.

Nesbit's attitude towards gender is similarly hard to pin down. She cropped her hair, smoked cigarettes and was a keen swimmer and walker at a time when these things were unusual for women. People who met her described her as being like a tomboy big sister. She and Hubert were involved with the socially progressive Fabian Society, but she also spoke out against women being given the vote and bemoaned the decline of the housewife in an article called 'The Goodwife's Occupation Gone'. (Fitzsimons 2019: 229). However, she is frequently less rigid in terms of gender roles in her children's fiction. Nelson says that Nesbit's Psammead books 'ultimately reject a model of gender that pits masculinity against femininity' in favour of 'the peaceful coexistence of the virtues of both sexes within a single personality' (Nelson 2006; 1). In her 1905 story *The Twopenny Spell*, Nesbit uses magic to switch the bodies of Lucy and her brother Harry for a day, which has the positive effect of making them become more and more alike, until there are no differences between them. Even in *The House of Arden*, which is in many ways socially conservative, involving, as it does a family's restoration of their ancestral castle and a male line of inheritance, Nesbit also includes this startlingly direct passage:

It's almost impossible for even the most grown up and clever of us to know how women used to be treated – and not so very long ago either – if they were once suspected of being witches. It generally began with the old woman being cleverer than her neighbours, having more wit to find out what was the matter with sick people, and more still to cure them...from 'wise woman' to witch was a very short step indeed. (Nesbit 1908: 90)

Nesbit also claimed she was a 'child at heart', which could be seen as a way of avoiding the complicated issue of being a woman altogether, and in *The Wings and the Child*,

she explicitly links her success as a children's writer to her belief that she remained a child in an adult world:

The grown-ups are the people who once were children and who have forgotten what it felt like to be a child [...] even the few who have managed to slip past the Customs-house with their bundle of memories intact can never fully display them. These are a sort of contraband, and neither the children nor the grown-ups will ever believe that that which we have brought with us from the land of childhood is genuine. The grown-ups accuse us of invention [...] all that we have is the secrets which were our own when we were children—secrets which were so bound up with the fibre of our nature that we could never lose them, and so go through life with them, our dearest treasures. Such people feel to the end that they are children in a grown-up world. (Nesbit 1913: Chapter 1, paragraph 5)

This description, with its emphasis on secrecy and its 'contraband' recalls both the girl hidden in the attic – Polly in her 'smugglers cave' – but also the idea of 'poaching', which Certeau suggests as a means of resisting dominant ideologies. Nesbit here depicts her hidden contraband as an awareness of what it felt like to be a child, but her children's fiction was also a space in which she could conceal ideas about her domestic life in a playful manner without being 'caught'. Reynolds argues that the fact children's literature has not been taken seriously contributes to the freedoms it gives to its creators and states 'the cultural and aesthetic wild zone at the centre of children's literature is a space for dissenters of all kinds' (Reynolds 2007: 15). Foster and Simons write: '[Nesbit] may have resented the market in which she found her success, but it paradoxically facilitated her release from imposed traditions of canonical writing and allowed her to situate herself in radical relation to establishment practice'. They see her children's fiction as a 'convenient vehicle for

articulating dissident opinions in an acceptably packaged form' and add that the child-centred viewpoint allowed her to satirise adult mores (1995: 128-129). As Briggs states:

In adopting the voice of the child, Edith Nesbit had, ironically, found a way of articulating her feelings of rebelliousness and subversiveness as a woman. Adopting the child's voice allowed her not only to locate her own position as a woman in a male-dominated society, but also to escape from the pressure to write like a man. (Cited in Foster and Simons 1995: 138)

Drawing on Kimberley Reynolds' analysis of patterns of children's reading in the late Victorian period, in which stories for girls were conservative and familial, while stories for boys attempted to instil 'manly' values (Reynolds: 1990), Foster and Simon suggest Nesbit's work opposes these two narrative positions. Despite writing adventure stories that are often led by boys, Nesbit satirises the heroic male values in the blustering self-dramatizing voices of characters like Gerald and Oswald. She also celebrates domestic security and the creative potential of imaginative play, typically features of girls' literature. She has strong heroine figures and a 'revisionary approach' to girlhood that allows female readers to align themselves with the imaginative possibilities of her stories (Foster and Simons 1995: 147). In essence, she combines both the adventurous and the domestic and creates something new.

## **Gender and Boston**

Boston, like Nesbit, wrote fiction that largely conformed to gender stereotypes while living an unconventional life herself. Boston was born in 1892, when Nesbit was in her thirties and still writing commercial short stories. Although we often associate Boston with post-war writers like Penelope Lively, she came to writing late and was from a very different era to her

writing contemporaries. Boston grew up in Lancashire before the First World War, a time before cars and cinemas, and her childhood reading was *The Ancient Mariner*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Jungle Book* – stories the Bastable children would be familiar with.

Like Nesbit, Boston recreated real houses in her fiction. Boston would move into the Manor at Hemingford Grey, the house that was to become Green Knowe, in 1937, when she had ‘nowhere to be’ following the end of her marriage. In her memoir she says she had ‘become a solitary’ but when she first encountered the house, ‘It was like falling in love [...] I was going where it took me [...] I knew not a soul in the district and was going to live alone in this overwhelming atmosphere’ (Boston 1992: 179). In much of what she writes about the house, she depicts her ownership of the house as a personal, even romantic, relationship.

She published her first books in 1954 when she was in her sixties: *Yew Hall* and *The Children of Green Knowe*. Both were inspired by her house, which she was in the process of restoring, though *Yew Hall* was written first and was for adults. In a 1972 interview, Boston said:

I started first with an adult novel and then went onto children's books for sordid reasons [...] because I needed money and somebody told me that any fool could write children's books [...] I did not at the time realise what a step down this was. (Cited in Tanaka 2021: 26)

As a divorced woman in her forties living in a large house on her own – and as a woman who often wore an Austrian dirndl – Boston attracted suspicion. During the war, her neighbours reported her to the police as a German spy. Boston wrote: ‘I loved all exiles because I had, though for a different reason, been one’ (1992: 219). Her characters are exiled people searching for a home, a refuge, which they find at Green Knowe, as she had. In *An Enemy at Green Knowe*, Mrs Oldknow states the house ‘has enemies’ and remarks:



The fact that it is different from anything else, with memories and standards of its own, makes quite a lot of people very angry indeed [...] Over and above all the rest, it seems to me to have something I can't put a name to, which always has had enemies. (2003c: 33)

It is hard not to hear in this extract, something of Boston's own relationship to the house, and her feelings about her narrow-minded neighbours. It speaks perhaps of a single woman's challenge to the established social order.

Tolly's first impressions of the house are ambiguous. He thinks Green Knowe resembles a ruin and wonders if Mrs Oldknow is a witch. However, he soon learns she is, as Lynne Rosenthal writes, a 'helping figure who symbolises continuity' (Rosenthal 1980: 53-76). Mrs Oldknow appears in all but one of the Green Knowe books, serving as an anchor for the different child characters. She greets Tolly as though she had always known him, linking him to the past by remarking on his resemblance to his great-grandfather. Roger also has a grandmother in whom he confides and Green Knowe is described as 'worn and crumbly, crooked and weathered and gentle, like the two grandmothers', linking these kindly women with the house itself.

