

MONDAY 4th AUGUST 1958



There's too much sky, and the further out of London we go, the more of it there is.

I twist round in my seat and rub the back window with a wet finger until the skin goes brown. I lick it again and it tastes bitter. Through the smear on the glass I see the edge of the city moving away. In the grey rain, the crowded buildings that filled my sky at home stick up like rotten teeth.

Mr Bates didn't want to bring Mimi and me all the way out here. He was only doing it to pay Dad back a favour.

Somewhere past Barking we stop to get petrol. Mr Bates starts arguing with the garage man, saying he hasn't filled the tank right up and he's fiddling him. The man wants his money. Mr Bates gets out of the car but only comes up to the man's nose. A gust of wet wind catches Mr Bates's hair and blows it sideways off his bald patch. The garage man says Mr Bates's petrol pointer can't be working properly because he can't get any more ruddy stuff in and he can ruddy well try himself if he doesn't believe him.

The garage man looks over at us and raises his eye-

brows. He thinks Mr Bates is our dad. Mimi smiles. I slide down the back seat and stare out at the road. Our dad would have had a laugh with the garage man – if we'd had a car, that is; if we had, it wouldn't be a dirty old Austin like Mr Bates's, it would be a nice two-tone job like the one parked outside Farr ows and Atkins every morning. Anyway, our dad looks like Tyrone Power in *Zorro*, not like Mr Bates, with a safety pin through his braces holding up his trousers, and hairs on his stomach that I can see because two of the buttons have burst off his shirt.

The garage man says he's going to call a copper . Mr Bates makes a hissing noise through his teeth, then slaps the money in the man's hand, gets back into the car and slams the door so hard that the window handle falls off.

Fewer and fewer houses slip by until there are hardly any at all. The fields stretch away on both sides of the road, flat and a dull grey-green. I try playing I Spy with Mimi, thinking it will help her learn her letters, but give up after a while because there's only G for grass and R for rain, and she's not bothered anyway.

I notice the big hand on Mr Bates's watch has gone right round twice since we started out.

A small run-down old pub called the Thin Man comes up on the left, set back a bit of f the road with a bench outside. Mr Bates parks in front then goes inside with

his scrappy bit of paper. He takes half an hour to ask for directions while Mimi and I stay in the back of the car.

The engine clicks as it cools. We breathe in the stale smell of Mr Bates's armpits. The windows steam up.

We're hungry. Dad gave us the same sandwiches he'd made on Saturday when we were supposed to come, but even then the cheese was the cracked bit of the end, and today the bread was all curled up, hard enough to do your teeth in. We ate them ages ago, going through East Ham. I've still got a lump in my throat from a crust that didn't go down.

Through the misty glass I see Mr Bates coming out again, buckling up his belt. He burps so loudly we can hear it ten feet away with the windows up. He hasn't brought us any peanuts, or a cream soda with two straws, like Dad would have done.

When he opens the door, I smell wet grass and soil. The rain has stopped. Mr Bates squeezes his big stomach in behind the wheel and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Ain't we there yet?' I ask.

'Mind your own bloody business,' he says, and beery spit flies out of his mouth and lands on the windscreen.

He reaches into his pocket for his tin of Golden Virginia and rolls himself a cigarette, thin, bent and wrinkly, with bits of tobacco sticking out the end. While he's driving, he can make them with one hand, balanc-

ing the tin on his knee. Most of them only last a couple of puffs. When he starts sucking like mad you know they've gone out. He takes his time with this one, slowly blowing out the smoke until it fills up the car and makes our eyes water.

'Bloody cave men out 'ere,' he says, pushing open the quarter-light to clear the windows.

We turn down a road almost opposite the pub. The name is painted on a piece of wood nailed to a stick – **OLD GLEBE LANE**. The road is narrow and rough, with scruffy hedges on either side.

A high wall and some huge wrought-iron gates loom up on the right. I catch a glimpse of a wide freshly mown lawn and long, curving flowerbeds. Mr Bates lowers his head to look as we drive by.

'And that ain't Guerdon Hall,' he says, 'just in case you was wonderin'.'

After a short while the car slows and I peer over Mr Bates's shoulder to see out. We are at the top of a steep hill.

Below us, a small church steeple rises up out of a cluster of trees standing at the edge of a sweeping wasteland of marshes. Thick fingers of sunlight pierce the clouds and stretch down to the earth in long pale rods that dip in and out of the scattered pools and snake around the reedbeds along the silvery ribbons of water, until in the far distance the glittering liquid threads

merge into a faintly shimmering line that hovers between the land and the sky.

