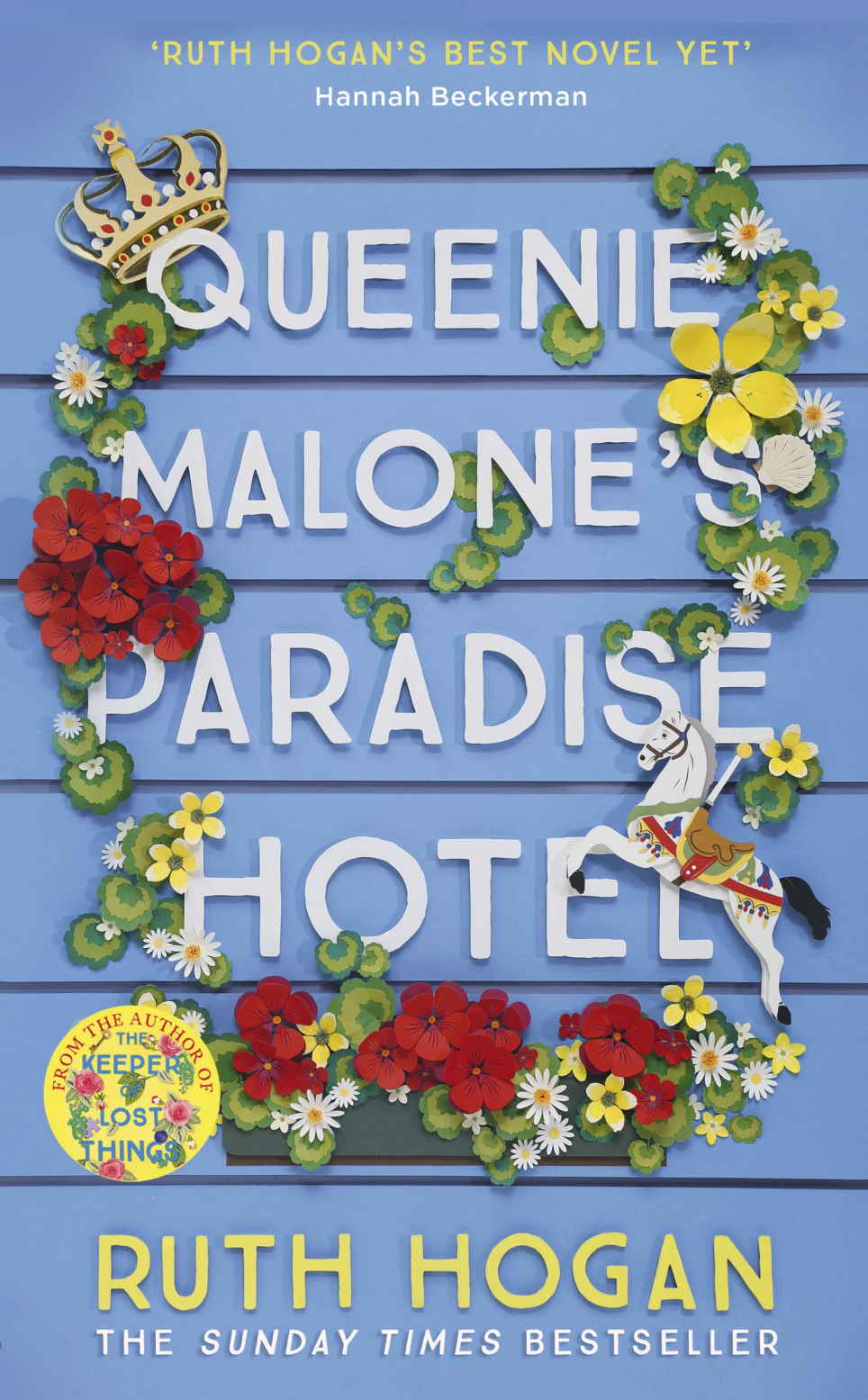
'RUTH HOGAN'S BEST NOVEL YET'
Hannah Beckerman



RUTH HOGAN
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Also by Ruth Hogan

The Keeper of Lost Things
The Wisdom of Sally Red Shoes

Queenie Malone's Paradise Hotel

Ruth Hogan

TWO ROADS

www.tworoadsbooks.com

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Two Roads Books
An imprint of John Murray Press
An Hachette UK company

1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 66906 2
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 66905 5
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 66904 8
Audio Digital Download ISBN 978 1 473 68682 3

Typeset in ITC Stone Serif by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR40 4YY

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

To Bokey (aka Bokapup) – son of Eli.

Her eyes they shone like the diamonds,
You'd think she was queen of the land,
And her hair hung over her shoulders
Tied up with a black velvet band.

Traditional Irish folk song

Part 1

The zebra, the horse and the kraken

1

Tilda

My mother killed my father when I was seven years old. Now, thirty-nine years later, she is dead too, and I am an orphan.