Mrs Oldknow is often described as childlike or like a partridge: 'little and soft' (2003a: 11). She makes noises that are 'clucks and tchks which are common to old ladies and birds' (2003a: 145). She is also described in terms that emphasise her similarity to Tolly: 'When he was with her, he forgot at once about being a schoolboy. He and she were just two people,' (2003a: 11); 'Her wrinkly smile still had something boyish about it, something rather like his own'. (2003a: 48). There is an echo here of Nesbit's woman writer who is 'a jolly sort of grown-up boy'. Tolly's masculinity is occasionally emphasised by his grandmother, who comments that he looks tall in his dressing gown and adds it is 'like having a man in the

house'. But there are no adult men in the house – the only one who appears is a visiting academic who stays in an outbuilding in *An Enemy at Green Knowe*.

Mrs Oldknow is the only adult who lives continually in the house and the only adult who is able to see the children from the past, meaning she shares the experiences of the children who come to stay in the house, and is equal to them. The last scenes of the Green Knowe series emphasise this equality, when Mrs Oldknow joins all the children from the different eras in a gathering in the garden and becomes a young girl again – or as Boston writes it 'a young grandmother-to-be' (2003b: 110) – a curious description that skips the fact she must have once been a mother.

The negation and absence of mother figures in the stories arguably allow the children a greater degree of freedom. There is perhaps also an echo of traditional fairy-tales. Marina Warner notes the frequency of absent mothers in tales like Cinderella, and their replacement by an older, story-telling figure, stating 'the older generation speaks to the younger in the fairy-tale; pruning out the middle branch in the family tree as rotten or irrelevant'. Warner describes the figure of the grasping step-mother, which is possibly replicated in the 'wicked' witch Melanie Powers, who wants to claim Green Knowe (2003c). Warner describes how fairy-tales are rooted in the real-life precariousness of women's social positions throughout history and their conflict with each other over children and marriage, concluding 'the effect of these stories is to flatter the male hero; the position of man as saviour and provider' (Warner 1991: 28). However, Boston resists this as, although Tolly does have moments of bravery, he is not a saviour – he is shown in relationship with Mrs Oldknow, working alongside her to protect the house.

In writing stories that avoid 'the middle branch' of the family tree, Boston removes not only the mother and the male adult hero, but also all romantic relationships and the complications of rival women. Boston's personal experiences may have informed this choice,

as Nesbit's did. Boston's husband left her for another woman, and she had a difficult relationship with her mother. Apart from Mrs Oldknow, there are no good women in the Green Knowe books. Maria, one of very few mothers in the series, is vain and superficial. Roger thinks 'there is no protection against a silly woman. She will go on and on till she gets what she wants' (2003b: 84). In *The Children of Green Knowe*, it is Petronella, the gypsy mother of a horse thief, who places a curse on the topiary figure of Green Noah. Even the giant's mother in *The River at Green Knowe* is described as 'very melancholy company'.

Fathers are also pruned. The only one we meet is Susan's, a well-meaning but oblivious man, frequently away on his ship, while Hanno the gorilla's father, who we meet once, is 'the leader, the protector, the avenger, and of course as all fathers sometimes are in private, the big dangerous joke' (2012: 21). Overall, it is a world of untrustworthy mothers, unreliable fathers, one old woman and many boys: Tolly, Alexander, Toby, Jacob, Oskar, Ping and Roger.

In Deborah O'Keefe's book *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled by Their Favourite Books*, she observes that grown-up characters in children's fiction typically enforce gender stereotypes, with male characters exhibiting authority, competence, and courage, while women have maternal warmth, domestic talents or social know-how. O'Keefe states: 'Such characters represented variations on sex-linked behaviour, not denial of it' (O'Keefe 2000: 95). This can be seen in the work of Nesbit and Boston. Although men are typically owners of the houses, the domestic work required to look after them is done by women, like Mabel's housekeeper aunt in *The Enchanted Castle*. Where women are shown as being in charge of the property, they often struggle make ends meet: Mrs Oldknow talks of selling old paintings to keep the house going; in *The Lark*, Nesbit describes the two girls left in charge of a big house raising funds by selling flowers. O'Keefe notes that even when women characters do have unusual powers they 'exercise them in ordinary roles' (2000: 95).

For example, Mrs Oldknow's ability to interact with the past is part of her role as elderly custodian. Furthermore, it is confined to the house; she has no power in the outside world.

Although these gender stereotypes situate the big house as a place of traditional continuities, the absence of parental authority allows both girls and boys more independence. There are scenes in Nesbit, Boston and *The Secret Garden*, where children leave their bedrooms to explore without telling anyone where they are going or what they are doing. The country house exists independently from the rules and routines of the child's usual domestic life; its isolation is social as well as geographical. My novel shows the Seagrave children effectively raising themselves and this early freedom from social conventions feeds Cristabel's ambition to create a theatre.

Where there are girl characters in Green Knowe, they usually have a limited role. Linnet is the youngest of the seventeenth century children and while Toby and Alexander have identifiable skills – horse-riding and music – Linnet does not. Susan, from the eighteenth century, is blind and, although she is shown as being underestimated by the adults that surround her, it is only her friendship with Jacob that allows her to explore the house and garden. Ida is one of three refugee children who come to the house in *The River at Green Knowe*, but while the other two – Oskar and Ping – are given interesting backstories (Oskar's father was shot by the Russians, Ping has left his family in China), Ida is just the great-niece of one of the women who has rented the house, Maud Biggin, a scientist whose studies preclude her from any interest in either the children or the house. When they arrive at the house, Ping thinks it looks like a 'Buddhist monastery'; Oskar says, 'a Crusaders castle', and Ida wishes she had long hair for the boys to climb up (2007: 7). Her response to the house is a stereotypically 'girlish' one.

Later, when Ida, Ping and Oskar are exploring the river that runs past the house, Oskar spots a giant, who looks like a dead tree, and the giant tells them that most people don't notice him:

'I sometimes wonder whether people aren't going blind, or perhaps can't see anything bigger than themselves, like ants. I see them rushing about, but they never seem to look higher than their own shoulders. Except boys. Boys are always best.' (Ida was ashamed). 'Babies of course. They gaze up out of their prams with round eyes, willing to see anything that comes. Otherwise cats are the only thing I have to talk to.' (2007: 65)

In this passage, babies, boys and animals are said to be able to see or notice the giant. But adults and girls, once out of babyhood, cannot. Girls are conflated with self-absorbed adults and adults play no positive role in the books. Typically, adults are oblivious to the house's powers and, in the case of Susan's mother or Melanie Powers, a direct threat to the house, either because they want to take it from the stewardship of Mrs Oldknow (who is excused from the world of adulthood by her connection with the children) or because they want to change it to something modern. Re-reading this as an adult, I was shocked by the fact Boston describes Ida as being ashamed of being a girl, and the implication she has something to be ashamed of. At no other point in any of the books is a child singled out like this.