‘What’s right over there then?’ I ask.

‘What’s bloody what?’

‘Right over there.’ I point past his ear to the horizon.

‘What do you ruddy well think it is?’ he says. ‘It’s the ruddy river, innit! And over there’s the flippin’ sea!’

‘So where does the river stop being the river and the sea start being the sea?’

‘How the flamin’ hell should I know!’ he says. ‘Shut up and stop asking bloody stupid questions! I’m givin’ you a lift in me blimmin’ car. It don’t mean I’ve ruddy well got to ‘ave a conversation.’

We bump slowly all the way down the hill, with Mr Bates swerving to avoid the big holes, muttering *flippin’* this and *bloody* that. At the bottom, the lane carries on towards the church and the trees, and another, far muddier track goes off to the right. Mr Bates stops the car and switches off the engine. He looks at his grubby piece of paper again.

‘The house is up the end,’ he says, pointing down the muddy track with his yellow finger. ‘But if you think I’m blinkin’ well driving down there, you’ve got another think comin’, and it ain’t Christmas!’

Mr Bates gets himself out and pulls the front seat forward so Mimi and I can wriggle out with our duffel bags. ‘That flamin’ hill’s shot me suspension

up. You'll 'ave to walk the rest of the way yerselves.'

'Ain't you comin' with us? What if it ain't the right house?' I shout as he gets back into the car and bangs the door shut. 'Ain't it against the law to leave kids all by theirselves in a strange place?'

He doesn't take a blind bit of notice, but quickly turns the engine back on.

'Oi! You could get done for this!' I yell over the noise.

Mr Bates scrapes the gear into reverse. The car turns, squealing and throwing up lumps of wet earth. We jump out of the way. It roars back up the hill, the rattle of the exhaust pipe growing fainter and fainter, until I'm not sure whether I can hear it or not.

The wind stirs the long grass. Some far-off bird calls, but nothing answers it.

Mimi starts sniffing.

'Put a sock in it,' I say.

She wipes her nose on Sid, her knitted thing, then rubs her finger on the little worn patch on his head, like she does before she goes to sleep. Once, Sid was a fat blue soldier, but now he's just a woolly grey sausage that smells of sick. Mimi found him in Mum's drawer at home, and Mum said his name was Sid and Mimi couldn't have him because he was old and dirty, but Mimi kept getting him out. In the end Mum gave in, but you could see she couldn't stand Sid lying around. Once

I saw her kick him r ound the back of the chair . I don't know why she kept him in the first place.

I give Mimi the old hanky out of my pocket. It's got a half-eaten sherbet lemon stuck to it. She pulls the sweet off and puts it in her mouth.

'Sherbet's all gone,' she says, sucking.

Thin trees line the side of the track, their spindly trunks bent almost double, whipped over years by the wind blowing across the empty spaces from the river.

A narrow ditch, half hidden in the grass, r uns along the front of the tr ees, only giving itself away by the sound of the trickling water.

I hang the two bags over my shoulders by the strings. The track is all mud and puddles. The soles of Mimi's shoes have come away from the uppers around the toes. I try to keep her on the tufts of grass so her feet stay dry My scuffed brown sandals aren't much better. The water comes through the little holes that make the pattern on the top. I hate them because they go *flup flup flup* on the pavement and I've always wanted shoes that go *click click click* like Lana Turner's at the pictures, but I have to have Monica Horgan's old shoes because she's older than me. The last ones were black lace-ups like a boy's. They're in the cupboard for Mimi.

As we work our way down the track, I hear the constant muffled sound of r unning water, as if secret streams are flowing down the hill and under the r oad,

feeding and swelling the ditch below the trees. At its widest point the ditch curves towards the road and disappears beneath it.

My neck aches with looking down to avoid the mud. I stretch up for a moment and see that some old red chimneys have appeared over the tops of the trees.

We come round a bend, and there is Guerdon Hall, half sinking into the ground.

The chimney bricks are set in patterns of squares, diamonds, and even twisted spirals like the cough candy Mrs Prewitt has in big jars in her shop, three pence for two ounces. The crooked roof, dotted with pincushions of green moss, overhangs the dark little windows. The reflected light from the high white sky is distorted, rippling unevenly in the old glass.

A deep, open channel of water, at least ten feet across, encircles the house and its garden like a moat, spanned by a wide flat bridge covered in a layer of earth tufted with grass and dandelions. Down the middle of the bridge, the soil has worn thin over the bare wooden planks.