I haven't been back to her flat since the funeral on that hot and humid day in late August, and now the glowing colours and rich, earthy smells of autumn have been swept away by the cinereous hues and raw, salty winds of a seaside winter. As the taxi crawls along Brighton seafront in the thick, teatime traffic, I can just make out the gunmetal-grey waves smashing onto the pebbles. The lights on the Palace Pier are twinkling seductively in the late-afternoon gloom and, even after all these years, they still spark a flicker of childlike excitement inside me. We pass the street where Queenie used to live. Losing that life still smarts as sharply as a paper cut. The taxi turns left, away from the sea, and stops outside a tall, Victorian house. From the outside, my mother's flat is dark and still. As I turn the key in the lock and open the door, the silence and the musty air creep out to greet me, and the secrets of my mother's life – and mine – stir softly in their hiding places, waiting to unravel the familiar pattern of my past.

I sleep soundly, and wake feeling shamefully refreshed. I say 'shamefully', because it doesn't seem quite decent that I should be feeling so chipper given the circumstances. It's like wearing a red dress to a funeral. I am here to pick over the bones of my mother's life like some sort of domestic vulture; deciding which linen, china and furniture are worth keeping, and which should be consigned to the charity shops in town or left to the mercy of the bin men. The silence has been banished by the measured intonations of a Radio 4 presenter. The musty air has been sucked out into the bright, new morning through the open windows, and replaced by the altogether more appetising smell of toast and freshly brewed coffee. I pour myself another cup and carefully butter a slice of toast, making sure that every square inch is thinly but evenly covered, and then repeat the process with thick-cut, bitter orange marmalade. I cut it precisely into four triangles and place the knife, perfectly straight, to the left of the plate; blade side inwards. These are the rituals that keep me safe.

Outside, the sun is shining hard and bright, making the slab of crinkling waves flash and sparkle like cut glass. I'm tempted to open the French windows and stand on the balcony for a few minutes to feel the fierce wind buffet my body and lash through my hair, as if to underline the fact that I am still alive. But I resist. I'm not sure I know where the key is in any case. I'm simply trying to delay the start of a task that I feel sure is going to be both complicated and time-consuming. Deciding what to do with the furniture is not straightforward. I have already resolved to keep the flat, but whether as

a permanent home or as a holiday flat and source of income I have not yet decided. Either way, it will need furniture. The kitchen table is staying; Victorian stripped pine, well used and well loved. During the last few years of my mother's life, she developed a passion for crossword puzzles, particularly those in the broadsheets. She said they kept her brain alive. She would spend several hours each morning sitting at the kitchen table with the newspapers spread in front of her, a dictionary and thesaurus close to hand – bad form to the purists, I know, but she rarely used them. When I visited her, she would sometimes ask for my help, as I sat drinking coffee and gazing out at the ever-changing sea. It was the closest we came to 'companionable' during my adult life; a poor relation to the emotional intimacy more usually found between a mother and daughter, but the best that we could do. Her actions had placed a distance between us that remained until her death, and I long ago gave up trying or perhaps even wanting to build a bridge across it. We skirted around one another with the cool politeness of strangers; remote even when we were in the same room. Still, the table is staying. I am also keeping the ornate over-mantle mirror, whose beauty is temporarily disguised under a generous layer of dust. I remember my mother checking her hair and patting her face with powder in the mirror before going out, taking care not to singe her tights by getting too close to the flames of the gas fire that burned beneath.

'Old age is not an excuse to let oneself go,' she used to say.

Sadly, her eyesight was not as good as it could have been if she had deigned to wear her spectacles, and her generous application of face powder often made her look a little dusty, rather like the mirror. But this was offset by the 'fresh from the salon' neatness of her hair, her smartly tailored coat, and the immaculately stylish silk scarf tied around her neck. This 'going-out' ensemble was always completed with a brooch pinned either to the lapel of her coat or at her neck, in the centre of the silk scarf. I once bought her a small, silver brooch with the word 'Mother' engraved on it. I never saw her wear it.

The two wing-backed easy chairs in the sitting room are the epitome of abominable ghastliness and are going. Definitely. Aside from the fact that they are of a shape and design that can only be described as 'Old People's Home' chic, they are covered in an eye-popping chintz that looks as though it has been created by Cath Kidston on LSD. The green velvet-covered sofa is inoffensive to look at, and reasonably comfortable to sit on, and is therefore staying for the time being.

After a purposeful start, my mind is beginning to wander and so am I. I drift from room to room, touching things, picking them up and putting them down again aimlessly. In the bathroom, my mother's toothbrush is still in a glass on the sink, alongside her neatly folded face flannel and a half-used bar of soap. Here my rationale deserts me; what exactly is the protocol for dealing with dead people's toiletries? These things are of no use to anyone, and should surely go in the bin? But these are the last remaining relics of the flesh and

blood that was my mother. They still have her on them. These humble objects retain a physical intimacy with her that would have discomforted me while she was alive, but which I am not yet ready to relinquish now she is dead. I put them into the toiletry bag covered in sprigs of tiny pink flowers, which she used on the rare occasions when she visited me. I don't know what else to do with them.

I go into her bedroom and sit down on the end of the bed. The bed in which she died. It will have to go. Her dressing table is positioned at the end of it. I sit gazing into one of the triptych mirrors, studying my face for any echoes of hers. Our bone structure is similar; high cheekbones, a strong, straight nose, and my dark hair and fair skin are like hers – were. But her eyes were cool and green and somehow glassy. I remember as a little girl, I used to think that they were the colour of marbles. But I could never tell what she was thinking. I have my dad's eyes; dark and mercurial; one minute watchful, the next lively, and equal mirrors of fury and mirth. The small, deep scar above my left eyebrow is mine alone.