The conflation of girls with adults reminds me of C S Lewis's treatment of his character Susan in *The Last Battle*, the last Narnia book published in 1956, two years after *The Children of Green Knowe*, when Susan is described as 'no longer a friend of Narnia' due to her interest in make-up and becoming more grown up (Lewis 2015: 128). Many writers have taken issue with Lewis's treatment of Susan and linked it to Susan's developing

sexuality. I would add that it is the also the things associated with young women – ‘nylons and lipsticks’ – that expel Susan from Narnia, not simply the fact she wants to be older.

Something similar can be seen in Boston’s work. Jon Stott sees elements of the pastoral in the Green Knowe books, given its ‘natural, pure setting’, it is a place of ‘innocence’ that stands in contrast to the ‘sullied artificial, complex world beyond its borders, a world in which the more evil aspects of progress – especially greed, anxiety, and ambition – are found’. ‘Innocent’ children respond to Green Knowe, along with Mrs Oldknow, who is closely linked to the pastoral world (Stott 1983: 145 – 155). But Stott notes:

Adults such as Susan's mother, who lives for the newest fashions, Dr. Maude Biggin, who cannot perceive the past existing in the present, or Melanie Powers, who hates the goodness of the house, are oblivious to the spirit of the place. (Stott 1983: 147)

It is striking that all three examples are women, although unsurprising given their association with the aspects of progress Stott sees as a threat to the pastoral. Maria is socially ambitious, Maude academically ambitious and Melanie is greedy. All three have selfish, superficial qualities that exclude them from the powers of the house. Ida is not shown as having these characteristics, and she does experience supernatural events, but perhaps the fact she responds to the house by seeing it as a fairy-tale castle where she will be a Rapunzel, while the boys see it in terms of its history or its architecture, means she has a lesser relationship with it. It could be this hint of superficiality in her response to the house that links her to the vain, grasping older women, and this in some way taints her. Only boys can see giants and only boys can truly be children at Green Knowe.

Although Boston did not involve herself in political groups or write essays about women’s roles like Nesbit, there may be clues in her personal life that explain her fictional

choices. She had one son called Peter, who did the illustrations for her books. But her marriage to Peter's father Harold was not a successful one. Peter, in a chapter of his mother's memoir, recalls how the marriage broke down when Harold decided he wanted to marry another woman. Peter writes: 'I was quite as enthusiastic about my future step-mother as my father was, I tried to divide my holiday time fifty/fifty [...] This was at times a little hurtful to Lucy' (Boston 1992: 165).

It is possible that this painful time led Boston to avoid writing about happy families. Her own childhood was not especially happy either. Her father died when she was six and she had a complicated relationship with her mother who was 'neurotically nervous' and suspicious of her daughter's friendships with anyone of the opposite sex. Boston's mother also insisted that one of her daughters sleep with her every night as she could not bear to sleep alone. Boston was understandably keen to follow her brothers up to Oxford. She was close to her brothers, and describes them in contrast to her distrustful mother, saying she shared with them 'a world of candour, trust and decency. We had no fears for each other's behaviour' (1992: 96).

While at Oxford, she received her inheritance, becoming a 'free agent', and suggested to her friends the establishment of an 'Anti Parents Society' through which she would provide funding to girls whose parents forbid them to go travelling or to study (1992: 113). There is, even allowing for youthful exuberance, a feeling of rebellion against parental authority here, and perhaps a clue as to why her own home and independence would be so important to her in the future. Through her work as a nurse in WW1 and her opening up of her house to servicemen in WW2, there is also a thread in Boston's life of being sympathetic to men, especially young men, which can also be linked to her closeness to her brothers, one of whom died during WW1. Writing about women writers in the 1930s, Valentine Cunningham observed that they were 'obsessed with male lovers and wonder-brothers', linking this to their

personal loss of brothers and the social power of men (1989: 26). The freeing company of brothers, less encumbered by social restrictions, stands in contrast to the complications of romantic relationships with men or competitive/claustrophobic relationships with women, and leads to an idealisation of young men and boys. My character Cristabel also longs for a brother, which could be seen as internalised misogyny but is also a logical desire given that the only interesting characters in her books are male.

As a child, I don't think I was conscious of the fact boy characters were more important than girls in the world of *Green Knowe*. I identified with Tolly, so *The Children of Green Knowe* was my favourite, and the others I liked were the ones where Tolly and Mrs Oldknow reappeared. Their double act was satisfying to a child reader, as it excludes bossy parents and attention-stealing siblings. A recent study looking at whether children learnt more from a story if the characters were the same gender as they were, found 'children who saw an own-gender character in the story did not differ in their recall of the story or their identification with the character as compared with children who saw an other-gender character' (Dore 2022: 15). Until I came to re-read the books for this study, I had forgotten Ida existed. The girls in *Green Knowe* are simply less interesting, less memorable, because of the limited roles Boston gives them.

Elizabeth Poynter's study of language and gender roles in mid-twentieth century children's adventure books states that 'children's literature may reflect the society in which it is published, or it may offer new ideas in an attempt to change that society' (Poynter 2020: 175). She notes that in the mid-twentieth century, Britain had distinct sociocultural gender roles, but that throughout the 1960s, feminism gained momentum and society began to change. She says children's stories during that time were 'largely imbued with the sociocultural gender constructs of the world in which the authors lived' but sometimes challenged these stereotypes. She uses as an example, girls who excel at physical skills, like



swimming, and boys who transgress ‘masculine’ stereotypes, by weeping. Although she does not include Boston in her study, the Green Knowe books were published in this time, and I was interested in her concluding statement:

male authors [...] seem not only willing to create forceful, self-reliant female characters, but also more willing than female authors to assign some ‘feminine’ traits to their male characters. I hypothesise that in the mid-twentieth century, male authors perhaps felt more freedom to present stronger women characters and gentler male heroes, while female writers felt more constrained to ‘follow the rules’. (Poynter 2020: 193)

This rings true to me when looking at Boston’s work because her female characters are limited. However, like the male authors in Poynter’s study, she often transgresses masculine stereotypes. This could, I suggest, be an example of the ‘imaginative cosplay’ I mentioned in my introduction, where a girl reader must identify with a male character to enter the story. Perhaps, as both a reader and a writer, Boston adopted a male perspective and her sympathy towards male characters partly stemmed from that. In *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, the male characters are more sensitive to Susan’s plight. They are progressive allies against her mother (as Boston’s brothers were to her). Susan’s father, Captain Oldknow, loves his daughter and her blindness to him is ‘not a defect but a mysterious charm’. Tolly’s keenness to empathetically experience Susan’s world sees him blindfolding himself, while Jacob encourages her to be brave and explore, to touch curious objects that he brings her, to drum and dance, even to climb trees. Jacob sees her sensitivity to her environment as a special, saying you will make a ‘a good witch-woman’ (2003a: 115). Susan’s father believes Jacob ‘teaches her freedom’ and tells his wife that Susan should wear pantaloons so she can climb trees, saying: ‘Since she is blind she must be allowed some things that would not be

usual for a young lady' (2003a: 151). A fire starts in the house when Maria is entertaining and it is left to Jacob to save Susan from the flames, which destroy the new part of the house that Maria prefers, leaving the old part where Susan and the servants live. (This old part becomes the house that Tolly and his grandmother live in later.)