The garden is a wilderness of bent, half-dead trees, strangled by bindweed, that lean over tangled masses of brambles, wild rose bushes, stinging nettles and dry yellow grass.

I can't think how Auntie Ida can live in such a place.

Mimi whispers, 'Someone's looking.'

'Don't be daft,' I say. 'There ain't nobody here.'

'Look.'

She points, and I see a boy sitting on a broken wooden fence on the other side of the track, staring. I feel I ought to say something, but I'm not sure they even speak English out here.

Then he says, 'Hello. What are you doing?'

I say, 'Ain't nobody told you it's rude to gawp?'

'What are you doing then?'

'We're stopping here. Is this Mrs Eastfield's house?'

'Yes, it is,' he says. 'What are you staying for?'

'She's our Auntie Ida. Is she nice?'

'Don't you know your own auntie?' he says, sliding down off the fence. There's a ripping sound. He winces, but only for a second.

'We ain't seen her before.'

'Isn't she too old to be your auntie?'

'She ain't that sort of auntie,' I say. 'She's our Grandma Agnes's sister – our mum's aunt – except Grandma's dead. Dad says Auntie Ida's about sixty or something.'

'That's your great-aunt then,' he says, rubbing the seat of his trousers. 'I've got one as well – Auntie Ethel. She lives over at the seaside at Wrayness. Her garden's just about on the beach.'

Keeping his eyes on us all the time, the boy walks backwards into some muddy water – a good thing he's got rubber boots on.

‘That Mrs Eastfield . . .’ he adds, still moving away. ‘I’d watch myself if I were you. She’s a witch.’

The boy turns quickly and runs off, splashing in and out of the puddles.

As I watch him, I notice for the first time high wooden poles, with wires stretched between them, spaced out in a line along the length of the track. The last pole stands by the bridge. The wire goes down to the house and disappears under the roof.

‘It mightn’t be as bad as it looks,’ I say to Mimi. ‘I think Auntie’s on the electric.’



Mum’s going to kill me when she sees I’ve torn my trousers. There must have been a blinking nail sticking out of the fence and it’s gone right through and cut my backside, but I can’t see round. I’ll need to look at it in her bedroom mirror to weigh up the damage.

I had to decide which was worse, me looking like a dope walking backwards, or those two girls catching sight of my bottom. If that nail was rusty, I’m most probably going to die from lockjaw, so I’ll have to keep checking to see if I’m smiling when I don’t want to, because that’s what happens when you get lockjaw –

you can't stop yourself smiling. It's the most dreadful way you can die that there is, even though you look happy when you're doing it. I don't know whether a dab of Germolene will stop you getting lockjaw – maybe I should rub the whole tin in, just to make sure.

Trouble is, I can't tell Mum because she'll start asking questions and I'm not supposed to go down to Mrs Eastfield's.

But I like it down there. It's nice and quiet.

Our house is specially noisy on Mondays because Mum does the washing. The whole place smells of Baby Pamela's nappies boiling in the big pan on the gas stove. Even if I manage to hide these trousers in the dirty basket before Mum sees them, there won't be any others I can put on secretly because they'll all be in the washer, so I'll have nothing to wear to make my escape in. The other annoying thing about going home is that Pete and I have had a row because I trod on one of his soldiers and broke its leg off, and he'll be hopping mad because I've sneaked off and left him to do the wringer on his own.

I was down near Mrs Eastfield's checking over a spot I thought would be good for a camp – three trees leaning towards each other, almost touching at the top like a wigwam. Me and Pete could live there if we wanted. We could catch fish to eat, though I don't really like fish unless it's fish paste.

We've got camps all over the place, Pete and me. We've even got one in the woods near where that woman keeps wild pigs. At least, we haven't seen the pigs ourselves, but Tooboy swears blind she's got some and he says they've got big tusks with blood on the ends.

Trouble is, if we did make the wigwam it would be a bit close to Mrs Eastfield's. Pete and me are pretty sure she's a witch, like old Gussie Jetherell, just down from us – though *she* definitely is. She's got lots of cats, and that's a sign. I've never seen any cats at Mrs Eastfield's but there's a great big dog that comes out over the bridge, barking its head off. Sometimes I dare Pete to see how close he can get before it starts, but he's really scared, and if the dog sees him, Pete legs it and doesn't stop running till he gets to the end of The Chase. The Chase is Mrs Eastfield's road.