On the dressing table is a large, wooden jewellery box, a brush, comb and mirror set, a large silver crucifix and a bottle of my mother's favourite perfume, Chanel No. 5. I have never liked it. I have always found it too overpowering, but often bought it for her at Christmas and birthdays because she adored it. The brush still has a few strands of her hair woven in amongst its stiff bristles. There is also a small photograph in a plain silver frame. It is an old and faded black-and-white snapshot of a young woman wearing a pale summer dress and a

single string of pearls. She is holding the hand of a small girl aged about five or six in shiny new sandals and very white socks, one of which is flying at half-mast. It is my mother and me.

2

Tilly

Tilly sat on the back doorstep in her new red sandals and carefully inspected the scab on her knee. She had fallen off her bike the previous Wednesday, when she had been momentarily distracted by the sight of Mrs O'Flaherty's enormous bum waddling down the street wrapped in a bright orange Crimplene dress. Like two pumpkins fighting in a sack, as her daddy would say, and then her mother would press her lips together and pretend to look cross, like she always did when he said something funny but slightly rude. Tilly wasn't allowed to say 'bum', but surely it was all right if you just thought it in your head? The orange pumpkins had captured her attention just long enough for her to miss the discarded roller skate that the front wheel of her bicycle had hit with enough force to catapult her from the saddle and send her crashing onto the pavement in a muddle of flailing limbs. She lay in the muddle for a moment, listening to the wheels ticking round until they stopped, and watching the tassels on the handlebar nearest to her face gently fluttering in the breeze. Her knee hurt and her elbow was sore, but her arms and legs seemed to be working normally.

Luckily, Mrs O'Flaherty had not heard the crash she had unwittingly been responsible for, and had carried on to the end of the street and turned the corner with her pumpkins swaying jauntily behind her. Mrs O'Flaherty was a kind woman, who had an easy way with children, which was just as well as she had seven of her own (she was, according to Tilly's mother, an 'enthusiastic Catholic'). Had she seen Tilly's fall, she would undoubtedly have hoisted Tilly from her pavement muddle and insisted on returning her safely to her mother for the administration of a swab of stinging antiseptic, a sticking plaster, and a comforting hug. But these would be the attentions of a normal, happy mummy, who baked cakes, wore a pinny, and, more often than not, a smile; who smelled of Avon perfume and called her husband 'darling'. A woman like Mrs O'Flaherty or the mummy from the soap powder advert on the telly. Not Tilly's mother. She would be cross about the fuss, the interference of Mrs O'Flaherty, the clumsiness of Tilly, and the hole in the elbow of a perfectly good cardigan. There would be no hug, and the stinging would come from her mother's harsh words. Tilly picked herself and her bicycle up, cleaned her wounds as best she could with spit and a rather grubby hanky, and spent the rest of the day with the sleeves of her cardigan pushed up far enough so that the hole didn't show.

The scab was almost black now, with the white edges ripe for picking. It itched, and the skin around it was puckered and tight. Tilly lifted one edge experimentally with her fingernail, and immediately a trickle of blood ran down her leg and soaked into her very white sock.

'I knocked it on the chair': the excuse immediately sprang to mind in readiness for her mother's inevitable rebuke. She often wished that her mother was more like the soap-powder mummy. Tilly thought she must be using the wrong sort. She pressed the scab back down with her finger and carefully rumpled her sock to hide the scarlet stain.

The borders in the back garden were full of flowers, and the lawn was neatly cut and edged. It looked like a picture-book illustration. The fragrant sweet peas were carefully coaxed and twirled around wigwams of cane sticks, and their fluttery flowers in every shade of purple, pink, red, mauve and white were a testament to her daddy's loving care and attention. He had shown her how to nip out the side shoots that looked like tiny coiled springs. He said it made the stems grow longer and straighter and produce more flowers. She checked them every day, and nipped out each stray green tendril between the nails of her thumb and forefinger exactly as he had taught her. The borders were full of marigolds, snapdragons and Livingstone daisies, their colours brash and bright like a 1950s picture postcard. Tilly loved the brazen daisies in their dancing-girl rows; not for their dazzling colours or shiny petals, but for the way they opened themselves up to bask in the sunshine, and then shut up tight once the clouds rolled in or the sun went down, like back-to-front umbrellas. It was magic.

