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THE SCENT WITHIN

by

Susana Beresford

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Isobel

This was not her baby. She was sure of it. The baby she held in her arms looked up at her with a dark, unblinking stare. Isobel touched the soft cheek and tears came into her eyes. What is the matter with me, she thought. This is a beautiful baby, why am I so convinced that it isn't mine? I'm sure, she said firmly to herself, because the baby I held yesterday was long and thin, this one is more compact and – cuddly. Yes, that's it, she thought, the baby yesterday – Jemima – kept resisting her and would not nestle in even when she tried to feed her.

As soon as the baby had been brought to her yesterday she had gone over every precious inch of Jemima, caressing her long fingers, her toes, her almost bald head, drinking in every wonderful detail of her miracle; kissing her cheek, her neck, her slightly pointed nose. She had breathed in the scent of her baby, taking it deep within her, and this baby had a different scent. Still beautiful – but different, and she had violet coloured eyes not clear blue; a mass of curly hair, dark not mousey brown; short, square hands and feet and a stubby, very cute little nose.

Isobel looked up and tried to catch the eye of the nurse who had brought this baby to her. A knot of nurses stood at the end of the ward, whispering together. Their faces were serious; as though something dreadful had happened. Perhaps a baby had been stillborn, or died, or maybe – Isobel felt her heart thudding in her chest – a baby had been given to the wrong mother. She waited to see if someone would realize the mistake and come rushing over, apologizing, and take this baby away and bring her Jemima. But the nurses stopped huddling together and busied themselves at the far end of the ward. No-one came anywhere near her and she wondered whether she should try to feed this little one. She stroked the tiny hand as emotions struggled within her. If this baby really wasn't hers how could such a thing have happened?

Isobel looked across at the woman in the bed opposite, who was trying to get her small son to feed. He was turning his cross face away from her breast and arching his back. 'Just like all the others! Stubborn like his dad.' But she said it with a proud smile and she seemed quite relaxed. 'Are you alright, dear? Is baby not feeding?'

Isobel smiled and turned her attention to Jemima. She nudged the nipple into the baby's mouth and tried to relax. This was a natural process after all and millions of mothers had managed it successfully. Yesterday had not been good and both she and Jemima had been exhausted by evening but today this baby latched on and began to suck strongly.

She looked across at the kind woman and smiled. 'What a relief! Today's fine!'

'It often happens like that. Getting born is tough for the little ones. They take time to settle.'

That would be it, thought Isobel. I'm being fanciful. She looked at her daughter's fingers and held the little hand lightly in hers. No, it was a different hand altogether. Her feelings swirled inside her. She felt a strong, maternal surge towards this baby as she was feeding her. The little one nestled in and held tight to her finger. Strange, thought Isobel, how the thin little body she'd held yesterday had resisted cuddling. Isobel had struggled with feelings of inadequacy as she had coaxed her baby to feed. Her maternal instinct had been strong then, too. What was happening to her? How could she be so convinced that this was a different baby and yet feel so comfortable with her? She must be wrong.

Ted frequently teased her about her fanciful ideas and often he was right. She had got used to giving in to Ted and it had never turned out badly; she felt safe and secure in her

marriage. Would he dismiss this latest notion of hers or would he share her concern and start an investigation? He had not seen the baby yet so he would be taking her word for it, that the two babies were different – even that there *were* two babies.

Jemima chewed at her lip and then, as soon as she realized what she was doing, stopped. Ted was always telling her it would make her lips sore. Sometimes he'd lean over and kiss her gently, 'Whatever it is, tell me,' he would say, 'Don't chew your lip and worry.'

Now she eased the sleepy baby off her breast and kissed the little head. So much hair – and this decided her - curls today but straight hair yesterday just wasn't possible. The baby wasn't hers.

She wanted to voice her concern but looking up from Jemima's face she saw that the nurses were all bustling around and very busy and although she tried to catch their eye they all seemed to be occupied. Had there been a mix-up, was that what all the whispering had been about? No, surely that couldn't happen, she admonished herself. And yet, as she was so sure that this little one was not hers, something must have happened last night.

After the baby had been fed and changed and laid in the cot to go back to the nursery Isobel got up and gathered together her bath things, a new nightie and fresh underwear. Her walk to the bathroom was slow and painful as the stitches were pulling. Halfway there she stopped at the end bed in the ward and held on to the footrail for a moment to catch her breath. She looked at the baby in its mother's arms and smiled. A bright crop of fair curls covered the little head and she so obviously belonged to her auburn haired mother.

'She's beautiful,' Isobel said by way of explaining her interest. 'Is she your first?'

'Yes, and probably the last. My man was killed a month ago. This poor little mite will never know her father.'

Isobel felt stricken. It was not an uncommon story nowadays, every family had lost someone they loved but this young mother looked so vibrant and she cradled her baby with such love and tenderness that Isobel's heart went out to her. Thoughtfully, she continued to the bathroom, wondering why such a thing should have happened to her - and, of course, to another mother somewhere in this hospital. She opened the bathroom door and closed, but not locked, it behind her. It was a dismal, dark room with no natural light. There was a huge tub of salt on the rim of the bath. A nurse opened the door a fraction and smiled encouragingly at Isobel.

'Well done, dear, to make your way here all on your own. I was just coming to get you and give you an arm to hold on to.' She took the towel and clean clothes from Isobel and laid them over a rail. 'Put plenty of salt in the water, dear. It will help those sore stitches a treat.'

After assuring the nurse that she was fine, Isobel eased herself into the warm water. She lay for a minute letting the water caress her and then, soaping her flannel, she washed. Voices outside meant that she couldn't take too long; there would probably be quite a queue by now. Yes, she felt a lot better now and the pain from the stitches had definitely eased. She began to look forward to the mid-morning drink. Gingerly raising herself from the water she rubbed herself dry and got dressed.

The auburn-haired mother was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom door. She had put her hair in large curlers and she laughed at the expression on Isobel's face.

'It's to stop it going all frizzy in the steam,' she explained. 'I'd look such a fright!' Isobel doubted that she could look anything less than stunning but she grinned at her and wished her a pleasant bath.

Before going back to have a rest in the chair beside her bed, Isobel walked slowly down the corridor to the nursery. She put her nose against the glass and peered in. There were ten or twelve little cribs there with names handwritten on cards pushed into the metal slots. Right in

front of the window was 'Baby Rainworth. Girl' her daughter, and now, sleeping peacefully beside her was the little one with the blonde curls. Isobel walked slowly down the length of the window looking at all the babies. There wasn't one she could positively identify as the baby that she had held yesterday. She would need to hold them, examine them, and, with a sinking heart she realized that no one was going to allow her to do that. Be reasonable, she admonished herself; you were tired and worried that the baby wasn't feeding.

And, she remembered, she had felt depressed that Ted had not been able to come in to see her yesterday because he had not been debriefed from his last Operation. He promised that he would stop by at some point today before he left on another. He had charmed Sister who had given him permission to come out of visiting hours. She had a soft spot for pilots, especially the tall, handsome sort.

Isobel reached her chair and eased herself into it. Okay, she thought, let's go through this thing and try and figure out what could possibly have happened. How was it possible that she should have been given another woman's child to feed this morning? She remembered trying to feed Jemima last night but she wouldn't suckle and at last the nurse had come up.

'Mrs Rainworth, let me take her. I'll settle her with some boiled water and you can try again tomorrow. You rest now and I'll bring you a warm drink.'

Isobel had nodded and gratefully allowed the nurse to take the screaming baby away. She had smiled apologetically round the ward at the other mothers and collapsed back against the pillows. She felt utterly exhausted and had drunk the warm milk gratefully and shortly afterwards the lights had been dimmed in the ward. Some of the mothers had been dozing and others had been quietly chatting when there was the sudden wail of the air raid siren. She had jolted awake and struggled to sit up, momentarily disorientated. What the ...?

'No panic, ladies,' Sister had said, bustling into the ward, 'Just follow the routine, it's been done many times before and we've never had a casualty. All of you who can walk, follow Nurse Evans and she will take you down to the basement shelter. If you've only just been delivered then we will send orderlies to help you, and we've wheelchairs for you two Caesarian mothers. Now please move as quickly as you can.'

'What about the babies, Sister?' asked one woman, getting out of bed and shrugging into her dressing gown, 'Do we go and get them?'

'No, Mrs Howden,' said Sister, 'the babies go to the shelter in the grounds.'

'Why can't they come with us?' the woman persisted.

'The babies' shelter is fully equipped with cots and everything that the babies need. Now please hurry along, don't worry Mrs Howden, the babies will be quite safe.'

Isobel had carefully got out of bed and eased her feet into her shoes. Other mothers had been anxious too but no one had disobeyed Sister.

But maybe the system wasn't foolproof, thought Isobel. Because clearly her baby had been swapped with someone else's. She closed her eyes. The noise of the ward was busy all around her. She heard the squeak of metal wheels on the tiled corridor floor and the smell of coffee wafted towards her. Or what passed for coffee during this interminable war, she thought grimly as she opened her eyes. Realizing that the drinks cart was still quite a way away she closed them again. Where was I? she thought. Ah yes, last night.

They had all followed Nurse Evans down to the basement. The air had smelt dank and cold and they'd all shivered and grumbled. The stone steps had felt damp through their slippers. She noticed that the woman from the bed opposite had put shoes on.

'I've done this before,' she said, 'This is my third war baby.'

'Really?' Isobel had said, 'Has your husband had a lot of leave?' She remembered blushing at the insensitivity of the question but the woman had laughed.