Both Tolly and Jacob are associated with the cramped spaces at the top of the house, which, earlier in this chapter, I discussed in terms of Bachelard's ideas about attics and corners as hidden spaces of solitude. In that discussion, I emphasised the attic's importance as a place for girls, but Green Knowe's attic is for Boston's empathetic boys. This is especially interesting in terms of the attic of a literary big house being associated with women. In their feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explored the links between texts, houses and women. One of their pivotal texts, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1890 classic *The Yellow Wallpaper*, sees a woman confined to a garret room in an 'ancestral hall'. The narrator initially believes she is in a child's playroom although the reader can see that the room is one of imprisonment not play. Gilbert and Gubar also discuss *Jane Eyre*, where 'madwoman' Bertha Mason is confined to the attic. (In her memoir, Boston remarks that the last maid to live in her attic 'went queer'.) In both cases, the confining of women to an attic room removes them from the social and domestic life of the house, whereas for Tolly and Jacob in Green Knowe, the attic is a place of discovery.

Tolly's attic bedroom contains toys that might be associated with girls: a rocking horse, a dolls' house, a bird cage and a mirror. When he opens the dolls' house, he sees it is a copy of Green Knowe with a miniature rocking horse and a bird cage, but four tiny beds rather than one. This is his first clue that there are other inhabitants in the house, followed soon by the sound of the rocking horse creaking during the night. Birds frequently tap on the windows of the attic and fly inside, and they are linked to both the children from the past (Alexander has a flute that summons birds) and the wider, stranger goings-on in the garden,

where trees and statues come to life. Boston is careful to resist any suggestion of ‘magic’, arguably to support the contention that other realities or histories are valid. But the attic in Green Knowe is a liminal site, into which the outside comes. It is important within the story because it allows Tolly a private imaginative space where he can wait for the other children, uninterrupted, and it sits above the ordinary rooms of the house, which have more formal or domestic roles. The attic is where uncanny things occur and where Tolly has dreams that frequently bleed into reality (2006: 97).

There is a scene set in the attic in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* which emphasises the limits and inadequacy of language (2003a: 92-93). When Tolly is leaning out of the attic window, he asks if Susan could ‘smell stars’. It is a childish question, but Mrs Oldknow answers seriously and replies: ‘She could certainly smell the kind of thing that stars belong to and happen in. Sometimes you make things smaller by giving them a name.’ Mrs Oldknow’s conversations with Tolly are often expansive in this way; she does not seek to close down mystery with definite answers, but opens them up, like the attic windows. Its high position calls to mind Bachelard’s writing on towers (Ida does compare Green Knowe to Rapunzel’s tower) which links high rooms like attics with an overseeing view of time and ‘immense dreams’ (Bachelard 2014: 46). In this reading, the height and romantic isolation of the attic confers knowledge and powerful imagination. Jacob, a servant in the house subjected to racism, is also associated with high, secret spaces. He is frequently found in treetops and chimneys, and his knowledge of the hidden passageways of the house allows him to outwit bullying members of the household – to practise an ‘art of being in between’.

Towards the end of *Chimneys*, Tolly discovers a trapdoor that leads inside the roof – a dusty, cobwebbed place ‘much lived in by furtive creatures’ (2003a: 176). He realises there is an extra chimney flue that leads to a ‘room that wasn’t there’ – a room that has disappeared in the renovations made to the house – and this leads him to find the family’s missing jewels,

thus ensuring the house's financial future. This has an echo of the stories Nesbit wrote in which children save the day by finding treasure in secret passages, and of the attics populated by scribbling girls, but for Boston the forgotten corners of the house are discovered – and recovered – by sensitive boys.

## Chapter Three: Stealing from the Library: Readership and Ownership

*“I read the books in the big library. Oh, it’s such a jolly room,” – The Enchanted Castle, E Nesbit*

In my introduction, I mentioned Ames’ 2014 study of country house novels, in which she draws on Certeau’s idea that individuals can ‘poach’ from and redeploy oppressive discourses of power. Certeau’s tactical subject practices ‘an art of being in between,’ in which, ‘without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity’ (De Certeau 1984: 30). Poaching can include speaking, reading, and inhabiting a dwelling. Elsewhere, Certeau describes readers as ‘renters’ who ‘insinuate’ themselves into the ‘dominant text’ (De Certeau 1984: xxxi).

In this concluding chapter, I will examine ideas of readership and ownership in Nesbit and Boston, starting with Nesbit’s depictions of reading and fictionality, looking at her work in terms of how readers can ‘insinuate’ a dominant text. I will explore how the traditional image of the big house library can symbolise the male-dominated canon. Here I will draw on both Certeau’s work and Graham Swift’s big house novel *Mothering Sunday*. I will then move to look at Boston’s relationship with her home in terms of ‘poaching’ as inhabiting or re-inhabiting a dwelling in a way that opens it up to new interpretations.

## Nesbit and Readership

Nesbit's children's books are full of an awareness of fictionality, both in terms of characters acting out scenes from books and child narrators being self-consciously aware of the conventions of children's fiction. Dusinberre says: 'Nesbit's children see their ordinary activities through the spectacles of books' (1987: 273), while Moss states: 'Probably no other writer so explicitly proclaims, indeed celebrates, the fictionality of literary texts, as the Edwardian E. Nesbit.' (Moss 1982: 39-45). Moss notes that in Nesbit's little-known work *The Wonderful Garden*, Nesbit uses another children's book, Kate Greenaway's *The Language of Flowers*, as the text by which the child protagonists organize their adventures. When the protagonists meet a boy who has read *David Copperfield*, they become friends instantly, the narrator explaining that 'there is no bond like the bond of having read and liked the same books'. In this discussion of shared reading, Nesbit even includes her own work, in a meta-fictional manner: 'A tide of friendliness swept over the party and when they found that Rupert had also read *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, and *Hereward the Wake*, as well as E. Nesbit's stories for children in the *Strand Magazine*, they all felt that they had been friends for years.' (Cited in Moss 1982: 39-45)

Nesbit's child characters use stories to organise their experiences or to help them cope with difficult situations. When the children in *The Enchanted Castle* are scared, they decide to read *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Swiss Family Robinson* or 'any book you like that's got no magic in it' (1998: 153). The Bastable children frequently consult books for a way out of their dilemmas. They also lament the fact that 'Albert-next-door' has not read books and therefore does not know how to 'play', showing how their imaginative games are drawn from reading. In all instances, the children are sophisticated consumers of books, using them as tools for consolation, advice or inspiration, rather than passive recipients of whatever message the

books might wish to convey. For Certeau, 'poaching' is linked to the process of consumption. It is 'an art of using' products for ends that are unexpected. He states that even within a fixed and dominant set of rules, consumers can resist constraints in unexpected ways.