Beyond the lawn was a small vegetable patch with a couple of rows of peas, some lines of crisp lettuce, four tomato plants in pots, and her daddy's precious raspberry canes. Tilly used to steal the pods of peas and eat

them when they were still tiny and juicy sweet. Her daddy used to pretend to be cross, and then laugh and say it would be a miracle if any of them were allowed to grow big enough to end up on a dinner plate. Tilly liked it when he laughed, because he laughed with his whole face and not just his mouth. His cheeks would go red, and the skin around his eyes would wrinkle like an over-ripe apple; and his eyes, as dark as treacle, would shine with what he called 'happy tears'. Tilly's mother always said that the raspberry canes were a waste of time because the birds would eat them, but each year the canes were laden with the velvet-soft, deep pink berries, luscious with nearly sweet juice that trickled down her chin as she crammed the fruit into her mouth whilst hiding in the garden shed with her daddy. The fruit tasted all the more delicious because it was eaten like this – greedily, messily and in secret. For Tilly, the smell of creosote would always be inextricably linked with raspberries, and years later, as an adult, the slightest whiff of it would make her mouth water. Her daddy would eat his share of the fruit, and then later, when he brought a meagre half-bowlful into the kitchen, he would wink theatrically at Tilly as he handed the bowl to her mother, who would be wearing her best 'I told you so' face. The raspberries were just one of the many little secrets and jokes Tilly shared with her daddy that brightened the rather dark and troubled palette that coloured their daily lives.

Tilly stood up and tested her knee with a few tentative steps to see if the bleeding had stopped. The daisies were fully opened in the glare of the midday sun, and their technicolour petals shimmered in the heat. Tilly

bent down and picked a snapdragon head. Just as she was squeezing its 'cheeks' to make it bite her finger, her mother came to the doorstep. She was wearing a light blue cotton dress and a single strand of pearls. As she was standing there, she pushed a powder compact and a clean hanky into her handbag and snapped it shut with a loud click. She should have looked pretty, but her face was tense, and her expression strained.

'Come on, Tilly, we'll miss the bus. And pull that sock up.'

She turned and went back into the house. Tilly dropped her snapdragon onto the path and tugged ineffectually at her sock. As she dawdled back past the flowers to follow her mother, she wondered who would look after them now that her daddy had gone.

3

Tilly

Tilly sat next to her mother, wriggling uncomfortably as the stiff, velvet pile of the bus seat prickled against the back of her bare legs. It was hot and stuffy on the bus, despite the breeze from the open door.

'Tilly, do sit still,' her mother muttered as she rummaged in her handbag to find her purse.

'She's got ants in her pants, that one.'

The lady bus conductor grinned broadly at Tilly whilst waiting patiently for her mother to fish the coins out of her purse to pay for their tickets. Tilly giggled. She longed to be a bus conductor with a shiny leather money pouch and a magical, whirring ticket machine, and to be able to say 'pants' on a bus full of people without getting into trouble. Tilly's mother handed over the money for their fares and the bus conductor turned the handle on the side of her box of tricks and pulled out two orange printed tickets from the slot on the front.

'Here you are, love. Do you want to hold them?'

She passed them to Tilly with a wink, and made her way down the aisle, swaying gently with the jolting movement of the bus. Tilly definitely wanted to be a

bus conductor. Not only was there a nice blue uniform, a pouch full of money and the marvellous ticket machine, but you also got to be in charge of the whole bus. Tilly and her mother were sitting on one of the two long seats, just inside the door, that faced each other across the aisle of the bus. Opposite them sat an old couple and a young woman with a baby. The young woman was very pretty, with yellow hair pulled into a high ponytail and shiny pink lipstick. She was wearing a pale pink skirt with white flowers that was tight at the waist and then stuck out like a lampshade, and a close-fitting, short-sleeved sweater that was knitted in a white, fluffy wool that Tilly thought would be nice to stroke. The old woman had a rather cross face, and very stiff grey hair arranged in fat curls that were puffed up on top of her head like a pile of sausage rolls. Her dress was navy blue with tiny white spots, and stretched over the huge shelf of her bosom before disappearing into the deep crease between the shelf and her large tummy. Her feet were squashed into shiny navy shoes from which her podgy ankles spilled out like over-stuffed haggises. She looked hot, cross and uncomfortable. Tilly wondered if she was having a baby too. Her tummy certainly looked big enough to be holding one, and it would also explain why her dress was too small for her. Tilly was just about to ask her when the woman shot her such a stern look that she thought better of it. As Tilly looked at the young woman and the old woman sitting next to one another, she wondered when it was that bosoms changed from being two separate things into one big one. The young woman definitely had two, and you could see the shape of them very clearly

under her sweater, but the old woman just had one big, rather solid-looking bosom shelf. Tilly puzzled over it for a bit, and decided that she didn't particularly want either.

She turned her attention to the old man, who Tilly thought must be about a hundred. He had tanned skin as wrinkled as a pickled walnut, great tufts of white hair sprouting out of his ears, and blue eyes that twinkled with mischief. He was wearing a tweed cap and a blue checked shirt, and Tilly was sure that he would smell like a granddad. His gnarled, bony hands gripped the handle of a walking stick that he had planted firmly in front of him between his widely spread legs. He looked as though he had anchored himself ready for the jolting stops and starts and gentle swaying of the voyage ahead on the number 37. Tilly looked at him with unconcealed curiosity, and he stuck his tongue out at her. It was done in a second, like a toad catching a fly. Tilly wasn't altogether sure that she hadn't imagined it. She looked at her mother to see if she had noticed anything. Her mother was in a world of her own, staring out of the window. Tilly looked at him again. He stuck his tongue out – again. But this time Tilly understood. She quickly glanced at her mother again before pressing the end of her nose up with her finger and sticking out her tongue. A flicker of a smile crossed the old man's face before he pulled both ears forward, pressed the end of his nose up with the tip of his little finger, and once again poked out his tongue in reply. Tilly thought for a moment and was just about to respond in kind, when the bus conductor sashayed back down the aisle. She looked at them both like a

teacher who knows that her pupils are misbehaving behind her back, but hasn't yet managed to catch them in the act.