'He's a farmer,' she said. 'The oldest son. He tried to join up but they wouldn't let him – his father is too old to run the place by himself.'

Isobel nodded and sat beside the woman, pulling her chair away from the wall, 'Isn't it cold down here, even though it's July?'

'You should be here in December,' the woman laughed again, 'It's perishing then but they do bring down extra blankets.'

'Good of them,' muttered Isobel, feeling really tired and sick. She shifted in her chair to try and get comfortable.

'Did you have a hard time, love? I'm Jean, by the way.'

'Hello, Jean, I'm Isobel.' Awkwardly she had held out her hand and Jean had shaken it, smiling, 'Yes,' Isobel said, 'I was in labour for a long time.'

'I remember my first,' Jean said, 'And I swore I'd never have another. Now look at me – glutton for punishment!'

'It's the stitches, they're so painful I could cry.'

Jean had nodded sympathetically and patted her hand, 'They'll be better tomorrow,' she had promised.

Now, Isobel moved carefully on her cushion and sat up a bit to be in a better position to drink her coffee. She gratefully accepted her drink from the orderly.

'Sugar, dear?'

'No, thank you.'

'Biscuit?'

Isobel accepted a *Rich Tea* and the orderly smiled at her and moved slowly on to the next bed. Isobel took a sip of the drink and shuddered. It was lukewarm as usual. Never mind, she sighed, I've more important things to worry about. She looked round at all the mothers in the ward. Some caught her eye and smiled, others looked exhausted, one or two were reading and the mother at the far end had her face turned firmly to the wall. No one looking as though they had been given the wrong baby, she thought. But, she reasoned, would anyone look at me and think that I had been given a different child from the one I gave birth to yesterday? No, probably they wouldn't. Her natural reticence stopped her from approaching either Jean opposite or the one in the end bed that she'd spoken to earlier, partly because they obviously had their own babies: one had a boy and the other was the image of her mother. The two women who'd had Caesarians were fast asleep and she knew that their babies were in a Special Unit. Isobel turned to the woman in the bed beside her. She was deep in a book and looked to be foreign: Spanish or Portuguese or maybe Malaysian. She recalled her struggling to speak English to the nurses. The lady on the other side had had a boy last week and was leaving today. Isobel saw that she was busy emptying the drawer of her side table. Looking up she said, 'I've read these magazines, would you like them?'

'Thank you,' said Isobel gratefully, 'If you're sure?'

'Of course, I was going to offer them to the Nurses or throw them away,' she said, walking round the bed to hand them to Isobel. 'Is this your first baby?'

Isobel nodded and opened her mouth to ask the question uppermost in her mind when the woman said, 'That's me done, then. Hope it all works out for you. Cheerio for now,' and with a quick zip round her case she lifted it from the bed and walked to the door.

Blow it, muttered Isobel to herself, I missed that opportunity. But, being brutally honest with herself, she realized that she would probably never voice her fears; she would rather keep quiet than make a scene. What if she were wrong? They'd think she was losing her mind. The niggle persisted but she was trying hard to persuade herself that there had been no mistake. Maybe new-born babies changed quickly? Rubbish, she argued with herself, not bone shape and hair colour; they couldn't change overnight. Her brain ached as the arguments chased round and round her head. No, she finally admitted to herself, it was quite beyond her. She would talk to Ted when he came and she would ask him to sort it out.

Isobel smiled to herself. She could still hardly believe her luck in being married to such a

wonderful man. They had been childhood sweethearts, meeting at a Grammar School dance, and had remained close ever since. Isobel remembered having to field off a lot of teasing at school – Ted was quite a catch, from an eminent family in the town. But then she herself came from an old, eminent family too, and it was generally agreed that they were well-matched.

Ted's family had served in the army for generations and Isobel remembered, at the outbreak of war, that he had had a tough time persuading his parents to let him join the Air Force but as he had been passionate about planes since he'd been a little boy they had, at last, given him their blessing. Isobel knew that he was an excellent pilot, that he was popular with his men and that he was trusted to make wise decisions. His senior officers had been full of praise for him at the Mess Dinner last Christmas and Isobel had glowed with pride.

How she had worried every time Ted's plane took off and how fervently she had sent up a grateful prayer of thanks when he returned safely. She had tried hard, through her pregnancy, to remain calm for the sake of her baby. She firmly believed that she needed to be quiet and peaceful for her unborn baby to thrive.

Thank goodness the war couldn't go on forever, she thought. True, things weren't looking too good but surely they'd soon change for the better. After all, the Americans were making a huge difference. Smiling to herself she remembered how their small town had even got used to seeing black GI's. Most of them were tall, broad and good looking and the local girls were falling for them. Mostly these men did mundane work, Ted had told her, like driving vans and delivering goods but they were playing an important role.

She knew that Ted had wondered how he'd get on with the white American pilots but he'd found them excellent fliers and made friends with them, often bringing them back to meet her and share their supper. They would bring precious silk stockings with them as presents for her. They were charming, easy in her company and seemed to like Ted very much. Isobel hoped some of them would settle here after the war; they were a breath of fresh air.

She sighed, she couldn't wait for the war to end. She wanted to have her own home, more children, and Ted coming back at the end of the day. She reached her cup and saucer up onto her bed table and collapsed back into her chair. She felt very tired, probably her disturbed night hadn't helped. Maybe she would have time for a little sleep. Ted would waken her when he came.

Well, that was that. Ted had come and gone.

He had gently dismissed her worry and said that such mistakes cannot be made in maternity hospitals.

'You were exhausted, Izzy. Sister told me you did really well but the labour was hard.' He had smiled lovingly at her, 'And I'm sure you weren't the only mother who had difficulty feeding their baby.'

'It wasn't only that, Ted. I examined every inch of her. I was so amazed at the miracle of her.'

'But you were groggy, Izzy. Sister said they gave you something to help you sleep; you'd had no rest the night before. You were probably dozing.'

'Yes,' sighed Isobel, 'I was very tired. But this baby has curls, Ted. Jemima had hardly any hair and it was straight.'

'She'd just been bathed, darling. Was her hair wet?'

Isobel nodded and she felt tears well up in her eyes, 'Ted, I'm so sure that this is a different baby.'

'Has anyone else said they have a different baby?'

'I don't know. I daren't ask. I was hoping you'd ask Sister.'

‘I can certainly do that if it puts your mind at rest. I’ll go and find out what happened last night. Sit tight, I’ll try and track her down now and come back to tell you what she says.’

Ted had got up and, after dropping a kiss on the top of her head, had left the ward. Isobel sat quietly and waited for his return. She had been cross with herself for wasting this precious visiting time when Ted was off on another tour of ops tomorrow, but she had to know.

But what would she do, she asked herself, whatever Ted said? Could she live with this baby that she’d fed today, knowing in her heart that her true daughter was somewhere else? Would it affect her relationship with Ted? Horrified, she pushed that idea out of her mind. No. No, that must never happen. That was unthinkable. She would try to convince herself that she was wrong; fanciful, silly Isobel, always getting crazy ideas. A daydreamer, her family lovingly called her.

Isobel had looked up as Ted strode into the ward.

‘Nothing unusual happened last night, Izzy,’ he had assured her. ‘Everything went according to procedure, and no one else is mentioning that they have the wrong baby.’

Isobel’s heart sank. Ted was speaking again and she had forced herself to pay attention.

‘...and I’ve been thinking, Jemima is the image of Mama. Same dark hair and pansy coloured eyes. Jemima will be the first one to take after her; she’ll be thrilled. All of us boys favour Dad.’ He had picked Jemima up out of the cot and held her up. ‘And look at that gaze - surely you’ve seen Mama look exactly like that!’

Jemima was, certainly, looking straight at her father, such a steady look for such a tiny baby, Isobel had thought. He held Jemima gently in one arm and, with his free hand he tipped Isobel’s face up to his. ‘I feel she’s ours, Izzy, I’m sure of it.’

He had carefully laid the baby back in her cot and tucked the cellular blanket around her as though he had done it all before. She smiled as she reflected how most of the fathers were afraid to touch the babies let alone hold them and tuck them up.

Then Ted had pulled his chair up as near to the bed as he could and he had held her closely and kissed her hair, her eyes and the tip of her nose. She ached for him now because she was missing what would have followed. When Sister eventually came to tell him he really had to go Ted had turned back to blow her a kiss from the doorway and there had been smiles and murmurings from the other mothers. Goodness knows when she would see him again, Isobel had thought, but deep in her heart she felt sure that he would come home safely. She felt so tired, so drained. Ted had not convinced her about the baby, she realized. Deep in her heart she couldn’t shake the belief that the baby she’d given birth to was not the baby she had fed this morning, not the baby Ted had held, and not the baby that the Nurse was bringing to her now. She could see the dark curls framing the little face, the chubby hand escaping from the white cellular blanket and the smiling face of the Nurse.

‘Here you are then, Mrs Rainworth. Here is your little Jemima. She’s getting very hungry. Are you comfortable there in the chair or would you like to get up on the bed?’

Isobel struggled up and eased herself onto the bed. The Nurse gave her the baby and then tucked pillows behind her back. Jemima shoved her fist in her mouth and made a soft little mewling sound. Isobel smiled down at her, she really was the most delightful baby. But she was not Jemima, she was not hers.

Peggy

Peggy felt wretched and Imogen did not stop crying. What on earth was the matter with her? She had walked round the flat all morning rocking her or singing to her and nothing was working. If she didn't stop crying soon, Peggy thought, she would drop from exhaustion. She looked at the screaming, red-faced scrap in her arms and felt nothing for her at all. Where were all the maternal feelings she had had during her pregnancy and why did she still feel so tired and drained?