Dusinberre says Nesbit's interest lies in fiction 'not as moral guide but as a way of making children experience language' (1987: 272). She uses this passage from *Five Children and It*, where Robert encounters people from the past, to illustrate her point:

Robert felt pleased at being *called* brave, and somehow it made him *feel* brave. He passed over the 'varlet'. It was the way people talked in historical romances for the young, he knew, and was evidently not meant for rudeness. He only hoped he would be able to understand what they said to him. He had not always been quite able to follow the conversations in the historical romances for the young. (Cited in Dusinberre 1987: 272)

This passage works on several levels, by showing Robert's recognition of the language used in books for children as being different to his own, and his ability to 'pass over' or ignore it if he chooses. Child readers who have struggled with books might feel a sense of camaraderie, while adult readers might ruefully remember their own difficult childhood reading. Nesbit had written many children's stories for commercial publishers and used this knowledge to establish an intimacy with her readers. It also opens up the text, by changing the usual one-way dynamic of adult writer addressing child reader, to a more fluid and multi-faceted relationship.

Oswald Bastable, who narrates the Bastable stories, is so self-aware a narrator he even comments on the look of the text on the page – at one point stating that he has found himself 'three deep in brackets'. He is aware of having to choose a more literary style when he tells a story, saying: 'Let me to my narrating. I hope you will like it. I'm going to try to write it in a

different way, like the books they give you for a prize at a girls' school.' He then goes on to write a passage that starts: "'Ah me!" sighed a slender maiden of twelve summers' but later breaks off saying: 'It's no use. I can't write like those books. I wonder how the books' authors can keep it up.' (Cited in Dusing 1987: 273-274)

The idea of 'insinuating' a dominant text is useful here, if we think of conventional children's books as the dominant texts – and Nesbit, through her narrators, as existing within them and aware of their conventions. There is a great deal of comedy here too, for both the child reader enjoying Oswald's attempts at flowery writing, and also for the adult reader, aware of the pretentious literary style Nesbit is mocking. Child readers might also thrill to read such a comment in a book they know is written by an adult. Here, as elsewhere in her fiction, Nesbit occupies a shifting, liminal space between child and adult, author and ally.

The narrator of *The Enchanted Castle* talks to her child readers directly, sometimes to explain elements of the story ('If you don't know what these are, ask your uncle who collects brasses') and sometimes to point out the limits of her narrative ('You wouldn't understand me if I tried to tell you how it looked'). Nesbit also situates the narrator within the world of the children by admitting she cannot know what Lord Yalding, an adult, is thinking, whereas young Jimmy's thoughts she can 'read like any old book' (1998: 227). The narrator often refers to 'the grown-ups' as if he or she were not one of them: 'The things that seem really likely, like fairy tales and magic, aren't, so say the grown-ups, not true at all. Yet they are so easy to believe, especially when you see them happening.' (1998: 29)

Reflecting on Nesbit's multiple voices, I recall children's author Noel Streatfeild who observed the stark difference between Nesbit as 'deeply sensitive' child and Nesbit as charming 'bohemian' adult and suggested there must be 'two Nesbits'. Streatfeild proposes:



The E Nesbit that the world knew was an invention of the real Nesbit's, built originally for an insecure, shy girl to hide behind, and into whose skin she grew, and out of which she only emerged when she was writing for children' (1958: 12).

With this in mind, it is notable that Nesbit's funniest, sharpest writing is when she uses a young boy as a narrator or main character, as if by 'poaching' a voice that does not belong to her, she becomes creatively freer. It becomes a form of ventriloquism that allows her to develop her confidence. However, in using a young male narrator to poke fun at the overblown writing popular at 'a girls' school', Nesbit is also situating herself outside of the language typically used by female authors for a female readership.

There are other disparaging remarks about publications for women in *The Enchanted Castle*. Mabel's aunt is said to be gullible because she is always reading 'novelettes' and arranges flowers according to the advice found in a magazine Nesbit calls 'Home Drivel'. Mabel differentiates herself from her aunt by saying: 'I read the books in the big library. Oh, it's such a jolly room – such a queer smell, like boots, and old leather books sort of powdery at the edges.' (1998: 57) Mabel, who has ambitions to be a writer, is aligning herself with the serious, male-dominated literature of the library, rather than the commercial fiction owned by her aunt – which was also the type of fiction Nesbit herself had written. It is a self-negating attitude on Nesbit's part, reminiscent of Elaine Showalter's identification of the 'persistent self-deprecation' of Victorian women authors (1979: 21).

Gilbert and Gubar have described the 'female anxiety of authorship' that had a debilitating effect on women writers, as they were defining themselves in relation to the main male-dominated culture, while that culture simultaneously sought to deny female autonomy and authority (2020: 51). Showalter describes how many 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers found a

male persona was a way of ‘transcending the cramping feminine ideal’ (1979: 58). We can see an echo of this in the way both Nesbit and Boston favour male protagonists.

Showalter describes the adoption of a male pseudonym as denoting the ‘role-playing required by women’s effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture’ and says the Brontës and George Eliot inspired ‘dozens of imitators’. The male pseudonyms often have an ‘air of semi-aristocracy’ – Mary Hawker became Lanoe Falconer, Anne Puddicombe became Allen Raine – as if the names chosen were a way of entering not just another gender, but also a way of entering the land-owning upper classes. Showalter identifies three generations of nineteenth century female novelists, and Nesbit – born in 1858 – falls into the third. Although the practise of using male pseudonyms died out with this generation, women writers of the period favoured names that could be male or female, often – like Nesbit – using initials. (Showalter 1979: 19, 57-58).

The adoption of a male name or a male voice in writing stems from Nesbit’s early childhood. Her first poems, written at about age 11, were romantic sonnets addressed to her sister that adopt the form’s usual praise of womanly beauty (‘auburn hair / Falls o’er her shoulders’) and she signed it with a name that could be male or female: Caris Brooke. Briggs suggests she adopted the poetic voice most familiar to her from her reading – that of an active ‘male suitor’ and adds that Nesbit never entirely accepted she should take on the passive role of recipient instead. Briggs suggested that Nesbit was also an early adopter of humorous verse in order to stop her brothers laughing at her poetry – that it was a clever child’s form of defence (2007: 45). We see here the beginnings of features that reoccur in her adult work: the adoption of a male voice in order to fit within accepted parameters (and, subtly, to mock those self-same parameters) and humour as a means of shielding herself.

Fitzsimons notes Nesbit’s early published poems appeared under the name D Nesbit – D for Daisy, her childhood nickname. After her marriage – which was a hasty affair resulting

from an unexpected pregnancy – she and husband Hubert worked on stories together under the male pseudonym Fabian Bland, the ‘Fabian’ reflecting their shared interest in the Fabian Society. By her early twenties, she was writing as E Nesbit and she used this name in her letter headings, despite being known as Mrs Bland in her everyday life. Whether this was the decision of her editor Alexander Japp is not clear but, in his *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (1907), he writes: “Mrs Bland, who is better known to the public under her maiden signature of E Nesbit, was born in 1858”, suggesting that the decision was hers (Fitzsimons 2023: email correspondence).