'I've got my eye on you,' she said in a stern voice to the old man, and then squeezed his knee as she passed him and climbed the stairs to the top deck. The old man's wife didn't look very pleased as she folded her arms firmly under her large bosom and jolted it crossly as if to wake it up. Tilly hesitated and the old man raised his eyebrows slightly as if to encourage her. Tilly readied herself; this was her best face and it took some concentration. She pulled her ears forward with her forefingers, hooked her little fingers into the corners of her mouth and dragged her lips into a wide grimace, rolled back her eyes so that only the whites were visible, and poked out her tongue as far as it would go. Beat that! The old man looked suitably impressed, and Tilly settled smugly back into her seat. But her claim to victory was premature. With breathtaking nonchalance and a flick of his tongue, the old man dislodged and partially ejected both his upper and lower dentures before sucking them back into place, keeping his eyes firmly crossed throughout the manoeuvre. Game, set and match. Tilly was completed captivated, and more than a little envious of his false teeth – they clearly gave him an unfair advantage. She was also then suddenly consumed with the giggles. She could feel them fizzing up inside her like the Alka-Seltzer tablets her mother gave her when she had a sicky tummy. She struggled to keep them inside her, but she was already shaking with both the effort and the failure to do so. Her eyes were brimming with happy tears and her face was as pink as

a raspberry. The final straw came when she looked across at the old man and saw tears of laughter streaming down his face, his whole body rattling with mirth. Tilly was worried that his teeth might be shaken out of his mouth completely this time and skitter across the floor and bite her mother on the ankle. The thought of it finished her off. She exploded like a shaken bottle of pop. Her laughter bubbled through the bus, rising and falling like jam boiling in a saucepan as she tried to pull herself together. But it was hopeless. The more her mother told her to stop being silly and sit quietly like a good girl, the worse it got. She knew she was, in her mother's words, 'making a show of herself', but the show had to go on because she couldn't stop it. And the old man wasn't helping. He was thumping his walking stick on the floor of the bus as though he were drumming the beat of the rising crescendo of hilarity that had gripped them both so firmly. Eventually the laughter subsided long enough for Tilly to batten down the hatches and display a reasonably sensible face. But her composure was precarious; too recent to be relied upon in the face of even the slightest provocation. As the old man's wife turned herself and her bosom away from him in disapproval, the bus jolted sharply and the baby sitting next to her was sick all over her bosom and her handbag. Tilly was lost again.

The next stop was theirs, and Tilly was glad to get off the bus. The smell of baby sick wasn't very nice, and the more the old woman tried to clean it up, the further she seemed to spread it. She even managed to flick some of it onto the bus conductor, who had hurried downstairs to see what all the commotion was about.

The old man was laughing so hard by this point that his anchor had come adrift and he almost fell off his seat. Tilly reckoned that he'd definitely be going straight to bed with no supper that night. As for Tilly, her sides ached from laughing so much, but she wasn't so sure that she wanted to be a bus conductor any more.

She didn't want to be a doctor's receptionist either. Ten minutes after they stepped off the bus, they were sitting on hard, wooden chairs in the cool and gloomy waiting room of their family doctor, Dr Bentley, and Tilly was having a staring contest with his receptionist, who was seated behind a desk at one end of the room. She was a thin woman, with dark hair so tightly scraped back into a bun that it made the skin on her face seem a size too small. She had a long, pointy nose which she had looked down at them, over the top of her glasses, when they had walked in. She behaved as though her job was to protect the doctor from patients, who were usually just making a fuss about nothing. Tilly didn't like the way she seemed to think that her mother wasn't good enough. Good enough for what, she was too young to fully understand, but she felt it nonetheless, and she knew it wasn't nice. Tilly also thought that her face looked as though she had been sucking lemons. She smiled to herself as she thought about sharing the joke with her daddy, but the smile quickly melted like an ice cream dropped on the pavement as she remembered that he had gone away, and with the memory came the feeling that her tummy was full of mud. The receptionist was watching Tilly intently as though she might, at any moment, run amok and mess up the perfect piles of glossy magazines on the shiny table, or

dishevel the box of leaflets proclaiming the benefits of Sanatogen and cod liver oil and malt. Tilly's mother made her eat a generous spoonful of the evil-smelling, brown, sticky gloop every day, because it was 'good for her'. Tilly didn't see how it could be. The very sight of the fat brown jar made her gag, and its contents coated the inside of her mouth for at least half an hour after she had been 'dosed'. It tasted like fish-flavoured toffee, and made her burps smell like the bin round the back of the chip shop. The phone on the receptionist's desk rang, and she lifted the receiver to her ear without taking her eyes off Tilly.

'Doctor will see you now,' she said to Tilly's mother in a clipped voice.

Her mother stood up a little too quickly, clutching her handbag, and said to Tilly, 'Now wait here, and be a good girl.'

She was almost at the door when she turned and added, 'Don't touch anything.'