Peggy knew that the midwife was puzzled as well. Most of her mothers were well past the blues and were pushing the big Silver Cross prams proudly down the streets to stroll along the promenade and stop and chat with friends and neighbours and graciously receive all the polite exclamations about their babies.

'How about taking baby out for a little walk, dear?' the midwife had suggested.

Peggy was not interested in going out. Didn't the midwife realize how much effort it took her just to get dressed? To tie an overall around her to save her clothes when the baby kept being sick was almost too much trouble. Now she looked down at her overall and realized that it could do with a wash. She must put it in the dirty washing basket tomorrow. Yes, she would put on a frock tomorrow. She would make more of an effort tomorrow.

The days followed one another drearily. The house was not getting cleaned and often Peter came home to the fire unlit and no tea on the table. Peggy watched how quietly he would set to and make the flat cosy and then rock the baby to sleep and put her in the carrycot before he put potatoes on to boil. She knew he was trying very hard to understand why she was making such heavy weather of having a new baby; his mess mate's wife had been delivered at the same time as Peggy and the baby was already sleeping through the night and Ted wasn't as shattered as he, Peter, was. Peggy knew that his friend Ted had recently returned from a tour of ops to find the house bright and the baby gurgling on a rug on the floor. His wife, busily knitting, was listening to the afternoon play on the radio. Peter had told her this to try and encourage her but it had the opposite effect.

'I don't know why I can't cope, Peter.' Peggy had said despairingly.

Peggy heard Peter's key in the lock and he opened the door and came into the hall. Peggy came out of the kitchen wearily. She saw Peter's smile fade as she came towards him with Imogen screaming in her arms. She thrust the baby at him and, shoulders slumped, she returned to the kitchen.

'Peggy, Imogen's wet. Her nappy needs changing.'

Peggy thought his voice sounded peevisish. She heard him trudge up the stairs speaking softly to his daughter. Above her head she could hear Peter opening drawers and she imagined him taking out what he needed to make the baby dry and comfortable. Imogen's sobs were subsiding and when Peter came downstairs her head was dropping on her father's shoulder and shortly afterwards she fell asleep. He laid her gently into her pram.

'Why does she settle for you and not for me?' grumbled Peggy. 'You've only got to rock her for a minute or two and she's falls asleep. She hasn't slept all day and I'm too tired to do anything.'

'That's probably why she fell asleep so quickly,' said Peter reasonably. 'You go and put your feet up and I'll bring you a cup of tea.'

Peggy turned away. She found Peter to be more and more patronizing these days. She was sure he didn't mean it but it was really getting her down. She felt a failure and she could not shake herself free of the guilt. Peggy had even heard Peter whisper to his mother-in-law a few

days ago that it looked as though someone should take Peggy in hand, her and her house. Peggy, hearing the conversation, had looked at him resentfully.

It had never been like this before the baby was born. For goodness sake, she had been a successful secretary before the war had broken out. After that she'd joined the WAF and was a very competent tracker. Her sharp eyes had picked up enemy activity quicker than any other girl in the room and she had been commended on more than one occasion. She'd had lots of friends and loved dancing. She remembered getting ready for dances with the girls and the shared rouge, mascara and lipstick. If there were no nylons they painted a long black seam up the backs of their legs. Eunice was the best at it and there would always be a queue waiting for her artistry. Sybil was good at cutting hair and Peggy herself had been much in demand for the quick alteration to a borrowed blouse or skirt. They had all had such fun, but she'd bagged the best looking pilot. Peggy had met Peter at a dance and they had been a golden couple. What an enjoyable life it had been.

Success was a feeling that had sat easily with her and that was why she couldn't come to terms with how she was feeling now. She had carried on working until late in her pregnancy because her skills were needed and she had looked forward to going back but she knew that that was not going to happen.

Now Peggy could not summon the energy to even think about it let alone make all the arrangements with her mother to help with the babysitting. She dropped onto the settee and to her dismay she felt tears roll down her cheeks. What was happening to her? Peter came in with the tea tray and, catching sight of her, sighed. He put the tray down and motioned to her to pour the tea. Peggy shook her head and started to sob. Peter frowned and looked helpless. 'What can I do to help, love?' he asked.

Peggy tried to wipe the tears away with the back of her hand. She dug into her overall pocket for a hanky but it was not there, so where had that gone? Yes, she remembered that the baby had been sick and she had used the hanky to wipe it off the front of her overall. She had dropped the handkerchief into a wicker basket already overflowing with dirty washing. Now she lifted the corner of her apron and scrubbed her cheeks. The material smelled of baby vomit and she could not bear it. The tears still flowed and she became distraught.

'I'll go and check on the potatoes,' Peter said patiently. Peggy knew it was an excuse to leave her and return to the kitchen. Now he can't bear to be with me, she thought. Part of her longed for him to take her in his arms but she knew that if he attempted it she would push him away. Just as she had every evening that he had been home, she admitted to herself. He will get fed up soon and serve me right, she told herself. But tomorrow I really will make an effort; tomorrow will be better, she promised herself, if the baby sleeps for a few hours.

But tomorrow was the same and so were the days and weeks that followed. In desperation Peter suggested that she go to the doctor and ask his advice. He even borrowed a car in order to take her.

The doctor looked overworked and stressed. 'What can I do for you, Mrs Foster?'

'I feel so wretched, Doctor.'

'In what way? Are you in pain?' the doctor was shuffling papers together.

With a sinking feeling Peggy knew that the Doctor didn't understand her either. With a shuddering sigh she replied, 'Not exactly.'

'Well what exactly?' the Doctor tapped his fountain pen against his fingernail until Peggy felt like screaming.

'Mrs Foster, what is the problem?'

'It's ever since the baby was born. I'm not sleeping ...she's not sleeping,' her voice trailed off as she looked at the Doctor's face.

‘For goodness sake, my dear woman,’ he snapped, ‘you have a husband who is ready and willing to help, he tells me. Lots of my mothers are all alone, struggling to make ends meet, yet they put a brave face on things. You really must try harder.’

Pull myself together, in other words thought Peggy. Well, I knew that. I just can’t do it. That’s why I came here.

The Doctor rose and walked to the door. ‘Get yourself an interest, Mrs Foster. Do some voluntary work or something. Help others and help yourself.’ He opened the door wide and ushered her out. She heard him tut tut as he closed the door after her.

It had been her father’s suggestion that she take a short holiday in Devon and have a complete break. Now she stood looking down at the wide curving bay of Woolacombe and for the first time in over a year felt a small stirring of pleasure. The sea was so blue and the sand looked as though someone had been out early and swept it into a swirling pattern. The sea gulls wheeled and called overhead and dived into the sea. She smiled at their antics and felt a lightening of spirit. Yes, it felt good to be alive. She climbed down the cliff to the sea and bent down to slip off her sandals. The sand felt cool beneath her feet and the breeze whipped her cotton dress round her calves. She was aware of feeling sensations she had not felt in months. Lifting one hand she ran her fingers through her hair and was surprised at how long it had grown. Maybe there was a good hairdresser in town who could style it for her. She would see to that first thing in the morning. She felt a little excited that she had a plan to look forward to, a reason to get up in the morning. Yes, things were looking up.

When Peter met her from the train a week later he was surprised at the transformation. She had a golden tan and her hair was cut into a bob and curled round her face attractively. She jumped lightly from the train and actually ran to him. Shyly she stopped in front of him and he took her cautiously in his arms.

‘Welcome home, Peggy.’ He whispered into her hair.

The plan was to have the weekend together and then to travel to Dorchester to spend a day or two with Peggy’s parents and little Imogen before travelling home as a family. Peter had another tour of ops the following week but they were confident that now all would be well. Imogen was a delightful little imp of a girl who loved nothing more than to be lifted onto her father’s knee with her cardboard book and have him read to her. It was something that Peggy was looking forward to doing with her daughter. She was determined to make up for lost time.

The ride from the station was filled with light hearted chatter as Peggy described the slightly rundown guest house she had stayed in.

‘But the landlady was a gem, Peter. She gave me my own key and I came and went as I pleased. If I didn’t feel up to joining the others in the dining room she sent me a meal up to my room on a tray. And once she put a flower on the tray. Wasn’t that sweet of her? Oh I’ve had such a good rest and I’ve walked miles and miles.’

‘You’re looking beautiful, Peggy. And we’ve all missed you so much. It’s good to have you back.’

Peggy knew that he meant more than just having her back from holiday. She really felt as though she had come back from a long voyage which had been dark and miserable and frightening. She turned her face towards him. ‘It’s going to be alright now, Peter. I promise you. Just like it was when we were first married. I’ve such plans for the flat - I can’t wait to get started. Mum’s got some distemper left over from doing up her sitting room. If I put some red food colouring in it we could paint the spare room and turn it into a lovely nursery for Imogen. And look...’ she fished in her bag and produced a handmade rag doll, ‘my land lady

made this for Imo. I thought we could put it on the shelf for her to look at when she is in her cot.'

Peter hugged her. 'I'll paint it as soon as I get back from ops. Imogen will love it.'

Their weekend passed in a warm blur of time. They cooked together and walked together and slept together. The days merged into one another but soon it was time to pack their suitcases and leave for Peggy's parents and Imogen.

The next few months passed reasonably smoothly for Peter and Peggy. Imogen was an amenable toddler and soon accepted her mother and only occasionally asked for her granny. Even when Peter was posted abroad Peggy felt confidently able to cope. One day she sat in the warm sunshine of an Indian summer and wrote to Peter:

I know that this is not what we planned, darling, but it seems I'm pregnant again. The baby will be due next year just a few weeks before Imogen is two. I hope you're pleased, I know I am.