I'd love to go into Guerdon Hall. If we asked those girls, they might get us into the house to have a good look around. One's about my age and the little skinny one's more like Terry. Their shoes were all holes and their clothes were too small for them and, if I'm honest, a bit dirty. They certainly don't come from anywhere around here. I could tell because the older one left the 'h' off of house, and nobody here talks like that. Grandma would say they were common.

Poor things, having to stay with Mrs Eastfield.

Pete and me can hear chickens clucking round the back.

Pete reckons they're probably children Mrs Eastfield's caught and put a spell on. I'd try creeping round to see, but Pete won't, even for a dare, even if we left the dog some meat with sleeping powder on. He says he doesn't want to be turned into a chicken and eat rubbish seeds and have to push eggs out of his backside all day long.



We stood by the bridge, Mimi clinging to my hand. On the other side of the channel two rusted iron gates lay half hidden among the weeds, left where they'd fallen from the gateposts long ago.

The water level was dropping, making a quiet gurgling sound as it went, leaving behind white frothy bubbles on the thick dark mud, just as it did when the tide was going out on the river at Limehouse. Perhaps the channel was not a moat at all, but a loop at the end of a salty tidal creek.

I looked back to the broken fence the boy had been sitting on. It ran along the front of two small ruined cottages. One of the roofs had sunken in and the other was nothing more than a jumble of wooden sticks. Dirty splinters of glass from smashed windows stuck out of the long grass behind the fence.

Further away, standing across the end of the track, was an old barn with a wide open doorway and a long low roof full of holes. Tangled heaps of rusty machinery were piled up in the yard.

Suddenly the deep, hollow sound of barking and the thumping of heavy paws echoed off the walls of the house. An enormous dog came bounding round the corner. Two long strings of dribble flew out of its slobbering mouth and streamed down its shoulders as it ran.

Mimi let go of my hand and fled back down the track. I should have gone after her but I didn't want to turn my back on the dog. I glanced behind and saw her slip on the mud into a pool of water.

'Shut up, you!' I shouted at the dog. 'Look what you've flippin' well made my sister do!'

It leaped up, but I wasn't scared. There were dogs like this at home. I stuck my hand out, palm upwards. The dog slowed down a bit, stopped and sniffed my hand. Then it lolled out its long drippy tongue, moving from one front paw to the other, giving another few barks, but not so loud this time. I patted its big head, then wiped the dribble off my hand on my skirt. Mimi, grizzling, got up on her own. There were muddy streaks down her coat. Her hands and knees dripped brown water.

'You flippin' clot,' I said, brushing her down. 'What's Auntie Ida going to say? Oh, it's all right, Mimi, for Pete's sake. He's just a noisy beggar. Stick your hand out

like this. Let him sniff you. Blimey, you smell flippin' awful now. Look, even the dog's backing off.'

Mimi wouldn't go over the bridge. 'Ain't goin', she sniffed. 'Don't like it.'

'You have to. Come on.'

'Won't.'

I stooped down, picked a dandelion clock and blew towards the house.

*One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock* – the little parachutes streamed across the water.

Mimi stepped closer – *six o'clock, seven o'clock* –

'I ain't never known one do the right time yet,' I said.

Mimi bent down and tore one up for herself. She blew – *one o'clock, two o'clock* – and followed the swirl of seeds as they floated over the bridge in a cloud of tiny white stars.



I called in at the post office on the way back to see if Mrs Wickerby had any more soldiers.

Pete and I hated Mrs Wickerby, because when we did 'Penny for the Guy' on Bonfire Night she wouldn't let us do it outside her shop because she said it was begging, so we had to drag our guy over the road to out-

side Mrs Aylott's instead. We told Mrs Aylott we were getting money for the poor, but all we got was the experience from Mr Rust, which we thought wasn't going to be much use to the poor, so instead we went into Mrs Wickerby's and bought some bubble gum.

There were loads of soldiers in a cardboard box on her counter. I thought it would be easy to take one without Mrs Wickerby seeing because the three old Death sisters were in the shop having a chinwag with her. They're called Beattie, Jessie and Elsie, and they all wear the same white hats that look like meringues.

My hand was near the box with the soldiers in, luckily hidden behind Jessie Death's elbow. I was reaching over the edge when, just at that moment, Mrs Wickerby stuck her pointy little weasel's face round the Death sisters and said, 'Can I get you anything, Roger or are you just looking as usual?'

'Just looking,' I said quietly, and left the shop quick.

When I got home, Baby Pamela wouldn't stop crying. It drives me potty sometimes when she goes on and on and you can't do anything with her. Mum gave her to me while she went out to hang up the sheets. I jiggled her around for a minute but she started to stink and she puts snot on you, so I gave her to Terry and told him he had to look after her or old Gussie would get him.