Tilly scowled. 'Be a good girl' was open to interpretation. It had possibilities. She could have looked through the magazines, or just moved them around, disturbing their perfect arrangement. She could have pushed her fingertips, one by one, onto the polished surface of the table, leaving a trail of smudge marks. She could have waved her hands through the heavy folds of the velvet curtains that hung at the window. All of this could be excused as the behaviour of an essentially good but bored child trying to entertain herself whilst waiting for her mother. Tilly's instincts told her, however, that they would be guaranteed to annoy the receptionist more than spiders in her

knickers. But she was scuppered by her mother's final words: 'Don't touch anything.' Tilly sat very still and thought very hard. After a moment, she jumped up from her seat. The receptionist was immediately on red alert. Tilly first went to the magazines. She placed both hands over the piles and moved them back and forth, leaving only the smallest space between her skin and the glossy magazine covers. Then, with one finger, she drew patterns in the air, sometimes only a hair's breadth above the polished surface of the table. Her finger moved steadily at first, tracing dramatic swirls and flourishes, but then suddenly swooped and dipped seemingly even closer to the table, like a swallow sipping water from the surface of a lake. The receptionist was getting crosser and crosser, in the way that grown-ups do when they are so thoroughly outwitted by a child. Tilly moved on towards the curtains, trailing the back of her hand perilously close to the rather miserable-looking rubber plant that squatted sullenly in a dull brown pot against one wall.

'Little girl,' the receptionist finally snapped, 'what exactly do you think you're doing?'

Tilly turned very deliberately to face her and smiled sweetly.

'I'm being a good girl and not touching anything,' she replied.

Tilly spent the next couple of minutes pretending to stroke the curtains whilst the receptionist looked on in infuriated frustration. Tilly wouldn't have been in the least bit surprised if steam had started blowing out of her ears. Eventually, there was the sound of footsteps outside the door, and Tilly returned unhurriedly to her

seat and sat down. She even remembered to cross her ankles and dropped her hands neatly into her lap to complete the perfect picture of innocence. The first thing her mother said as she came into the room was, 'I hope you've been a good girl, Tilly?'

A question neatly fielded by Tilly's reply of 'I didn't touch anything.'

Outside, blinking in the bright sunshine after the gloom of the doctor's surgery, her mother took her hand. She seemed pleased with Tilly for once and even bought her an ice cream from the shop next to the bus stop. She immediately wished she hadn't, however, when the bus came sooner than they had expected, and Tilly had to negotiate getting on and finding a seat with one hand clutching her ice-cream cone, both eyes fixed on the pink ice cream that crowned it, and her tongue in constant motion attempting to finish her treat before it melted in the heat. As Tilly licked the last drips of ice cream off her fingers, she wondered vaguely what the medicine was that her mother had swapped her prescription for at the chemist. The only medicine she had ever had after a visit to the doctor, on account of a nasty cough, had been the same colour as her ice cream and was called penny ceiling. On their way back to the bus stop, they had also stopped at the flower shop. Her mother had bought a lovely big bunch of roses, carnations and some other flowers that Tilly didn't recognise but thought looked and smelled very pretty. They were for Auntie Wendy because it was her birthday. Auntie Wendy was her mother's best friend, which Tilly thought was quite strange because they weren't alike at all. Auntie Wendy

was a noisy, friendly sort of lady, who said 'hello' on the street to people she didn't even know, and thought nothing of answering the door in her dressing gown and curlers. She had two children and one husband. The husband was called Uncle Bill, and the children were called Karen and Kevin. Kevin was a boy and twelve years old, so Tilly didn't have much to do with him. But Karen was only two years older than Tilly, and friendly and lively like Auntie Wendy, so Tilly liked playing 'shopping' and 'hairdressers' with her. Auntie Wendy lived just two streets away from them and always had red fizzy pop, which was another reason why Tilly liked going to see her. They got off the bus at their usual stop, and Tilly noticed that she had two small splodges of pink ice cream on the front of her dress. She tried to lick them off, but her mother stopped her.

'Leave it, Tilly. You'll only make it worse.'

Tilly wasn't really worried about the state of her dress; she just didn't want to waste any ice cream. The houses in Auntie Wendy's street all had boxy front gardens bordered by red brick walls. Most of them had a square of lawn in the middle, edged on all four sides by a thin strip of earth planted with brightly coloured flowers. Tilly thought that the houses and gardens looked like they were made of Lego. Except for Auntie Wendy's. Auntie Wendy's front garden was covered with crazy paving with the occasional hole for a plant or shrub, and was home to about twenty assorted garden gnomes. There was also a large plastic windmill, a small wooden wheelbarrow full of begonias, a stone statue of a naked lady, and a wishing well. One of the

gnomes sat on the edge of the well dangling a fishing rod into it. He was Tilly's favourite.

'Oooh, look!' shouted Tilly excitedly as they reached Auntie Wendy's gate. 'Auntie Wendy's got a new bird. Isn't he lovely?'

In pride of place, standing on an oval-shaped piece of mirrored glass that was held in place by a border of assorted stones, was a magnificent pink, plastic flamingo. Tilly loved Auntie Wendy's front garden. It reminded her of one of those places at the seaside where you could play golf (except, perhaps, for the naked lady). Tilly's mother didn't seem quite so keen.