Peter, holding the letter in slightly trembling hands, had misgivings, but Peggy had been so much better of late he reasoned that he was sure everything would be fine this time. With the war over the future looked much brighter than it had eighteen months ago. This baby had been conceived on that lovely weekend that they had had together - a baby conceived in love. Yes, all things considered, Peter was looking forward to the new addition to his family. A boy would be nice this time but another girl would be equally welcome. He tucked the letter back into its envelope and began to look forward to his leave and to being with Peggy again to celebrate her welcome news.

two

Isobel

In 1946, a year after the war ended, Isobel and Ted moved out of Abbeymouth to a house nestled in a fold of countryside and surrounded by a garden badly in need of tending. Time passed pleasantly and Jemima grew tall and strong. Her dark eyes were now brown and her hair was a tumble of almost black curls.

Isobel was still convinced, deep down in her heart, that Jemima was not her birth daughter, but, nevertheless, she loved her deeply. She pushed the thought of where her true daughter might be, firmly from her mind. Ted, still, would not allow the subject to be broached and Isobel was realistic enough to realize that nothing would be gained, now, if she fretted about it. She was certainly not prepared to put their marriage at risk, and to Ted there was no question of a doubt that Jemima was their child.

As their new home was more than a hundred miles away they had not yet been able to return to Abbeymouth. Ted's family had come to visit them once or twice and when Isobel's mother was widowed she had moved up to be close to them. There was no reason at the moment to return to where Jemima had been born. And anyway, reasoned Isobel, would she recognize a child she had only once held in her arms? More to the point, she was sure that she was pregnant again. They had been trying for another baby and today the doctor had confirmed the pregnancy; it would be welcome news when Ted got back from work.

Isobel gathered Jemima up in her arms and pushed open the back door. The garden was a riot of flowers and the little girl gurgled with delight as a butterfly landed on her arm. Isobel told her to be very still and look at the beautiful colours on the wings.

'We'll draw a pretty picture of it later, sweetie, and put it on the wall for Daddy to see when he gets home.' She put Jemima down and they walked hand in hand to the old apple tree. A rope swing was moving gently in the warm breeze and Isobel lifted her daughter up onto the plank seat. 'Hold tight, sweetie, and I'll swing you into the sky. See if we can reach the clouds!'

Jemima chuckled and swung her feet back and forwards, gaining height. Isobel eased off pushing and her daughter kept up the momentum. The sunlight caught the auburn lights in her dark curls and she looked like a fairy child. Isobel's heart contracted with love and she wondered how much happier she could be.

'Please God take care of my other daughter,' she whispered to the sky. 'Please make her happy and I hope her mother loves her as I love Jemima.'

It was a prayer from the bottom of her heart but she would not allow it to surface and make her miserable.

'Push some more, Mummy!' called Jemima. 'Want to go higher! Want to touch the clouds!'

'One more time then, sweetie, then we must go in and make some tea.'

Jemima was content to have one more push and allow her mother to lift her down. She tucked her little hand into Isobel's and they started back to the cottage, stopping to collect some flowers to put in the copper jug which always stood in the centre of the kitchen table. Both of them loved flowers, the colours and the scents and the shapes. Jemima gently stroked the petals or held them against her cheek. She was gentle in everything that she did. Now she lifted down the jug and Isobel filled it with water. They arranged the flowers together and Isobel put the jug back on the table. The fragrance of the flowers filled the kitchen. Together they put scones, butter and jam on the gingham cloth. Jemima opened the cupboard and carefully got out her plate which had her favourite teddy bears marching round the border. Isobel lifted a matching cup from the hook on the shelf and put it beside Jemima's plate. A

fat brown teapot with a crocheted tea cosy took pride of place and Isobel filled the milk jug and sugar basin.

‘A feast for a princess!’ she said happily to her daughter.

‘A fees for a queen!’ retorted Jemima.

Laughing gaily, they started their tea, Jemima laboriously spreading jam on her scones and crowning them with a dollop of cream. Her fingers were sticky and two or three times she held them out like little starfish for Isobel to wipe. Isobel left the jam which smeared her nose and chin until she had finished. Her milk left a creamy moustache and Isobel chuckled at how colourful she looked.

‘Just like a clown!’ she said lifting Jemima and taking her over to the mirror. The little girl giggled and tried to lick it off. Isobel giggled with her as she took her up to her bath. Jemima had a little yellow duck which she played with whilst her mother washed her and shampooed her hair. She wrapped her small daughter in an enormous white towel and tickled her dry. Tucked up and warm and sleepy Jemima’s eyelids drooped as Isobel read Peter Rabbit and by the time she closed the book her little daughter was fast asleep.

Peter

Peter held the little scrap in his arms and struggled to recognize her. This baby had a mass of curly hair and large dark eyes. Her face was round and full, not long and angular as Imogen's had been as a new born. But she looked so like Peggy's sister, Ann, also like his little niece born last year. He felt an instant bond with this little one; a familiarity. Imogen came up to him and leaned against his knee. 'She's a pretty baby, daddy, a pretty baby all for Imo. Imo hold pretty baby, daddy?'

'Yes, darling of course, you can. Here, climb into the big chair and I'll put her in your arms. That's right, wriggle your bottom right back and I'll put the pillow under your arm 'cos Maggie's heavy and your arm will ache.'

Imogen obediently sat herself well back on the chair and held out her arms for the baby. Carefully Peter put his little daughter in the arms of his eldest daughter.

'There, Imo. Hold her carefully now. Don't squeeze her too tight.'

The baby looked up into her sister's face and stared at her solemnly.

'Why doesn't she smile, Daddy?'

'She's too little to smile, darling. When she's older she'll laugh and play with you. But we have to wait for her to grow up a bit.'

Imogen shuffled and shifted her weight and tried to hand the baby to her father. 'She's heavy, Daddy.'

'I'll take her up to Mummy, then, shall I? When I come down we'll play a game together before tea. Think about what you want to do and I'll be down in a sec.'

Peter smiled at Imogen and took Maggie up to Peggy. This was going to be tricky, he thought, because she hadn't wanted to hold the baby or to feed her, since she was born. He was becoming increasingly worried that Peggy was going to react to this baby as she had to the first and, in which case, it was going to be hard going for a while. But at least, this time, he would be at home because, at long last, his war was over. He'd done an extra stint in India but he had been de-mobbed last year and he was glad to be a civilian again. Maggie was a peacetime baby and long may the peace last.

Peggy's eyes were troubled as Peter entered the bedroom with the baby. He could see the unspoken questions on her face: Why was he bringing her the baby now? Surely it wasn't that long ago that she'd been fed?

Peter sat on the edge of the bed. 'She's hungry, Peggy. Will you feed her?'

'No, not now.' Peggy turned her face into the pillow. 'Can you get a bottle for her? Shall we bottle feed her, Peter? I can't feed her myself. I don't want to. Please take her away. Her crying gives me a headache. Can you phone Mother to come over? Can you give Imogen her tea too?'

Peter could see that Peggy was getting worked up; her questions were almost breathless and tears were in her eyes. He certainly was not equal to a prolonged battle over feeding when he could easily prepare bottles himself. He thought he'd ask the midwife to give her a tablet to dry up the milk. Certainly Peggy's painful breasts couldn't be helping matters.

Peter felt weary. He didn't know whether he could cope with Peggy going through all this again, especially as this time it seemed worse. She wouldn't get out of bed, could hardly be persuaded to take a bath and adamantly refused to eat.

Suddenly Imogen's wail came up the stairs, 'Daddeee, when are you coming?'

He shifted the baby over his shoulder as she started to cry. Poor little mite was hungry and soon would really start to wail.

'Try and rest, Peggy,' he said. 'I'll see to Maggie and Imogen. Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?'

Peggy didn't answer him and, closing the door gently behind him, he went downstairs.

And so the pattern of the days followed one on another. When Peter had to return to work, Peggy's mother, Maureen, arrived to look after the family. She tried to cajole her daughter into taking an interest in herself even if she could not manage to interest herself in her family. One evening, several weeks later, Peter put the key in the front door after a long day at work. He felt bone weary.

'This situation can't go on,' Peter said as he joined his mother in law in the kitchen. She was manfully dealing with piles of ironing while Imogen was eating her tea and the baby was asleep in her carrycot. 'I must call the doctor again in the morning.'

Their doctor, new to the practice following the retirement of old Dr Evans, was watching the situation and said that this time he would admit Peggy to a hospital for treatment for depression. They were having some success with electric shock treatment, he told Peter, but they would not go down that path yet. Peter fervently hoped that it would not come to that; it seemed very drastic.

'Yes, I think you must,' Maureen said, wiping her sleeve over the forehead and brushing her hair back, 'I'm sorry, Peter, but I think Peggy needs more help than I can give her. Be honest, now, do you think she's getting any better?'

'No,' agreed Peter, 'and it's not your fault - you've been marvellous. Do you think she needs to be in that hospital the doctor recommended?' He sighed, 'I hate the thought but I can't think what else to do.'

'Maybe it won't be for long,' Maureen said with a sigh, 'and she'll get back on her feet and be able to cope.'

'I hope so, she is so miserable and she's missing out on the children and'

'Peter it isn't your fault either. This just happens to some women. They usually come out of it eventually, with proper treatment.'

'You're right, though, Maureen, I must do something. Is the surgery still open, d'you know?'

'I think so, Peter, it's the late one tonight, isn't it?'