I went in the garden with Pete and Dennis to look for lizards, but it wasn't really dry enough. They like to sit

on rocks in the sun or on the concrete fence post that's come down by the big conker tree. We don't tell Terry we're looking for lizards because he's cruel and swings them around by their tails until they fly off into the garden. Sometimes the end of the tail comes off in his hand. I know they grow back, but then they always have a kink in. Once he tried it with a newt from the pond but it dropped before he could whirl it round. They're a bit more rubbery and slip out of your fingers, and their tails never ever come off.

We had sausages and mash for dinner. Mum sticks the sausages in the spuds like they do in the *Beano*. I started to tell her about the two girls at Mrs Eastfield's but she had her hands full with Pamela and told me to tell her later. It's a good job she wasn't really listening or she'd have known I'd been down near the church. I nearly put my foot in it there.

I'll go back tomorrow with Pete and see if the girls are still around. If they are, we'll tell them about Mrs Eastfield capturing a German airman during the war when his plane crashed on her farm, because they most probably won't know about that. Mrs Eastfield gave the chap a cup of tea, then stood over him with her shotgun until the police arrived to take him away. I once said to Mum I thought Mrs Eastfield was brave to do that, but Mum said people didn't like her. They talked about her behind her back.



Thick dirty grey roots of ivy were clinging to the crumbling front wall, the leaves brown and crispy, coated with dust. Only a few small green shoots up near the roof showed the plant was still living.

Not quite in the middle of the house, a huge porch, with a room above, jutted out onto the path. The dog followed us in, its paws clattering on the uneven stone floor. Dead leaves had blown into piles in the corners. It smelled mouldy.

The massive front door was studded with big iron nails. Threads of spiders' webs, spotted with the dried-up bodies of little flies, fluttered lightly in the cracks. Long deep lines ran down the door, as if the dog had got into the habit of standing up on its hind legs, scratching to come in.

I lifted the great iron knocker – the head of a lion with a ring hanging out of its mouth. It was so stiff it would only go down slowly. When it made its dull thud against the door, some dust fell down on us from the rafters.

'She obviously doesn't have a lot of visitors,' I said to Mimi.

I shouted, 'Auntie Ida! Auntie Ida! It's us!' but it just made the dog bark and start dribbling again.

‘Let’s go round the back,’ I said, leaving the porch and turning to the left along the weedy path. I expected Mimi to follow, but I’d got all the way to the corner of the house before the dog whined and I looked back.

Mimi was standing on the path, staring up at the arch over the porch. I’m not sure I would have noticed it myself – an old piece of wood nailed lopsidedly across the angle of the arch, a couple of feet long, bent, cracked, blackened round the edges as if it had been burned. There was some carving on it, worn almost smooth in places – probably from hanging outside in the wind and rain for years on end.

As I got nearer and saw it more closely, I caught hold of Mimi’s coat sleeve and tried to pull her away but she wouldn’t come.

‘Who is it?’ she said.

‘How the hell do I know?’ I said. ‘It’s like – well, I think it’s supposed to be a baby. Hard to see it really.’

‘Why’s it crying?’ she asked.

‘Perhaps it’s hungry,’ I said. ‘Come to think of it, I’m a bit peckish meself. Come on.’

She wouldn’t move.

‘What’s the writing?’

There were two words under the face, carved out roughly in thick capital letters, but they weren’t like words I’d ever read anywhere.

‘I don’t know. Must be foreign. Come on, Mimi. You

can see it later.' She wouldn't move. 'Look, I'll fetch you one if you don't hurry up.'

'Will Auntie Ida eat us with mash?' she asked as we walked round the corner of the house.

I looked over to the deep ditch as it curved around the overgrown garden. There was hardly any water left in the bottom. At the edges, the drying mud had begun to crack.

'Don't be daft,' I said, pushing Mimi in front of me. 'We're family, ain't we.'



Finn is scrabbling at the gate. One of the hinges is half of – he'll push the whole fence down one of these days if I don't see to it.

What's he barking at? If it's Harry's girls – God, I hope it isn't Harry's girls – the man will just have to take them straight back.

The letter said Saturday, definitely Saturday, not Monday. I was so relieved when they didn't turn up.

I bend to get through the henhouse doorway. Only four eggs today. Is it really worth hanging onto these wretched chickens? Pushing Finn away, I shut the gate in the fence behind me, pull a piece of straw out of my hair

and tuck my fringe under my scarf. Then I catch a movement.