Many readers and reviewers assumed ‘E Nesbit’ was a man. A reviewer in *The Graphic* magazine described her as ‘a man of rare poetic gifts and of true honest purpose’ (Fitzsimons 2019: 93-94). After her first collection of poetry, *Lay and Legends*, was published in 1886, a reviewer in *Vanity Fair* magazine expressed surprise:

E Nesbit has been a puzzle to us for some time. In reading the magazines we found from time to time verses of singular beauty, and the beauty was allied with a strength quite masculine. In this new volume we find evidence that the writer is a woman. (Fitzsimons 2019: 93-94).

Fitzsimons says Nesbit was aware of the confusion, writing to a friend that she had been ‘Mr Nesbit’ until she was ‘foolish enough to dedicate a book to her husband and thus give away the secret’. In 1894, an article about ‘Women Poets’ introduced her as ‘Mrs Bland who, until recently has followed the women’s fashion of writing as a man under the now well-known disguise of “E Nesbit”’. Even as late as 1905, when she was well-known as a children’s author, a review of *Five Children and It*, still referred to her as ‘he’ (Fitzsimons 2019: 94). The adoption of a male pseudonym is, depressingly, still advised. As recently as

the 1990s, J K Rowling was told by her publisher that she had a better chance of being widely read if she was thought to be male, so used her initials.

Nesbit asked George Bernard Shaw for a review of *Lay and Legends* – they were briefly involved with each other – and in a letter, he provided a sharp mock review that suggested that Nesbit was in some way constrained by her adaptation of male attitudes: ‘The author has a fair ear [...] On the other hand, she is excessively conventional and her ideas are not a woman’s ideas, but the ideas which men have foisted, in their own interest, on women’ (Cited in Briggs 2007: 111). His complaint here is reminiscent of G H Lewes’ comment in 1852 that the literature of women was ‘too much a literature of imitation’ and that women should express what they ‘have really known’ (Cited in Showalter 1979: 27) but as Showalter says, this was impossible, given the restrictions of Victorian society.

Showalter says women were also ‘deeply anxious’ about appearing unfeminine – partly because rather than ‘confronting the values of their society, these women were competing for its rewards’ (1979: 21). As part of this, women novelists would sometimes denounce female self-assertiveness, as Nesbit does with the portrayal of Yolande in *The Red House*. Although, here, as in so much of her life, her fictional attitudes are contradicted by her actions, for she was not above using her femininity if it helped sell her work. When her husband advised her that no editor could resist a manuscript presented by a beautiful woman, she walked the length of Fleet Street, hawking her sketches and poems. It was reported in *Current Literature* that this was how she secured a commission for one of her best-regarded poems:

[Her] first hit was made with her poem ‘Absolution’, in the pages of Longman’s magazine; a perfect stranger, she called one day at the office and read the poem to the editor; it was

accepted then and there, and for its appearance in the magazine she received \$75. (Fitzsimons 2023: email correspondence)

As well as facing the challenges of being a woman writer, Nesbit had an additional anxiety about being best known for her children's writing. Briggs says although Nesbit enjoyed the success her children's stories brought her, she resented it for threatening to eclipse what she believed were her greater achievements as a poet and novelist for adults. Given the low status of children's fiction, her popularity in that genre could be felt as demeaning. Entertaining children's books written by women are not to be found among the 'big books in the library' in *The Enchanted Castle*, and it is saddening that Nesbit judged herself against this standard.

### **The Big Books in the Library**

The library of the big house is a potent image of male-dominated literary canon. It is an adult space in the main body of the house, filled with multi-volume histories; guides to field sports; bound editions of Punch magazine; Greek or Latin classics; and adventure stories. During my novel research, I would note down books found in the libraries of stately homes. On the shelves at Dumfries House in Scotland, for example, I spotted *The Master of Ballantrae* by R L Stevenson (feuding Scottish noblemen); *Windsor Castle* by W H Ainsworth (a fictional account of Henry VIII's pursuit of Anne Boleyn); *Mr Midshipman Easy* by Captain Marryat (a young sailor during the Napoleonic Wars); and *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Lord Lytton (Victorian novel about the eruption of Vesuvius). In essence, G A Henty historical adventure stories for grown men. Action-driven stories that emphasised stereotypical male qualities: physical prowess, bravery, virility. Reynolds (1990) observes that this type of writing was

especially required in the Victorian era, when women began to question the foundations of male supremacy. In this way, it can be seen as a shoring up of the dominant ideology.

In *The Whalebone Theatre*, Cristabel is forbidden to go into her father's study where he keeps his books. In a description of the house left empty after the war, I write: 'Heavy books in the study talk only among themselves, if they talk at all.' I had in mind that the books were a closed circuit, a self-referential echo-chamber, repeating an approved Anglocentric masculine version of history. Despite this, both Cristabel and the maid Maudie regularly steal books to read. The books in the study form Cristabel's ideas of what life should be, and when the children put on a play, they use *The Iliad* as their inspiration.

I chose *The Iliad* because it would be the type of book found in the Chilcombe library and was representative of an era where boys (not girls) were taught classics as a matter of course. Lisa Maurice observes that Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1906), demonstrates the division between male and female education, by depicting her character Phyllis's yearning to learn Latin like her brother. Phyllis even writes a poem that concludes: 'I'd break the slate and scream for joy/ If I did Latin like a boy!' (Maurice 2018: 181-202). I also used *The Iliad* because the story echoes that of Rosalind, Jasper and Willoughby. Rosalind even plays Helen in the children's production of *The Iliad*, though Cristabel cuts out all her lines, a decision that reflects both Cristabel's scornful attitude towards the women characters in *The Iliad* and her step-mother.

Writer Rebecca Solnit, in an essay on interior space, remarks that the women in Greek myths usually remain within the home, while their menfolk leave for adventures elsewhere. She quotes architectural historian Mark Wrigley who states that the house serves as a container for the disruptive sexuality of women:

In Greek thought women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of their masculinity. This self-control is no more than the maintenance of secure boundaries [...] In these terms the role of architecture is explicitly the control of sexuality, or more precisely, women's sexuality, the chastity of the girl, the fidelity of the wife. (Cited in Solnit 2014: 146)

In *The Iliad*, Helen has been stolen from her marital home by Paris and is kept within the walled city of Troy. Even though she remains contained within an interior space in both instances, it is her desirability that has triggered the conflict, the men fighting to be the one who owns her. Similarly, though Rosalind is largely powerless – her marriage to Jasper is portrayed as being her only means of leaving her family home – it is her attractiveness to his brother that triggers the chain of events that ends in Jasper's death.

Like her father, Cristabel is immersed in the world of Greek mythology, but her own story subverts this trope, by having her leave the family home, unmarried, to fight in a war. Cristabel does not identify with the women in the myths ('sad women who cause wars'); she identifies with the gods. In her production of *The Iliad*, she plays Zeus – and when she is working at Fighter Command, she writes to Digby that she wants to be an impetuous god who interferes with human life. Like Nesbit's self-aware readers, although the books Cristabel consumes may have a specific purpose, what she makes of them is something else. We see Cristabel's rebelliousness being boosted by the Russian artist Taras, who supports her in making her own choices when directing *The Iliad* and who teaches her to look and relook, encouraging imaginative expansion and critical thinking.