Peter got up wearily; this was something he really didn't want to do. Somehow it felt as though it was betraying Peggy but if he didn't do something surely he was neglecting her? He looked beseechingly at his mother-in-law but her brief nod encouraged him to go into the hall and make the call.

The doctor had come round the next day and examined Peggy. Peter had taken the morning off work and was anxiously standing in the doorway as the Doctor made his examination. Peggy was unresponsive and wouldn't look at Peter, or the Doctor. She answered none of his questions and a frown gathered on his face. Peter felt his spirits plummet, this was not going well.

At last the Doctor had finished and he sighed.

'Look Mr. Foster, I think the time has come to give your wife some treatment,' he said, straightening up and snapping his bag shut. 'Apart from that, you need a bit of a break. I'll have her admitted this afternoon.'

'I suppose that's the only solution?' Peter said in a small voice, but he knew the answer.

The Doctor nodded briefly, 'It's not going to get any better, I'm afraid. We did know that it might come to this didn't we? But take heart, I'm sure things will improve once she gets treatment.'

Both men turned to look at Peggy who was making soft groaning noises.

'Is she in pain?'

'Who knows what's going in her mind? She's certainly not happy, she's not at all herself.' And that's the truth, thought Peter, I hardly recognize her as the Peggy I love so much. He followed the Doctor downstairs, showed him out and, shutting the front door quietly, he telephoned his office to explain that he wouldn't be in for the rest of the day.

Maureen came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. One look at Peter's face told her all she needed to know.

'When is she going in?'

'This afternoon,' said Peter, 'I've just arranged for the rest of the day off. This is dreadful ...'

'Not if she gets better,' Maureen said firmly, 'I'll take the children out for a walk while you see to Peggy. I'll just nip up and give her a quick wash and change her nightie. Can you get the girls some toast and a glass of milk? I won't be long.'

Peter took deep breaths and tried to make his face look less troubled as he went into the kitchen to see to the children and Maureen went upstairs to see to her eldest daughter.

Maureen got the girls ready and Peter leaned down to give them both a kiss. He stood at the door waving and if Imogen wondered about his unexpected day off, she said nothing.

Heavyheartedly, he set about packing a small suitcase for his wife. Peggy kept her face turned to the wall and would not talk to him. Peter felt empty and miserable but he tried to keep up encouraging chatter as he helped Peggy out of bed and put shoes on her feet.

'Alright, love, we've got to go for a short trip now. Lean on me and I'll help you.' It was many weeks since she'd been outside and Peter found it difficult to cajole her to come downstairs and get in the car. She said nothing but, once settled in the front seat, she shot reproachful glances at him and kept her hands, clawlike, in her lap. Maureen had tried to tidy her hair but Peggy hadn't let her do much, or put any makeup on, and she looked pale and pinched. There was no life in her face and the light had gone out of her eyes, those lovely sparkling eyes that Peter had fallen in love with. There was no trace of the bright, intelligent, lively woman he had married, he thought ruefully. How can pregnancy and birth wreak such devastating changes?

'It won't be for long, Peggy,' he promised, a few hours later. The hospital staff had been briskly efficient and Peggy had not resisted them as they put her in a wheelchair. He had followed them as they set off down the corridors, horror filling his soul as heavy doors were unbolted and then bolted behind them, 'You just need some professional help for a bit.' She'd clung to his hand and tried to say something. He leaned down to catch her words but she'd closed her eyes. He smoothed back her hair, so dry and lifeless. Where were all those dark, springy curls?

'Doctor says I can come and see you at the weekends. If you feel up to it you can telephone me from the public phone in the Day Room, when you get better. That's the point of all this, Peg, to get you better so that you can come home ...'

Peggy shook her head a little but Peter couldn't interpret the movement. He kissed her gently and released his hand. 'See you on Sunday, darling,' he said.

'You look exhausted, Peter,' Maureen said, one evening a week or so after Peggy had been admitted to hospital. Her son-in-law dropped his briefcase in the hall, took off his jacket and loosened his tie. 'Has it been a hard day?'

'Not really.' Peter replied. 'It would help if I didn't start off so tired - I never seem to pick up. How's your day been? Have the girls been good?'

'It's not been too bad,' Maureen said, putting the kettle on to boil. 'I had to go and see Ann this afternoon - her blood pressure is raised - Maggie slept all the time and was an angel but

Imogen ...' she paused and sighed, 'Poor little mite, she never seems happy, I think she's trying to understand what's going on ...'

'Has she been naughty?'

'No, not really; but she and little Joan don't play very well together. I think Ann found it all a bit much. They're not old enough to share their toys and I forgot to take some toys for Imo - my fault really ...'

'I'm sorry, Maureen. You're really needed at Ann's - you must feel so torn.'

'I do,' she admitted, 'but you're doing as much as you can, Peter. It's just that ...' her voice trailed off.

'It's just that, what?' His voice was gentle and he gratefully took the cup of tea offered to him.

'I don't know what to do.' Maureen looked miserable, 'I really need to be at home when Jacqueline gets back from school, and, as you say, Ann needs me. I was just wondering if it would be easier if I took the children back with me. Just for now until Peggy gets on her feet again.'

Peter ran his fingers through his hair and sat down heavily. The tea slopped a little into the saucer. 'No, that's too much for you,' he said feeling drained and exhausted. 'How about if I asked my mother to take Imogen for a while, could you cope with Maggie?'

'She's no problem, Peter, and neither is Imogen really ...'

They shelved the problem for another two weeks and Maureen continued to look after the children, and cook Peter's evening meal and keep the house clean and tidy. But then she told Peter that she really did have to get back home.

'I can't leave Brian and Jacqueline any longer, Peter. Jackie is old enough to help me look after Maggie... I was wondering...' she was troubled and Peter reached out a hand to touch her arm.

'What is it? What's worrying you?'

'It's Imogen,' Maureen said quietly, 'do you think she could go, after all, and stay with your mother for a bit? I'd love to take her too, she's such a poppet, but I've rather got my hands full, especially as I want to be able to visit Peggy. Is it too much to ask, do you think?'

Peter ran his fingers through his hair and paced across the kitchen. 'I'll ask her. She'll have to give up her job....' he felt weary and dispirited, 'this is such a mess, Maureen, but what else can we do?'

My family is fragmenting, he thought, but for the life of me, I can't think what else I can do.

'Of course I'll have Imogen, Peter.' Caroline assured him, that evening when he telephoned her. 'The most important thing is to give Peggy the rest she needs.'

Peter sighed and his mother said reassuringly, 'There are new treatments, I believe. I'm sure it won't be long before you're a family again.'

'Nothing much has changed though, Mum, all the time she's been there. If anything she's withdrawing even further into herself.'

'I think it takes a long time, son. But there are good results, sometimes'

They made arrangements and then, thanking his mother, he put the phone down. He poured himself a stiff whiskey and, feet propped on the pouffe, he listened to the evening play. He hadn't done that for a very long time, and, although he was deeply unhappy, he also felt that a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Both his mother and his mother-in-law would take good care of his precious children. There really was nothing else for him to do. Peter had his first good night's sleep in weeks.

Over the next few weeks Peter visited Peggy several times but she didn't seem to recognize him. After visiting his wife he called round to see Maureen and to spend an hour or two with Maggie. She seemed happy and contented and was beginning to chuckle and reach out for her rattle or a Bickie Peg that Maureen was giving her to help with the cutting of her first tooth. He enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and some adult conversation with his father-in-law.

'What do you think about this assisted passage thing to Australia, Peter?'

'□10 isn't it? Seems a jolly good idea; if you fancied a new start. Why, are you tempted?'

'Friend of mine's going. He's an electrician and he's got a job already lined up for him. They're getting him a house too, if he wants it. It's a big step though, isn't it?' He drew on his pipe. 'He's getting me all the information.'

'So you are serious?'

'Not yet - interested maybe. Takes a year or more to sort out anyway.'

'Sounds good, though, Brian, a fresh start in a big country.'

'Yes, they're not facing the hardships we've still got. Well, we'll see...'

Peter felt that it would unsettle Imogen if he went to visit her too soon. Caroline had said on the telephone that she was quite hard to handle and once or twice she had cried herself to sleep. Peter was worried that life had already been too difficult for Imogen, after all, she was still little more than a baby and she must be missing Peggy. He remembered how well she and her mother had got on together during Peggy's pregnancy; Peggy had often said how fit and well she felt. She and Imogen had spent happy hours on the beach; Peggy in a striped deckchair with a gaily coloured scarf tied round her unruly curls and Imogen building endless sandcastles with moats that she filled up with sea water carried carefully in her bucket to pour around her castle. It was a never ending task as the sand swallowed up the water almost as soon as she had poured it in but Imogen trotted back and forth under her mother's watchful eye.

Peter, untying his tie and slinging his jacket over his shoulder, had often joined them straight from work and Peggy had struggled up to fetch two steaming mugs of tea from the red and white painted booth on the sands. Timeless, thought Peter, people have been doing this for generations. He had been happy and contented and Peggy had seemed excited at the prospect of the coming baby.

'This one will be a boy, I'm sure of it! He kicks like a footballer!' she exclaimed.

'Whatever it is, I'll be happy. Just the usual amount of fingers and toes required and sleeping through the night from day one and it can stay!'

'You're not asking much, are you?' Peggy retorted. 'Give it until day two at least!'

People passing by had smiled at their laughter. Even though there was a lot of sadness at the end of the war everyone was trying to pick up the pieces of their lives; it was good to see a little family like this one.