Oh God, there they are, the two of them standing on the path beneath the washing line, under the row of laddered stockings.

For a sickening moment I see Susan and Anne.

I shut my eyes and rub my forehead, then look again.

It isn't Susan and Anne, but Susan's daughters. They are scruffy, unwashed.

'Hello, Auntie Ida,' says the older one, almost bobbing to a curtsy. 'I'm Cora.'

My mouth has gone dry. I can't remember the last time I spoke to a child.

'I – I thought you weren't coming. I was expecting you on Saturday.'

'Yeah, well, that's when Mr Burridge was supposed to bring us,' Cora says, 'but we waited and waited and he didn't turn up. Then Dad asked Mr Bates because Mr Bates owed him one, and Mr Bates is a bookie so he's busy doing bets of a Saturday, then yesterday his car wouldn't start for love nor money, but Mr Harrow couldn't fix it because he had to get hold of this special bit and it was Sunday, so he had to do it first thing this morning. You ain't got no telephone or Dad would've rung you from the pub.'

Finn barks. The little girl jumps.

'All right. Quiet, Finn, quiet!' I say. My head aches. I

am shaking a little, along my arms and in my chest.

‘This here’s Mimi,’ Cora says, pushing the little girl towards me.

‘What sort of silly exotic name is that!’ I snap at her. ‘Isn’t she Elizabeth?’

‘Yeah, well, she’s Mimi because she used to run after me when I went playing,’ Cora says in a rush, ‘and she used to call “Me! Me!” because she wanted to come too, and my pals used to say, “Oh Gawd, it’s that ‘Me Me’ again,” and after a while it stuck, and now she really thinks that’s her name.’

‘It’s utterly ridiculous,’ I say. ‘Not that it matters, because you’re not staying here – not for a moment. Nobody asked me if I minded you turning up, and the fact is, I *do* mind, so you’re going straight back to London where you came from. Where’s this Mr Burr ridge?’

‘It weren’t Mr Burr ridge. I told you,’ says Cora. ‘It were Mr Bates.’

‘Where’s this Mr Bates then?’

‘He dumped us at the end of that muddy road there—’

‘The Chase—’

‘Yeah. He’s gone.’

‘What? You mean he just left you on your own?’

‘Yeah, I suppose. He didn’t want to get his wheels stuck. Mimi fell in a puddle when your dog came out.’

‘He’s called Finn—’

'Yeah, Finn then,' says Cora. 'If you want us to go home you'll have to leave a message for Dad with Alf at the Half Moon. We ain't got no telephone neither. Then maybe Mr Bates or somebody'll come back and get us. Or you'll have to write a letter. D'you know where we live? We're at number nine.'

'We have white eggs,' Elizabeth says.

I notice she is rubbing her cheek with an old, filthy, stuffed woollen toy. I look more closely and am overcome by a hot wave of anxiety. I've seen it before. My heart begins to thud. My head feels as if it's being pressed in a vice.

They can't stay here.

They mustn't stay here.



*Don't do this – don't do that – don't go here, there, upstairs, except to your bedroom or the bathroom – don't go round that side of the garden, because there's an old well there and you or Elizabeth ('It's Mimi, Auntie Ida, she don't know she's Elizabeth') might fall in – you absolutely must not go down on the marshes – it's extremely dangerous there – don't even think about going down to the old church – absolutely forbidden – don't open the windows – ever! (That's why the*

house is so stuffy you almost can't breathe, and it smells horrible.) *Don't even try to get into the locked rooms. Lock the back door when you come in and hang the key up on the big iron hook (there are scratches on the back door as well, and next to it on the inside a great huge axe on the wall with such a long handle it takes three hooks to hold it up). Always check who's at the door before you let anybody in – not that anyone ever comes. I'm writing the letter to your father this evening, so don't get any ideas about getting too comfortable (no chance of that in this dump). If you hear any strange noises, it'll be the parrot (really old and half bald – hasn't even got a name, not even Polly) in the sitting room through there. Don't – never – mustn't – can't – don't – never – mustn't – can't – (Like a flippin' prison.)*

Auntie points out her bedroom door. I lean over the heavy rail and look down the huge staircase, at the monstrous carved post that marks the place where the stairs bend at a right angle and go down past the window towards the hall. The edges of the treads have worn pale and smooth and slippery. Next to the bottom step is a tall clock. Even from here I can see that it doesn't stand straight. The wooden floors slope so steeply in places that you start to walk faster without being able to help yourself. The clock is silent. All the clocks in Guerdon Hall are unwound.