'He's certainly rather colourful.'

Auntie Wendy appeared from the side of the house before they were even halfway down the front path. She greeted them with a broad smile, open arms and asked, 'What do you think of my Englebert?' nodding towards the flamingo. 'The kids got him for my birthday.'

'I think he's lovely,' said Tilly firmly.

Her mother smiled and handed Auntie Wendy the flowers.

'Happy birthday, Wendy.'

Auntie Wendy took the flowers, clearly delighted, and then looked at Tilly's mother's worried face, pale despite the warm sunshine.

'What you need is a nice cup of tea and a piece of my birthday cake. But first, you have to let me try out my present from Bill.'

She ushered them into the back garden and made them stand together under the apple tree. She disappeared into

the house and reappeared almost immediately holding a small, black rectangular object in her hand. She held it up to one eye, and pointed it towards them.

'Say "cheese"!'

Click.

4

Tilda

The black dog is behind me as I struggle to make progress along the promenade. Eli is my wingman. The freezing wind has already lashed my face into a numb mask and slapped my cheeks cherry red. If I were to unbutton my coat and hold it wide open, I should be whisked up immediately into the pale blue skies like a human kite, and with nobody to hold my string I might be lost forever. But Eli is always there to hold my string. For a moment, I'm almost tempted, but instead, I turn up the collar of my coat and burrow myself deeper inside it. A sudden gust steals my hat and whips it into the air like an escaped balloon. It swoops and rolls into the path of a man walking a safe distance in front of me. He tries to recapture the fugitive hat with flailing grabs and snatches, and it teases him for a moment before flying skywards and then pitching defiantly into the sea. The man turns to face me, raising his shoulders in an exaggerated gesture of regret like a mime artist. I am too far away from him to see his face clearly, but I have a feeling that it would be a kind one. I could have taken a more sheltered route through the town, but I needed the sea. Watching it through a window is never

enough. I had to smell its raw saltiness and hear it bang onto the beach and roar across the pebbles. I have left the flat to buy food. I brought enough with me to make a decent breakfast, but I'm planning to stay for a few days at least, and will therefore need more than toast and marmalade. Without my hat, my ears are beginning to ring and the wind is whipping icy tears down my cheeks. I turn away from the sea and head up towards the town while the muscles in my face can still move. Eli follows at a distance; watchful, respectful, guarding. I know that no one else can see him. For as long as I can remember, I have been able to see things that most other people can't. It used to make life hard for me. It tainted me somehow; made me an oddity. But over the years I have learned that it is better to be the real me in secret, so I pretend to be like everyone else. It's not how I want to live, but it makes for a life less complicated. And it's made me stronger, tougher. I don't *need* anyone's company. I'm enough on my own.

I am in no hurry, and wander through the streets peering into shop windows that frame their goods like some wildly eclectic art gallery. My taste buds are being tempted by the warm scent of freshly baked bread and the sight of patisserie tarts and pastries, sitting in rows like little jewelled cushions. Finally, I begin the shopping that has been delayed long enough by my meanderings.

When I have bought enough food to sustain my body and enough wine to fortify my spirit, I head back towards the seafront. Despite the loss of my hat, the sea pulls me back like the seductive endearments of a cruel lover. The little shops along the promenade are

opening up now, but there are few customers. This was once my playground for a short but blissful time; my childhood kingdom where I was happy, free and safe. I knew all the shopkeepers and stallholders by name. The fish man was called Walter, and every now and then he used to give me a free punnet of cockles, soused in pungent brown vinegar, and a little wooden fork with which to eat them. Madame Petulengro would let me gaze into her crystal ball and play Snap with her tarot cards, and Ralph and Ena, who sold postcards and rock and all sorts of seaside souvenirs, used to sing songs with rude words in like 'bum' and 'bugger'. Well, Ralph did, and Ena used to tell me not to sing them when I got home. Conrad, who was foreign (probably Polish, I think now, but as a child, 'foreign' was as much as I could tell), would sit on an upturned rowing boat on the beach outside Walter's shack mending fishing nets. He always had a cigarette between his lips that remained in place even when he was eating, drinking or speaking. I was fascinated by his extraordinary proficiency in smoking, but his impenetrable accent coupled with his permanent cigarette meant that I never understood a word he said to me. But I remember that he had a kind smile. It didn't last, though, that golden syrup, 'sun has got his hat on' happiness. It was so long ago, but even now with the memory of it comes the feeling that my stomach is full of clay. Queenie's was the only place where I have ever felt that I truly belonged, and it was the only time in my life when I felt completely safe. My mother must have known this. She must have realised that Queenie's was the happiest home I ever had, where I was surrounded by people I loved; people

who loved me back. But still my mother sent me away. That it happened so soon after I came out of hospital and she offered no satisfactory explanation for my exile made it worse. I remember sitting on my bed next to the suitcase she had packed for me, begging her to let me stay. But she ignored my tears and led me downstairs to where the taxi was waiting. All she would say was that it was for my own good. It was a callous and undeserved punishment that I never understood, and she never attempted to justify any further. I don't recall anything about my accident, but I do remember with agonising clarity that my mother snatched from me my childhood paradise of seaside, pier and ballroom, and condemned me to a prison of polished corridors, draughty classrooms and stuffy dormitories. The tang of the sea, vinegar on hot chips and fresh doughnuts was driven away by the stench of boiled cabbage and damp games kit. I was a fish out of water until I left, ten years later, with an excellent education and an irreparable sense of grievance. I came back for the school holidays, but it was never the same. I hardly saw my mother, and life at my beloved Queenie's and on the pier moved on without me. The subtle shifts and changes of everyday life were lost to me, and I became little more than a tourist. Even at Queenie's I was a guest in the place that used to be my home. The one consolation was that *she* always loved me just the same. Queenie was a second mother to me then, and there have been many times in my life when I have wished that she was my first.