But all that had changed. As Peggy went into labour and delivered the baby Peter had seen the same expression in her eyes as he had seen after Imogen was born. Professing tiredness she had turned away from the baby and refused to put her to the breast. Peter thought that she probably was exhausted and had not pressed her to take the baby in her arms. Instead, he had cradled his daughter who looked so like Peggy with her tumble of curls and round dark eyes, and hoped that this time all would be well.

Now, as he tidied the flat, he felt heavy hearted and wondered what would happen. He had hardly had chance to get to know his little daughter and now she was with his mother in law. His beloved wife was in hospital and Imogen was in London. He felt that his life had spiralled out of control.

Of course, he reasoned, Imogen would be fine with Caroline; but London was so far away and the air was not as pure as sea air. Besides which, there was a lot of demolition work going on; in the street where his mother lived badly bombed houses were being demolished to make way for new blocks of flats for families who had been bombed out of their own homes. London looked a sad and sorry place. Was his daughter breathing in dusty and dirty air? Would she be alright? But he did not seem to be in control of his life at the moment and at least his daughters were in trusted and capable hands.

Today he had called in at the hospital to see Peggy but she had not seemed interested in him at all.

‘I know things must look bad to you, Peter,’ the doctor said, ‘but this treatment needs Peggy to be sedated, that’s all. Once she’s off the drugs she’ll be far more responsive.’

Peter was not so sure but what other solutions did he have to his problem? She was much worse than last time; there would be no therapeutic trip to Devon this time.

The months passed and he travelled back and forth between his daughters and his wife. He did not seem to have a life of his own and against his will he was beginning to become resentful. Had he survived the war to suffer this awful misery? Each day began to take on a pattern. As soon as he got up in the morning he thought of his two small girls and sent mental good wishes to them both. He knew that they were well and happy and he spoke to Imogen every week, on Sunday evenings. Maggie, of course, he saw more frequently.

As soon as he got to work he was busy which helped the time slip by. Often, at lunchtime, he went with others from the office, to a nearby café where he ate heartily so that he could get by with a light meal in the evening. That was his worst, and most lonely, time - opening the front door to the echoing silence. His home had seen happy times, he told himself, but the miserable times had elbowed those memories out so that negativity enveloped him as the door clicked shut behind him. He began to dread going home. Thus, when, one evening, Hazel, a girl from the office, asked him to go for a drink with her, he took her up on her offer simply to delay the inevitable return to the empty house. She’d been good company and he found himself laughing out loud at one of her jokes. Immediately, he’d felt guilty. Hazel had leaned over and patted his knee.

‘It’s okay to have fun, Pete,’ she said, ‘you can’t live in the past all the time. You’ve got to start looking forward now.’

‘It’s early days,’ he mumbled, and she patted his knee again and smiled encouragingly.

‘Of course it is, pet. You’re doing fine. By the way,’ she clicked open her handbag and took out a slim diary, ‘I think it’s next Saturday...’ she flipped the pages, ‘yes, it is. There’s a coach trip to Bournemouth and I wondered whether you fancied coming? We get a couple of hours in the town and then go to the theatre in the evening before coming home.’

‘Who’s going?’

‘Just a few of us from work. Don was supposed to ask you last week but he never got around to it.’

Peter hesitated. He didn’t want to go. Everything in him screamed ‘no’ but it would fill part of his weekend. That would only leave him Sunday to get through. He looked up at Hazel and saw her eager face. He smiled a little and she nodded at him, eyebrows raised in question.

‘Yes? You’ll come? Oh good, cos I’ve booked you a seat already.’

Peter laughed, ‘You took a risk.’

‘I wasn’t totally sure you’d come but I’m really glad you are. Good for you, Pete.’

He was pleased he’d made her happy and began to look forward to a day in her company. Soon he found himself spending more and more time with her. Little by little, over the next few months, Hazel drew him into her wide circle of friends which at first Peter resisted and then came to enjoy. Hazel knew of his family situation but it did not seem to worry her -

indeed she was so intent on enjoying life to the full that wives in asylums and daughters with grandmothers were encumbrances she did not care to consider. Peter felt liberated when he was with her; all fun and no responsibility. Hazel's social whirl had done the trick; now when he opened his front door (on the rare occasions he went straight home from work) it was peace that greeted him, not accusatory silence. He convinced himself that life owed that to him.

One weekend, a month or two after Imogen's third birthday, and Maggie's first, the asylum telephoned Peter at the office.

'Can you come to the hospital tonight after you finish work? The doctor needs to talk to you.'

'Of course I can manage it if it's urgent.'

'Thank you, Peter, yes it is, I'm afraid.'

When Peter walked up the long drive he felt a sense of foreboding. Were they going to suggest that Peggy was well enough to come home? She certainly hadn't seemed so last weekend when he'd visited her. There still had been no recognition when he'd entered the ward, she wouldn't even meet his eyes. He had tried to brush her hair and fasten back the curls with a clip but she'd pulled it out and let it drop to the floor. He'd reached out to hold her hand but she recoiled from his touch.

'She's sensitive to being touched,' the nurse had said. 'Don't take it personally.' But he had felt hurt and had left soon after.

To his dismay he realized that he did not want Peggy home. He came to the conclusion, with a shock, that he did not, actually, even want to go back to being married to Peggy. If she recovered this time he knew he would never be able to take the risk of having more children and he admitted to himself that he would like to increase his family. He was devastated. He had never felt this hopeless.

As he walked across the beautiful lawn and sat on the white painted bench, he absentmindedly looked at the fountain in front of him which shot water into the air. It tinkled soothingly as it fell. There were pink water lilies in the stone bowl around the fountain and their shiny green leaves shone as the droplets caught the sun. It was peaceful sitting there listening to the fountain, the drone of insects in the air. Nature was so busy doing the things she did best and Peter was making a complete hash of his life. He bowed his head and dropped his head in his hands.

'Peter? Are you alright?'

Peter looked up with a start and saw the doctor walking towards him.

'I wanted to tell you myself. Who has told you?'

'Told me what, Doctor? I haven't seen anyone.' Peter looked up at the doctor. He had a kindly face but the job he did had taken its toll and lines were etched in his forehead and round his mouth. Today he looked especially careworn.

'Has something happened to Peggy?'

The doctor sat beside Peter. 'I have very sad news for you,' he said and carefully explained that this kind of thing sometimes happened. Patients could be devious, secretive even. It appeared that Peggy had managed to save several of her pills and, in her unbalanced state, had taken them last night with her evening drink. When the nurse had come to waken her in the morning she was dead.

'Dead?' Peter stared at the doctor, 'Peggy's dead? She can't be - she's only twenty seven. People don't die at twenty seven!' he could feel his voice rising and he shouted at the doctor. 'Why didn't you think about this? If you knew it could happen why didn't you watch her? Oh Peggy ...' an anguished wail escaped him, 'Peggy!'

He jumped up and paced around the fountain. How could this happen? He certainly hadn't

wanted this. He thought back over all the years he had known Peggy. He had known her from school. They had been childhood sweethearts. She had been sweet, loving, funny, and so supportive of him all through the war. He had never been put under pressure from her; her letters to him were always cheerful and positive. As they had planned their marriage they had felt happy; they were good times. Everything had been fine until Imogen had been born. It was not Peggy's fault. This was something that she'd had no control over. She wanted to be a good mother, she had shown that when she was pregnant with Maggie. Maybe it was his fault - had he not noticed her need? Had he driven her too far? The questions hammered round his head.

He turned back to the doctor who sat there and watched him. He's seen all this before, thought Peter, that's why he looks so sad.

'Doctor ...?'

'I'm sure it's something to do with hormones,' he mumbled. 'The medical profession is doing research into the condition. We know that some women suffer this way after childbirth but we don't really know why. It's heartbreaking – there must be a breakthrough soon ...'

Peter knew that the doctor was just trying to fill the awful silence.

'I'm going to do research myself,' he was saying, 'I've managed to accumulate a lot of data.' The doctor got up and put a hand on Peter's shoulder. 'Come on, old man, I'll get you a taxi.' He stood, unspeaking, with Peter until it arrived. Peter got into it without a backward glance.

The funeral was unbearably sad. Peggy's family had brought little Maggie with them and Peter's mother had travelled from London with Imogen. The two girls did not know each other and both clung to their grandmothers' hands. Peter made no effort to connect with his daughters; he was distraught. After the funeral they had a small meal at a hotel in town and then Peter took them to the station.

'I will come and see you soon, I promise. I just don't know what is going to happen.'

Caroline reached her hand up to her son's face. She had no words for him but she poured her love into her gesture. Peter was unresponsive. He had shut down. He was unreachable. He watched his mother and daughter board the train and then his mother let down the window.

'Don't worry about us, my son. We'll be fine. You know how much I love Imo..., and I'll make sure she talks to you regularly. We'll phone tonight...'

Peter nodded. He had nothing left to give his mother or his daughter. Lifting a hand in farewell he turned before the train had pulled out of sight and trudged along the platform, back to the flat.

Isobel

Jemima climbed onto the bed and looked into the face of her new baby sister. She was fast asleep and making funny little sucking noises.

‘She’s a very hungry baby, isn’t she?’ Isobel stroked Jemima’s cheek.

This baby was exactly like the baby she remembered in the hospital. Her fingers were long and thin and her eyes were blue. There was not much hair yet; certainly not Jemima’s abundant curls, but what there was, was definitely a mousy brown, much like Ted’s.