Chilcombe, like Troy, serves as a form of container for the girls and women who live within it, but the fact that they are largely unsupervised means they are free to read whatever they can lay their hands on. Reynolds observes that the relative lack of interest in educating girls may have perversely allowed them greater freedom – in that it didn't matter if they read

their brothers' books because their futures would be as wives and mothers, when such reading would be discarded. The policing of boys' reading material – which should be suitably instructive – was more important, as boys were to take up positions of importance in the world. Digby, for example, is forbidden to read *The Wind in the Willows* and told to play cricket instead. Reynolds adds that as early fiction for girls was tedious and unexciting, girls frequently secretly read boys' books. (1990: 93)

Graham Swift's 2016 novel *Mothering Sunday* features Jane, a maid, who secretly reads books in the library of the mansion where she works during the 1920s. The novel links this illicit reading with her later career as a writer. The library is described as a forbidding room and is linked with the empty bedrooms that belonged to the family's sons who had died in the war, connecting the library with an idealisation of male heroism: '...the point of libraries [...] was not the books themselves but that they preserved this hallowed atmosphere of not-to-be-disturbed male sanctuary.' (Swift 2016: 75)

Swift's library contains the same type of books Cristabel reads in my novel – Henty, Kipling. Jane describes reading them as 'reading across a divide' (2016: 78) – one that is both gender and class-based. Despite the image of the library as a deathly, masculine place, Jane finds a way to imaginatively enter into the stories she reads, as Penelope Lively did in the extract quoted in Chapter 1, and as Cristabel does in my novel. Jane enjoys Joseph Conrad, describing him as 'a secret agent slipping between worlds' (2016: 145). The images here of spying and imagination and slipping between worlds are vivid descriptions of a young woman writer's development in a world that valorises male achievement.

They are also themes that reoccur in my novel. I use the idea of imaginative play-acting as a way of showing how Cristabel and her siblings find a way to 'slip between worlds'. The theatre allows them to insinuate texts and usurp spaces or roles that might otherwise be restricted or taboo. Cristabel, for example, plays the monstrous Caliban when



they perform *The Tempest*, while Digby plays the gender-neutral sprite Ariel. There is often an element of cross-dressing or gender confusion in theatrical scenes: when the children in *The Enchanted Castle* put on a play, Gerald – the eldest boy – plays a girl, who ‘rustles in’ and ‘minces’ in a pink dressing gown (1998: 121). In my novel, as in Nesbit’s work, the idea of acting out a story is shown as allowing an entry point into fiction, regardless of gender.

My novel also explores the ways in which traditional roles within the English country house can themselves be seen as performative. Ames (2014: 19-20) states that country house novels show through their character’s performance of conventions, the illusory nature of the markers of Englishness. In *The Whalebone Theatre*, Rosalind turns to society magazines for guidance on how to properly inhabit a country house while her husband Jasper has been instructed by his father in how things ‘should be done’. Jasper’s vision of country house life is informed by his Victorian father’s nostalgia for a golden past, which recalls Raymond Williams’ idea of ‘myth functioning as a memory’, a bucolic vision of rural life that conceals the country house’s dependency on the work of rural labourers (Williams 1975: 43, 249-250).

Rosalind has a more modern vision based on reading about the so-called Bright Young Things. She sees the house as a showcase for wealth and a venue for entertaining, revealing her preoccupation with social status, but her vision is less rigid than her husband’s, and, in opening up the house to outsiders, potentially transgressive. The eponymous first wife in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) is associated with the kind of attributes Rosalind aspires to. But Rebecca’s increasingly carefree socialising is linked to her sexual adventuring, which is a threat to the stability of the estate. Maxim de Winter, the husband, later explains away his own murderous behaviour by stating that he was helping to preserve the reputation of his house, which Rebecca’s ‘scandalous’ behaviour jeopardised.

The theme of play-acting is explored in a different way in the last section of my novel, where Cristabel and Digby both join the wartime intelligence services and work

undercover in Occupied France. Here, there is an idea of acting as someone you are not, which, perhaps counter-intuitively, allows a fuller exploration of yourself. Digby finds that living undercover in Paris allows him to explore both his sexual identity and his love for the theatre, as he finds a job working backstage. Their new identities and the comparative freedom of wartime allow them to practise ‘an art of being in between,’ in which, ‘without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity’.

In a chapter called ‘My Dear Lads’, which signals Cristabel’s shift away from her uncritical absorption of her father’s books, I describe her about to parachute into France, remembering reading Henty, and feeling that joining the military had allowed her to step into ‘her rightful story’. But she notices that the parachute jumpsuit she is wearing ‘is not designed for a woman’ and she ‘does not fit comfortably into this story’. When she jumps from the aeroplane she will be ‘jumping blind’ and when she lands ‘her story [...] has disappeared’. Cristabel’s wartime experiences allow her to contrast her ideas of what she thought she should be with who she really is. She is still existing within ideas of plucky Britishness and the confines of military authority, but she is beginning to consider her own place within this system. The image of a parachute reoccurs in the closing paragraphs of the novel when Cristabel describes a dream where she is jumping from a plane with a scarf around her neck, ‘a silk one, printed with a map, but I don’t know what the map is of, or where I’m going’. In these passages I wanted to explore the idea that Cristabel’s identification with the male-dominated books she read as a child can only take her so far. She and Digby must find a life beyond what they have been taught. Digby says he wants to ‘write his own story’. Where they go next will require a leap of faith and a different map.

## Boston and Ownership

Given the importance of the big house in the fiction of Boston and Nesbit, I have often wondered if the act of writing about it was an act of imaginatively claiming it in some way, planting their flags on foreign territory. But while Nesbit was always a tenant, Lucy Boston owned her house, and there is something in her relationship with the house that allows that act of ownership to be an unusually generative one. Boston describes her response to the house when she went to view it for the first time as ‘like falling in love’ despite the fact it was also hardly habitable and ‘ramshackle madness from top to bottom’. Like Mrs Oldknow, Boston was a woman in deep relationship with an ancient house, a relationship which was arguably more satisfying and stable than her previous personal relationships. She wrote: ‘It is a love affair and like all old lovers the house and I have grown alike’ (1992: 186).

Her adult novel *Yew Hall* emphasises this symbiotic relationship. The first-person narrator owns Yew Hall, which is based on the Manor at Hemingford Grey – my copy has a photograph of Boston’s home on the cover – and the narrator tells the story of a self-centred and spoilt woman Arabella, her husband Mark and his twin brother Roger, who become involved in a love triangle with tragic consequences. (It is tempting, given the circumstances of Boston’s own marital breakdown, to see why Arabella is the villain of the tale.) Early in the book, the narrator says:

It is only as the owner of the house that I come into this story at all. There are four main characters in it, and possibly the house is the most important of them. I shall speak for it as far as I am able, and if sometimes I relate more than I have personally seen or heard, the walls that housed us all saw the whole drama. (1974: 12)

The narrator carefully situates herself as an on-looker to the messy romantic drama – or even a ventriloquist, ‘speaking for’ the house. Her relationship is solely with the house, of which she writes: ‘Sitting alone here for the longest series of wordless winter nights I feel neither shut in nor shut off, but rather like the heart inside living ribs’ (1974: 18).