Above me, webs hang down from the ceiling in loops and bunches like dirty lace, swaying in the draughts that

come under the doors or up through the narrow gaps between the floorboards. Dust lies in strips along the skirtings and outlines with grey the curves of the carvings on the spindles. I blow on the dust, but it is so thick that it doesn't move.

Our bed is huge, with a faded pink quilted eiderdown. Auntie turns down the top sheet and plumps up the pillows and tells us the bathroom's down the landing to the left.

When we're sure she's gone all the way back down the stairs, Mimi and I bounce and bounce on the eiderdown. Dust floats down on us from the rafters overhead. Auntie comes thundering back up and shouts that we'll break the bed and we're not to fib about it because she heard the springs going.

We have two eggs each for our tea, with bread and butter soldiers for dipping. Auntie only boils the eggs for a couple of minutes so there is jelly around the yolks. I peep under my first strip of bread and see it is flecked with green. I worry Mimi might make a fuss but she doesn't notice the mould under the butter and is so hungry she spoons up all the runny egg and scrapes out both her shells afterwards.

Auntie says it's time for bed and I daen't argue even though it's so early, especially for me. We go back upstairs. I get our pyjamas out of our duffel bags, and take Mimi to the bathroom.

I push open the door. It isn't a bathroom at all but a shadowy room full of old paintings. The Guerdons look down on us from the walls as we stand in the doorway. I see no likeness to myself at all, dark-haired and dark-eyed as I am, but in almost every face I see Mimi's pale eyes, Mimi's mouth, and her fluffy fair hair.

The walls are covered with red material, most of it torn and faded. Up near the ceiling on the outside wall are dark patches of damp, and some of the fabric has come away and hangs loose and frayed over the window

In a dark corner near by is a portrait of a lady with the same straight nose as Auntie Ida, but she is young and pretty, in a pink dress and lovely shiny pearls. I can't resist running my finger along the top of the frame to see how much dust there is. It comes down in a long thick string and I sneeze two huge sneezes, which makes Mimi laugh.

Beside the fireplace there is a short dark passage. At the end of it I can just make out the shape of another door. 'Must be the bathroom down there,' I say to Mimi, and push her in front of me.

Suddenly, without warning, she opens her mouth and screams – so loudly that the sound bounces from one side of the passage to the other.

Something crashes in the kitchen downstairs.

'What on earth's the matter? Be quiet, Mimi – *ssh*.'

I clamp one trembling hand over Mimi's mouth and

fumble for a light switch with the other but find nothing.

I look up. On the wall over the bathroom door is the face of an old man, glaring down at us out of the darkness. His eyes are two piercing white dots. A few thin grey wisps of hair hang down on each side of his skull. His outstretched hand is raised, the curved fingers spread out towards us like a claw.

I hear Auntie Ida rushing up the staircase. She is out of breath, her face white. She follows our gaze. I expect her to be angry, but when she sees the painting, she just shuts her eyes for a moment, panting slightly.

'Oh,' she says quietly, putting her hand on Mimi's shuddering shoulder, 'that's – that's only – we called him Old Peter. He's been up there for years and years. You get used to him. It's all right – really. There's no lamp here, but leave the doors open when you come out and the light from the bathroom window will brighten up the passage a bit. I'll – I'll wait for you here while you get washed, and take you back to your bedroom. Be careful, there are three steps down behind that door.'

What a daft place to put steps. If she hadn't said anything, we most probably would have fallen smash down headfirst on the hard wooden floor and broken our necks.

Behind the door is a little room with two more doors. The one to the right is the toilet and the other is the bathroom.

At home the privy is outside in the yard. I think it's cleaner than having one in the house like this. Ours has been leaking for a couple of weeks so we've had to share with the Woolletts next door. Mrs Woollett's mother, Mrs Bracegirdle, is always in the privy because she's got a disease. Sometimes we have to stand outside, hoping we won't burst before she comes out. Mimi hates going to the Woolletts'. She hangs on in our house till she's desperate.

She's never going to go here with that man hanging on the wall.

I open the bathroom door and blink. The light is green and cold. The ivy outside has grown almost completely over the small arched windows. Some of its stems have crept through gaps and are inside, feeling their way upwards towards the ceiling.

Long ago, it must have been a different kind of room altogether, not a bathroom at all. When I stand in the corner behind the door, in that dusky half-light I can see shapes on the walls – shapes of people, trees and flowers that were once there but have since been painted over. Now they are nothing more than ghosts, their pale colours faded almost to nothing. The shadowy people look at me, look out at me from the past. Their eyes are barely visible. They watch me in secret. Only when I stand in that special place, and turn my head in a certain way, can I peer into their hidden world and watch them back.