In a way Isobel felt oddly comforted that she hadn’t imagined everything that had happened when her first baby was born; but she was discomforted too. Of course she could not imagine life without Jemima and once again Ted would not discuss the matter with her and she realised that she would have to get used to the idea of holding this secret to herself. Isobel was determined that Jemima would never know of any doubt about Isobel and Ted being her true parents. She was an adored child and that was how it would always be. In fact in some strange way this baby was the stranger although Isobel knew without any doubt that she was hers.

If Ted had thought it strange that his wife was adamant that this baby be born at home he had been easily persuaded. Isobel felt a warm glow as she thought about her beloved husband. He was so proud of his family and he was doing very well in his new job. Indeed, she had much to be grateful for. To make her life absolutely perfect she would have her first true daughter with her, she thought wistfully, but not if it meant giving up Jemima and so she would make the most of what she had. And she determined that she would do it willingly, and with joy; she would try not to dwell in the past and wonder what might have been. Ted and her little family deserved better – she must not hanker after things she could not have.

‘Isn’t Jemima good with Penny?’ Isobel said one day as she and Ted watched their eldest daughter shaking a rattle over the baby’s cot. ‘She shows no jealousy whatsoever.’ Penny, however, thought Isobel, was not so amenable. As the days passed she frequently had bouts of temper and was not easy to pacify. The baby took a lot of her time and patience but she didn’t begrudge it because, as she said to Ted, ‘Penny won’t be a baby for long; we’d better just grin and bear it. It’s just got to get better soon.’ ‘Maybe she’ll learn to be better tempered as she gets older,’ smiled Ted, pacing up and down and trying to get his youngest daughter to stop screaming and fall asleep. Isobel knew that she wasn’t finding as many hours as she’d like for house work but there would be time enough for that, she reasoned; house cleaning would just have to wait. She satisfied herself with watching the girls grow strong and brown through those long, summer months and marveling at Jemima’s patience and Ted’s good humour through many sleepless nights.

One day, Ted came home and called to them. Isobel looked up and saw him framed in the doorway.

‘We’re in the garden, come on out here and see what the girls are doing.’

Ted left his briefcase and jacket in the kitchen and sauntered across the lawn. Jemima looked up and scrambled to her feet to propel herself at her father. He swung her up and twisted her round. ‘Hey there, Mima! Have you had a lovely time today?’

‘They’re planning Penny’s birthday party,’ smiled Isobel.

‘That’s exciting. Are you having balloons?’

‘And a cake,’ said Jemima.

‘And a cake, too? What does Penny think about it?’

‘She just keeps tearing up whatever Mummy writes down. It’s all right, though, she thinks

it's a game. She's not really being naughty.'

Ted winked at Isobel over Jemima's head. He had a strong suspicion that was just what Penny was being.

'Dad phoned me at the office today, Izzie.'

'Is he okay?'

'They're both fine. They were wondering whether we had any plans for the summer.'

'Why?'

'Mum and Dad are eager for us to stay for a few weeks and want to know what you think about it and whether you're up to the journey with you-know-who.'

'It would be lovely, Ted,' Isobel said enthusiastically, 'and of course I'm up to the journey. I'll have you to help me and Mima's no problem.'

Later, as she scrubbed some new potatoes, she thought about returning to Abbeymouth. She realized that, secretly, she had misgivings that while she was there she might see a family whose child resembled Penny. What if, she thought, Ted saw without doubt that Isobel had been right all along? No, she decided, he still wouldn't do anything about it; his family would be scandalized that such a thing had happened and they'd do everything in their power to keep the whole thing quiet. Nothing like that had ever happened to the Rainworths and Isobel knew that somehow she would get the blame. Not that she didn't get on very well with her husband's family, but, if blame had to be laid, it wouldn't be at their door.

When all the plans had been finalized, Isobel spent one afternoon packing the suitcases and allowed herself to get excited about a few weeks by the sea. She was returning to her birthplace and she looked forward to seeing all her old friends and spending long, warm days on the beautiful sands. Of course, she remembered, it wasn't always idyllic - when the breeze got up the sand flew everywhere, but it was all part of the seaside and she could hardly wait to be there. She planned to take the children to all her favourite places and especially to a charming wishing well in a nearby village.

Isobel knew that Jemima would love to throw her penny in the well and make a wish. She smiled to herself. What was the betting that her daughter's little wish would be something for someone else? She didn't seem to have a selfish bone in her body and again Isobel felt her heart constrict as she wondered what Jemima's birth parents were like and whether they, too, had doubts about the child they were bringing up as their own. Did they struggle to identify with her, or did they, like Ted, doggedly believe she was theirs? Suddenly, Isobel felt a rush of anger. This was all so unfair. Supposing they didn't have the patience with the child that she had for Penny? Goodness knows, she was hard work most of the time. Was she being treated roughly? Was she unhappy? Did Isobel want to go to Abbeymouth at all and run the risk of seeing her? But she had Jemima, her beloved Jemima, and she could not imagine life without her. This would not do, she chastised herself, you must be prepared to do something about it or get on with your life.

Now, with Jemima's help, Isobel prepared to close the house for the holiday and wait for Ted to come home from work. The plan was to catch the six o'clock train which would be in Abbeymouth just after nine. But the holiday would begin just as soon as Ted arrived. Jemima was standing at the window watching for her father and hopping from one leg to another in her excitement.

'Here he comes, Mummy! Here he comes!' She ran to the front door and stood on tiptoe to open it. Running down the path she climbed on the gate and leaned over, waving at her father. Ted swept his little daughter up into his arms. 'Are we all ready to go poppet?' he laughed, 'Everything packed and have you remembered your teddy? We won't be able to come back for anything once we're on the train, you know!'

'Course I've got my teddy, Daddy. He's sitting on my suitcase with Penny's doggy.'

‘That’s good, then. Penny won’t go to sleep without her doggy.’

‘She sucks his ears until she falls asleep.’

‘So that’s why his ears are always mucky!’

They laughed together and Ted hoisted Jemima onto his shoulders. ‘Duck!’ he reminded her as they walked through the door. ‘Hi, Isobel! We’re home! Where is everybody?’

Isobel came out of the kitchen with Penny in her arms. ‘We’re all ready to go. How was your day, Ted?’

‘I’ve hardly been able to concentrate with the thought of a holiday away with my family,’ he said happily. ‘Our first holiday since the war and boy, am I looking forward to it!’ Ted lifted Jemima off his shoulders and went upstairs to have a quick wash and then he came downstairs two at a time and helped Isobel to get the coats on the girls and to organize the suitcases. Isobel put the baby in the pushchair and they locked the front door behind them. ‘Hold tightly onto the pram handle, sweetie,’ Isobel told Jemima, as Ted picked up the suitcases.

Fortunately, the journey was uneventful because Penny slept for most of it. She could be fractious if she got overtired and Isobel wanted her in-laws to get a favourable view of this new grandchild of theirs. Lydia and Edward had visited Isobel and Ted after Penny was born but this was the first time they were welcoming them, as a family, into their home. Isobel was really looking forward to being with them; they all got on so well together. Isobel smiled across the carriage at Ted and he winked at her. Jemima was soon sleepy too and Ted took her onto his lap and rocked her gently until she fell asleep and over her curly head he winked again at his wife. Isobel smiled at him and reached her hand out to touch his. He lifted her hand to his lips and said softly, ‘Thank you. You are beautiful and my girls are beautiful. Thank you.’

Isobel squeezed his hand and looked up into her husband’s face. She smiled at him. ‘Thank *you*,’ she whispered.

The train drew into the station and Ted let down the window to lean out and scan the platform for sight of his parents. There they were, waving excitedly. He gently laid Jemima on the seat and, after fetching the pushchair from the guard van, got up to lift the suitcases down from the string rack above their heads. Isobel eased Penny into the pram and turned to gather up the coats. Jemima stirred and opened her eyes, ‘Are we here yet?’ she asked sleepily.

‘Yes we are,’ smiled Ted, ‘and Grandma and Grandpa are waiting for us.’

Jemima sat up, rubbed her eyes, and looking out of the window she spotted her grandparents and blew them kisses.

‘Come on sweetie, let me help you climb down from the train,’ Isobel said putting Jemima’s coat on. She handed her daughter down to her father-in-law and turned to help Ted with the pushchair. Edward took the suitcases and said, ‘The car’s outside. Will the pushchair go in the boot? Will Penny stay asleep?’

‘She’s had a good sleep so it doesn’t matter if she wakes up. Oh, it’s so good to see you both!’

As the pushchair wouldn’t fit in the car Ted decided to walk back to the house. The rest piled into the car.

They were a merry party as they made their way through town and into the wide street where Edward and Lydia lived. There was plenty of news to exchange and the little girls were wide-eyed as they looked out of the window.

‘Look Mummy – all the shops are open! Look at all the buckets and spades!’ Jemima cried. Gaily coloured plastic balls hung in nets from the door frames and round racks of postcards displayed different coloured views of the popular seaside resort.

The war, over such a short time ago, seemed a long way away. Edward pulled up outside the house and opened the car door to let the children and Isobel out. Opening the boot he stacked the suitcases on the pavement and Lydia pushed open the gate and opened the front door.

Isobel loved this house with its double fronted bay windows and deep porch. The tiles on the floor were maroon and diamond shaped and the border of black tiles had tiny maroon tiles interspersed all round the edge. The inner door was of coloured glass which, when the sun shone through it, scattered myriad kaleidoscopic patterns all over the hall. The whole of the left hand wall of the lobby was taken up by a beautifully carved hall stand with six elegant brass coat hooks on which hung coats and hats. The centre shelf with a small cupboard underneath proudly bore a shining copper jug just like the one Isobel had in her kitchen. A colourful array of flowers filled the jug and made a cheerful splash of colour to greet the home comers. The house smelled of lavender and furniture polish and looked as though it had been vigorously cleaned in honour of their visit.