I walk briskly, heavily shrouded in my thick coat, my shoulders hunched against the wind. I know without

looking that Eli will have broken into a leisurely trot to keep up with my stride, and that his tail will be gently wagging. As I climb the steps to the front door of the flat, someone calls my name.

'Tilda, how are you my dear? Sorting through your mother's things, I expect.'

It is Miss Dane. Penelope Dane; my mother's neighbour from the ground-floor flat. She is at least as old as Winnie the Pooh, and stands as upright as a Girl Guide at a church parade. She is a lifelong exponent of the A-line tweed skirt, twinset and silk scarf brigade, and doesn't hold with teabags, daytime television or whinging of any sort. Or euphemisms.

'I'm really awfully sorry she's dead. I used to enjoy our little chats over a cup of tea. She was an extraordinary woman, your mother. Still, perhaps you'd like to join me for tea one day while you're here? Tomorrow. Around four?'

No, I wouldn't really.

'Yes, of course.'

I had no idea that my mother and Penelope Dane used to have tea together. I had always assumed that they were simply neighbours on little more than nodding acquaintance.

I set down my shopping bags and reach into the depths of my pocket for the key. I look down at the street below. Eli is gone. He will be inside the flat already, waiting patiently for me.

It is almost lunchtime, and the wind and walking has made me hungry. I hang my coat on the coat stand in the hallway and take my bags through to the kitchen. The flat is warm, and light floods in through the large

sash windows and French doors. The warmth is supplied by the excellent central heating system that was barely troubled during Mother's residence. She had it installed several years ago and then treated it like a front parlour; she only used it for best. It wasn't as though she couldn't afford the bills – it was simply that she regarded it as unnecessary for everyday use. I always packed extra sweaters when I came to stay with her, and woolly socks to wear in bed. When I arrived last night, I cranked up the thermostat, fully expecting a subsequent plumbing catastrophe. But the machine clicked obligingly, and somewhere, in the heart of the boiler, a flame had gently blown into life. It felt like a small act of rebellion against my mother to be so profligate with the pilot light.

In the kitchen, I begin preparing my lunch. Eli is lying under the table, keeping me locked in his steady gaze. I break some of the fresh, crusty bread onto a plate, and press some creamy butter onto its soft and still slightly warm insides. I add a couple of thin slices of cheese to the plate, a dollop of pickle, and a small bunch of grapes. I'm also going to have a glass of wine; or two. I feel half as though I'm on holiday. I fetch a glass from the cabinet in the sitting room and rinse it under the tap. It is etched glass with a large, delicate bowl and a tall, slender stem twisted like barley sugar. It is clearly also 'for best'; a precious confection spun out of fragile, glistening glass. But what good is its beauty if it is never seen and never used? It might just as well be a plastic tumbler. What was my mother saving it for? She could hardly have been expecting a chance call from a local dignitary, or a random visit from a passing celebrity or minor member of the royal

family. My mother seems to have lived her whole life buttoned up in a stiff, starchy suit of 'what ifs', 'keep for bests' and 'what will people thinks'. A bright summer dress of 'chase the stars', 'seize the days' and 'hang the consequences' might have fitted her so much better if only she had dared to try it on. I think that may have been who she was inside, but I never got to see her. Her caution was stultifying, and she passed her days permanently under its sedation. And now I am beginning to be just a little afraid that I might be a bit like her. I am certainly hiding who I really am. It's not a legacy I welcome. I don't want to be that woman who wastes her whole life wearing the wrong dress. I fetch another glass from the cabinet and fill it with sparkling mineral water; and then another one, just for the hell of it.

After a leisurely lunch, which has dirtied three of the best wine glasses (I put the grape pips in the third), I am ready to resume the task of sorting through my mother's things. After the wine, I don't want to do anything sensible like tackling the post that is mounting in an unsteady pile on the bamboo table in the hallway. I wander through to her bedroom with the intention of emptying the drawers of her dressing table. I sit down heavily on the bed and, as I do so, my boot catches something heavy and solid underneath it. My mother was not a woman who shoved things under the bed as a matter of course. She was a woman who dusted under the bed as a matter of decency. It's a box; a polished, walnut box with an intricate brass lock. Its mottled lid glows and gleams with the rich colours of caramel, honey and lemon curd. And it's locked. There are only

two things that I can think of that someone would keep locked in a box under a bed: treasures and secrets. Either way, I need to find the key. I pick up the framed photograph from the dressing table and stare at the child I used to be next to the woman who so spectacularly failed to be the mother I wanted. What were her secrets and where was the key?