A huge bath, stained with long streaks of brown and green, sits on iron legs right in the middle of the room. The right tap drips now and then.

Dad didn't put any washing stuff in our duffel bags. I brush our teeth with a nasty old toothbrush that lies on a shelf under the mirror and use some vile pink powder in a tin next to the brush. At least, I hope it's toothpaste and not something for cleaning out the sink. I wipe Mimi over with a hard old flannel full of holes that was wrapped around one of the taps. There's only cold water coming through.

Auntie Ida is waiting outside. I see her eyes going to the worn patches around my knees and I cover up the holes in the elbows with my hands. She says our pyjamas are too small. My teeth begin to chatter. The house must be perishing in the winter; the sort of place to give you the rheumatics.

When we come back down the passage, I don't look behind me at the old man on the wall, but I can almost feel two needles of light coming out of his eyes and boring into my shoulder blades.

I lie in the big bed next to Mimi and try to get to sleep. She goes off straight away, rubbing Sid's little worn patch, but her gentle snoring doesn't soothe me at all.

The night closes in and the house wraps us up in itself, making its own noises in the dark – muffled clicks,

soft thuds from unknown rooms, the rustling of mice in their secret scratchy places underneath the floors. I can hear beetles creeping along the cracks in the old hairy plaster, and above my head, in the angles of the beams, big black spiders are spinning, softly spinning in the shadows.

I hope Auntie Ida is writing her letter so Dad will come and fetch us home.

Late, but I don't know how late, I hear slow creaking on the stairs. A gleam of soft candlelight flares under our door for a moment as Auntie passes on her way to bed.



My worn-out tweed skirt lies over the back of the chair. The hem's been hanging down for weeks. Will's old shirt is in a heap on the floor and I'll just pick it up and put it on again tomorrow, along with the brown cardigan I knitted before the war, the one I wore today, and yesterday, and the day before that.

I know what I have become. I find in some small hidden room of myself a little corner of shame, but I quickly shut the door on it.

I used to smile at my reflection in the mirror there and carefully arrange that jewelled butterfly comb in my hair

– the comb that lies in the dust on top of the chest of drawers, with three of its teeth missing. How smooth my skin was then. Now the lines on my face are like the cracks in the dried-up mud at the bottom of the creek when the tide goes out.

I was so slender in the blue silk dress that even now hangs beside the door. The colour has faded on the outside of the pleats, where the light strikes them, but when I press them apart with my fingers, the gleaming turquoise shines out with the brilliance of years ago.

His letter is still in its envelope, tucked into the pocket.

*Louvaincourt, January 1917*

*. . . Last night was a night as bitter as any I've ever known. I couldn't sleep for the cold, even with my boots and great-coat on. I gave up and went out of the dugout and walked along the service trench for a while and had a smoke to stop my teeth chattering. They made such a noise I thought they might draw fire. I leaned my back against the sandbags and kept my head down so the Huns wouldn't see the light from my cigarette.*

*There was no moon and the frost was beginning to crust the top of the parapet. I looked up and saw the sky was ablaze with stars. I made your face out of the constellations, and tied up your hair with the long pale ribbon of the Milky Way . . .*

Why am I thinking of that now? Why didn't they  
leave me alone . . . ?

Why am I lying awake? What am I listening for?  
They should have left me alone . . .

They can't stay here.



*I'm lying in the ditch, the muddy water soaking my back and  
legs. The more I try to drag myself out, the further in I sink.  
My arms reach up to grab the long grass on the bank.*

The bed was warm and wet.

'Flippin' heck! Mimi! Wake up! Look what you've  
flippin' done! Blinkin' hell!'

'Sorry . . .'

'Flippin' hell . . .'

'I had to go . . .'

'Flippin' hell . . .'

The bed was getting cold and beginning to smell.

'For God's sake, get up! Have you finished or is there  
any more coming?'

'S all gone.'

I rolled back the eider down and blankets. Luckily  
they were dry, but the sheet and underblanket were

sopping. I pulled them off, rolled them up and threw them on the floor. The mattress was wet too, but I couldn't do anything about that now. I took off our sodden pyjamas, wrapped us both up in the prickly woollen blankets, then covered us with the eiderdown.

Mimi went back to sleep but I lay awake, itchy in the blanket, worrying about how I was going to ask Auntie Ida to move the painting of the old, bald man with the hand like a claw.