‘Ah it’s good to be back,’ smiled Isobel as Lydia put her arm round her daughter-in-law’s shoulders. ‘I’ve been longing for the girls to see the house where their father grew up. Jemima’s going to love exploring it.’

‘Well, in you come, I’ll make a cup of tea.’

They all trooped into the hall and Jemima put Penny down. She immediately made for the wide staircase which was to the right of the hall and had a heavy mahogany banister which ended in an elaborate scroll. It was polished not only by the loving administrations of many years but also by the seats of many small boys’ pants. The descent from the first floor to the hall was a steep one and a breathtaking ride according to Ted. Jemima hurried over to Penny to stop her climbing the stairs.

There were a further two floors in the house, and some eight or nine bedrooms.

‘I’ve given you the front bay bedroom, Isobel, if you want to go on up,’ Lydia said.

It was a very large room overlooking the street and in the bay window were two armchairs upholstered in cherry velour, one on each side of a small rose wood table. On the table was a tray set with china already for a welcoming cup of tea.

‘I’ll bring up the pot and you can get settled in while I see to the meal. Will the children want to eat or are you putting them straight to bed?’ Lydia asked.

Isobel looked at her daughters. Penny was sucking her thumb and even Jemima looked as though all the excitement had worn her out.

‘Perhaps a glass of warm milk will do Mima and I’ll feed Penny to sleep. I don’t think it’ll be long before they’re fast asleep,’ Isobel replied.

‘Shall I draw a bath for them then?’ suggested Ted as he hoisted the suitcase onto one of the single beds and opened it with a click, click of the catches.

Isobel nodded, ‘That’s an excellent idea. I’ll get their night things and come along to the bathroom in just a minute.’

Soon the girls were tucked up; Jemima in the single bed and Penny in a cot right alongside her sister. Their parents were to sleep in splendour in the four poster bed which had pride of place in the centre of the room.

Isobel poured out steaming cups of tea and Ted drew the curtains around the large window. The standard lamp cast a warm circle of light around their chairs and left the rest of the room in shadow.

They commented, in whispers, how successful the journey had been and how well the girls had behaved. Ted looked across at his daughters, now breathing softly and evenly, and smiled.

‘Dad’s asked me to go with him to the office tomorrow morning,’ he said, ‘but we’ll be back

by midday and then we can go to the beach. Or anywhere you'd like to go. Will you be alright with Mother and the girls for a few hours?'

'Of course, I will, darling. How nice for you to go with your father - he's so proud of you. We'll probably just sit and gossip and watch the world go by. The children can play with their toys. The beach sounds a lovely idea.'

Edward called up the stairs that the meal was ready and, after tucking the blanket round Jemima and gently removing Penny's thumb from her mouth, Isobel followed her husband downstairs.

The following morning Isobel and her mother in law were comfortably settled in the armchairs with a coffee pot on the table and watching people pass on the street below the window. Most were holiday makers and it was good to see the town returning to normal after the war. Every now and then Isobel exclaimed when she saw someone she recognized and her mother in law brought her up to date with the news.

After a while Lydia got up, 'I'll just go and tidy up the breakfast room,' she said, 'and wash some salad for lunch. You stay here with the girls and I'll soon be back. Do you want some fresh coffee?'

Isobel assured her that she was fine. As she went out of the room Lydia kissed her granddaughters on the tops of their heads. Jemima looked up and smiled at her grandmother. 'Look at my picture, Mummy,' Jemima said, coming up and leaning on the arms of her mother's chair. She had done a drawing of two cats and an out of proportion house with broad bands of blue across the top for the sky and a round orange sun.

'Sweetie, it's lovely, aren't you a clever girl!'

Jemima went back happily to help Penny build a tower of wooden blocks which the little one gleefully, and noisily, knocked down.

Isobel idly turned back to the window and, suddenly, felt her heart contract. Walking slowly on the other side of the road was an older woman holding the hand of a child of Jemima's age. The little girl was dragging her feet and her face was scowling but the likeness was unmistakable. The child was the image of Penny. She was dressed in a navy dress with a white Peter Pan collar and her sandals were of red leather. Her shiny, long, straight, brown hair was held back by two tortoiseshell slides. She looked well cared for, if not entirely happy. The woman looked hassled and was cajoling the child to come on, obviously she was in a hurry and the girl was not helping matters.

Isobel watched until they were out of her sight and wondered at the circumstances. Was the child's mother at work? Some women had continued to work although most had relinquished their jobs to returning service men. There seemed a familiarity between the woman and the child. Isobel was sure that she must be the grandmother. How could she broach the subject with Lydia? She had so many questions to ask but how on earth could she put them to her mother in law which wouldn't sound contrived and false? She decided that she could not. Had they still been drinking coffee together it would have been easy to ask if the woman and child passing in the street below were known to her but for the moment at least, Isobel could not bring the subject up; she would have to let the moment pass.

Isobel did not see the little girl and her grandmother again all the time that she was on holiday. The weeks passed in mostly glorious sunshine; there were only a few days that they could not go onto the sands. Jemima learned to swim at the patient hands of her father and grandfather. Both children were golden brown even though Isobel had been careful to cover them up when the sun was hot. They had had picnics nearly every day and had visited many of the famous beauty spots. Isobel had managed to take the girls to the wishing well one

afternoon and they had dropped their pennies in and made a wish. Jemima had kept hers to herself. It was just as Isobel had imagined it would be. They had had scones and jam and Penny had had a glass of fresh milk.

Afterwards, they had gone outside and helped the lady to collect some eggs. The children had to search for them under bushes and beside the stream and in all sorts of nooks and crannies. Penny, who had just learned to walk and was none too steady, was guided by her mother but she insisted on carrying an egg that, incredibly, remained unbroken. They had taken some back home in a brown paper bag screwed over at the top. Lydia had been thrilled, and cooked them for tea.

Isobel had noticed that just lately Penny had taken to scowling if she could not get her own way. She did it now because Lydia had given Jemima the brown egg for her tea and Penny wanted it.

Ted laughed, 'You look just like your grandfather,' he said. 'He makes a grumpy face just like that!' And, Isobel thought, just like the little girl she had seen on the first day of the holiday. It was obviously a family thing but no one seemed to realize that Mima had never done it. As Jemima willingly swapped boiled eggs with her sister, Isobel was determined that Penny should learn that she couldn't always have everything she wanted. But her youngest daughter was very strong willed and Isobel suspected that Ted found it easier to give in to Penny. When we get home, Isobel resolved, we're going to have to talk about this.

As the days drew closer to their departure, Isobel realized she was struggling with the thought of not seeing the child and her grandmother again. She was being torn two ways and there was no solution. The idea of giving up Jemima was unthinkable but something deep inside her longed to hold the child she was convinced was hers and coax a smile to that sad little face. Obviously she could not have both children, Isobel knew that, but thoughts kept chasing round and round in her head until she thought she would go mad.

Ted commented on her distraction and asked whether anything was wrong. 'You're in a dream most of the time, Izzy. Are you feeling well?'

Isobel made an excuse because she knew that she could never bring the subject up and speak to Ted of her deepest feelings. His family had lived in the town for generations and was well respected. This would be something akin to a scandal and they would not tolerate it. There was nothing to be done.

On the last evening Ted had booked a table in a restaurant that overlooked the harbour. His parents were babysitting the children. Isobel was glad of the opportunity of being alone with him because she had special news to share with him. She had visited the doctor yesterday and had her pregnancy confirmed. She hoped that this time it would be a boy but they had discussed possibly having four children. Ted had three brothers but Isobel was an only child and she longed for a large family. She knew Ted would be thrilled with her news. Jemima would be at school and Penny would be two when the baby was born. She knew that Mima would be very excited at having a new baby to look after and while she was not so sure of Penny she hoped that there would not be a big problem.

'So that's why you've been in a world of your own just lately,' smiled Ted. 'What a lovely secret to be holding.'

'I just wanted to be sure before saying anything,' Isobel said, 'but I'm very happy.'

The evening was a great success and they went home happily to share their news with Edward and Lydia. It was a good way to end their holiday.

'Please would you consider coming for your holidays here every year,' Lydia suggested, reaching up to the window of the train carriage, 'if it's not too much to ask?'

'We'd be delighted,' they both said together.

‘It’s been lovely being with you, and being here again,’ said Isobel warmly.
‘And the girls have had a wonderful time,’ added Ted. ‘Even Penny’s been passable!’
‘It’s been wonderful having you, I can’t wait until next year,’ smiled Lydia, tears in her eyes.
Edward shook his son’s hand and blew kisses to Isobel and the girls. Jemima blew kisses back and waved as the train started slowly to move.

‘You’re home!’ Isobel’s mother greeted them, standing with open arms in the doorway of their home. She had spent all morning filling their little house with bright flowers and the scent greeted them as she gathered the children into her arms.

‘Dinner’s almost ready,’ she said to Isobel, ‘do you want it now or shall I make a pot of tea?’

Isobel realized that Penny was almost asleep. ‘I’ll put her to bed first, Mum, and then we’ll be able to eat in peace, if that’s okay?’

Ted carried the suitcases up to the bedroom and had a quick wash. Jemima followed her grandmother into the kitchen and chattered nonstop, telling her every detail of their holiday. Isobel smiled to herself as she watched them together and knew that the decision she had made was the right one; Jemima was their very precious daughter, and, God willing, her other little girl would grow up just as happy, wherever she was.

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