Boston renovated her property herself: she was both servant and master. While this was being done, she camped in the house, despite a lack of windows and roof tiles, writing:

I cannot adequately describe the pleasure of living in a vital ruin [...] From the time the workmen left until eight the next morning, ease and liberation and quiet captured me, with a sense of time both telescoped and expanding that was like the buoyancy of the sea. I was riding high on the pride that this actually belonged to me, and yet was aware that nothing ultimately belongs to anyone. (1992: 208-209)

Here, her relationship with the house is a series of contradictory statements, in terms of time (‘telescoped and expanding’), ownership (it is both hers and not) and the state of the building (both a ‘ruin’ and ‘vital’). But all are true. The house allows for multiple readings. Her use of the word ‘telescoped’ to describe time also echoes the depiction of time in *The Children of Green Knowe* as both eternal and immediate. The fact that she enjoys owning a ruined building is a striking contrast to the usual literary depictions of downtrodden housekeepers left to tend a decaying house in lieu of absent men. It is also very far removed from the idea of a grand house as a status symbol. Similarly, Boston described her writing of the Green Knowe stories as a way of providing her house with an imagined lineage, an act that makes her both mother and father. She is outside of society, but through her creativity, she makes her own.

I find it striking that rather than try to modernise her house, Boston preferred to uncover and repair its previously concealed ancient features. In this I am reminded of contemporary writers who are re-writing old stories from new perspectives, such as Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), a feminist retelling of *The Iliad* that uncovers the lives of the women caught up in the war. I am reminded too of Reynolds' analysis of online fan fiction, in which she notes that much is written by young women who are taking narratives they love, for example the Harry Potter stories, and responding to them in innovative ways, like including same-sex romances. Reynolds links this intertextuality to children's fiction, which also responds to and subverts existing texts (Reynolds 2007: 180-183). I can see a similar impulse at work in my novel, in my use of familiar features of big house stories in unusual ways, and also in the way that, like fan fiction, my novel is based on a love for narratives that are, in some readings, problematic ones. Cristabel's love of G A Henty is similar. We are all operating in the gap between a genuine enjoyment of books and an awareness of what else might be possible.

While Boston's depictions of gender are complicated, the sense she is interested in what is overlooked or undervalued is a consistent theme throughout the Green Knowe books. Similarly, it is notable that while her books do prioritise male characters, the one constant throughout them is the wise Mrs Oldknow, arguably Boston's own representative in the books, who sympathises with and supports vulnerable children (and vulnerable gorillas) who have been excluded or undervalued. Jill Paton Walsh writes of Boston that the struggles of her own life meant that she 'instinctively sided with the weaker party' (2021: 239). A twelve-year-old girl who met the 90-year-old Boston, wrote that the resemblance between Boston, Mrs Oldknow, the house and garden was so strong that it was 'impossible to know where one ended and the other began':

She is Mrs Oldknow [...] the old lady in every story that knows so much [...] she and they knew lots of things that everyone else never knew or has forgotten about the really old ways before and outside history, the real magic that time did not matter. (Linehan 2021: 236)

In this reading, the grandmotherly story-teller that appears so often in children's fiction, is recast as an all-knowing, powerful figure, both aware of and outside time, in the same way that Green Knowe is aware of and outside time; a shift of perspective that decentres the usual forms of authority within fiction and within our society. The knowledge that Green Knowe/ Mrs Oldknow/ Boston has is 'outside history', indicating it is not found in the big books in the library. In fact, Green Knowe doesn't have a library at all. The stories within the books exist within Mrs Oldknow and within the house itself, and in that sense, are available to anybody willing to listen. Long (2017: 89-101) describes Green Knowe as a 'living archive' and draws our attention to Derrida's ideas about archives being connected to ideas of knowledge, power and origins. She notes that for Derrida the meaning of 'archive' stems from the Greek word *arkheion*: a house, a dwelling, the residence of a figure of authority. Boston denies the intimidating exclusivity of the library and recasts the big house of fiction as an imaginative archive that can be accessed by any reader.

## Conclusion

*“If you find a way to give people what they want, they let you in, thinks Cristabel. If you make a creature to hide inside, they open the doors and pull you through” – The Whalebone Theatre*

In this study, I have looked at Nesbit and Boston as I believe they inspired my own novel. I have attempted to unpack what I responded to in their work, looking particularly at time, gender and ideas of readership and ownership, believing there is a symbiotic relationship between children’s books and adult writing.

I discovered how, through their use of the big house setting as a site of magical possibility and a portal to deep time, they remade it as a potentially transformative space, while also incorporating the familial, comforting elements of the big house story attractive to child readers who yearned for both escape and stability. I saw how they absorbed the prevailing attitudes about gender in their lifetimes and the restrictions of being a woman writer, but through their work and lives rebelled against those confines, and that even when gender stereotypes appear in their work, there are other elements that resist a simplistic reading. Nesbit found comic freedom in male narrators, Boston a tender empathy for male protagonists. By insinuating the text, they reshaped it from within.

I saw that like the child navigating the big house, Boston and Nesbit responded to the traditional conventions of children’s fiction, but that this unattended, unmonitored space also allowed them freedom to explore, to expand, to poach. By showing child readers as intelligent consumers, Nesbit celebrated a child’s love of books, while opening up a gap between writer and reader that allowed for the possibility of imaginative freedom. As a woman who owned a house and sought to uncover its hidden past, to champion the

vulnerable, Boston showed me how to renovate the big house in a way that decentres the usual forms of power and authority.

I see in my own work the clear influence of these women and the ways in which my past reading informed my future writing, most particularly my desire to write about a big house inhabited by children with absent or inadequate parents, as this prioritises the child's perspective and therefore allows a critique of the dominant authority. This, I feel, was my entry point into writing about a big house that avoided a nostalgic glorification of the past.

But I also see some resistance to and twisting away from elements of the big house story that I personally find unsatisfying. For example, while my analysis of gender in Boston and Nesbit allows me to understand why they favoured male characters, I felt it important to focus on female characters and to prioritise their experiences. I wanted to tell the story of the girl hidden in the attic.

Similarly, while Boston and Nesbit's fiction was subversive in surprising ways, Nesbit's mockery of masculine pomposity for example, or Boston's early ecological concerns, both finish their stories with a return to or a safeguarding of the big house. But I wanted to end my novel with my characters moving away from the house. My final chapter describes sisters Flossie and Cristabel leaving 'dark and empty' Chilcombe to head to their theatre where a 'performance is about to begin', an image I hoped would show that by departing the old world of the house, they are moving towards a new, more vital life.

My novel's central image is a whale, which, although it 'belongs to the king by right', is claimed by Cristabel and transformed into a theatre, forming 'the skeletal beginnings of a strange new home'. This both echoes and stands in contrast to the patriarchal home she grows up in. Cristabel describes her theatre made of old bones as 'something created from what was left to her'. In this image, I can hear both the positive attributes of inherited stories and their



limitations, but like Cristabel, my intention was to use what I had discovered, what was handed down to me, to make something new.

**(Study: 29,384 words)**

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