

Hay Bales and Hollyhocks

Sheila Newberry was born in Suffolk and spent a lot of time there both before and during the war. She wrote her first 'book' before she was ten – all sixty pages of it – in purple ink. Her family has certainly been her inspiration and she has been published most of her adult life. She spent forty years living in Kent with her husband John on a smallholding, and has nine children and twenty-two lively grandchildren. They retired back to Suffolk where Sheila still lives today.

Also by Sheila Newberry

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The Family at Number Five

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The Gingerbread Girl

The Girl With No Home

Hot Pies on the Tram Car

Molly's Journey

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The Punch and Judy Girl

The Watercress Girls

*Sheila
Newberry*

Hay Bales
and
Hollyhocks

ZAFFRE

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*For: Judith Murdoch, in warm appreciation of her belief in,
and encouragement of, my writing.*

PROLOGUE

1968

They parked the hump-backed van ‘nose to peg’ on the river bank. The scrubby, triangular field bore a number of rectangular yellow patches and the tracks of many wheels. This quiet afternoon in late June the pitch was deserted, so Rosanna and Sim had the prized site.

Rosanna descended barefooted, via the rickety orange-box, from the high cab. Her flowing, flimsy skirt caught in the door as she slammed it.

‘Hang on, stay still, or you’ll tear it,’ Sim told her calmly, as she cried out. Being so tall, he didn’t need the step: he simply reached out, freed her carefully. Then he lifted her down and whirled her round to face the sun-dazzling water, where someone had heaved a large, flat stone to the edge. ‘See, somewhere to sit and watch the boats go by, Rosanna.’

She grimaced ruefully, gesturing at the converted ice-cream van, the previous owner’s name painted over with

multicoloured flowers. Sim's brushstrokes were more careless than inspired. The sides of the van were still embellished with unlikely chocolate flakes stuck into rippled snowballs in danger of toppling golden cones, and frozen, fruity orange-bars on sticks. 'Not even a *wafer* Sim. We didn't stop to shop, going round Cambridge . . .'

'Had to keep going: didn't like the sound of the gears,' he pointed out. 'I'll go to the farm, and see what I can scrounge. We need water from the standpipe in the yard, we can't dip our bottles in the river, not nowadays.'

He had a smiling, tanned face, black, wiry hair hanging way past his shoulders, a glinting ring in his earlobe: he was nothing like Derry, as she remembered him. She flung her arms impulsively around Sim, hugged him tight. Her shell beads made their mark, for his shirt was unbuttoned.

'Hey!' he said in mock protest. 'What's that about?'

'About coming back,' her voice was muffled, 'after all these years . . .'

He freed himself, put his hands on her shoulders, gazed thoughtfully into her upturned face with its pale-painted lips, hazel eyes outlined with kohl. She was not as young as she seemed – perhaps ten years his senior, but she'd not said. The attraction had been mutual, when they met a few weeks ago. Maybe it was not love as she once knew it, but that had led to despair, to her present unconventional life.

Her long, light hair and loose clothing suited her; it was hard to imagine her in the pert mini-dresses, white tights

and high boots of the city girls who thus proclaimed their liberation. That new world she had discarded, along with her family: Wendy and Baz, her parents; Russ, her brother, and Marcy, her little sister; her aunt Janet and her husband Jim; Grandma Birdie, only she and Jim were long gone; and, perhaps most of all, her cousin Merle, and Derry, who wasn't really a cousin at all.

'You've been here before?' he asked. He knew nothing of her past, whereas he'd confided to her what she'd already guessed regarding his: drop-out from university; disapproving family; joining the endless trail. In search of . . . what?

'I was born a few miles upriver. It's tidal, the Great Ouse. I sailed along it once to the Wash . . .' Her husky voice trailed off. With Derry, she thought, and with Merle . . .

The sudden splash of fish in the water startled the stillness.

'Tell me later. Better get on,' he added laconically.

When he returned with a plastic container of water in one hand and a box under the other arm, she was sitting on the stone, her legs tucked under her skirt, combing out her hair. No pile of sticks, no fire, no spitting kettle. Just her banjo, on the grass beside her.

He said merely: 'You look like a mermaid, Rosanna.'

'I was dreaming of a floating moon . . .'

He showed no surprise. 'Maybe tonight, you never know.'

PART ONE

ONE

1938

‘Rosy, wake up!’ Merle hissed in her ear. ‘There’s something you *must* see, but don’t make a sound . . .’

It was a summer’s night, with moonlight flooding the surrounding fens; the time when Rosanna Bloomfield was four and her cousin Merle Bird seven years old.

They crept past Grandma Birdie’s room, which she shared temporarily with Rosanna’s mother Wendy; past Merle’s parents’ bedroom. They hesitated briefly by the little flight of stairs which led to Derry’s attic where he’d pinned a paper on the door: ENTER AT YOUR PERIL! which Merle ruefully said meant *them*. Then they went stealthily down the main staircase, through the big kitchen to the unlocked back door.

‘I haven’t got my slippers on,’ Rosanna whispered. Mummy would be cross if she knew. She shivered in her pyjamas because she wasn’t wearing her dressing-gown either. The temperature had dropped sharply from the heat

of the day. She wanted only to dive back into bed under the covers, but where Merle led, she must follow, as Merle followed Derry.

‘Don’t be a baby,’ Merle whispered back. ‘Nor have I.’ But once outside, she gripped Rosanna’s hand tightly.

Across the way, the pumping station was brightly illuminated. There was the insistent throb of the engines as the pistons worked smoothly away, for the water-levels were constantly monitored. Last spring, after anxious weeks of heavy rain, with the army standing by awaiting orders from the Catchment Board and evacuation of the farming families a distinct possibility, the Ouse had finally overflowed and flooded the fens, a disaster from which the fenlanders were still recovering. The house smelled still of river water, Merle’s mother Janet said, even though it had dried out.

The odour of oil and grease threatened, as usual, an upheaval in Rosanna’s tummy. She willed herself not to retch. Through a window, they glimpsed Merle’s father Jim in his dark boiler suit, rubbing his hands on a rag. His balding head glistened with sweat. He was talking to Nipper, his assistant. The children didn’t stop, as they usually did, to see which of them could hang upside down and turn over the most times on the cold metal bar that provided a handhold up the slope to the door. Rosanna had chinked her teeth on the metal yesterday and she seemed to have the taste of it still in her mouth.

They scurried along the plank bridge over the river, disregarding the danger of splinters in bare feet. The river narrowed at this point, a hundred yards from the isolated house. When they reached the middle of the bridge Merle commanded Rosanna to look down.

'I-I can't. I might fall in.' The wooden rail was decidedly shaky.

'Course you won't. I've got a hold on your trousers, lean over as much as you like! See it? A floating moon! Dad says it's lucky, so you and me can make a wish . . .'

Rosanna's terrified scream echoed around them; she was aware not only of the wavering reflection of the full moon, but of a mass of wriggling black shapes highlighted in the water.

Instantly, Merle clapped her hand over Rosanna's mouth.

'*Snakes!*' Rosanna choked, as Derry glided alongside and leapt from Jim's rowing-boat to the bank. He tied up before turning his attention to the little girls, transfixed on the bridge.

'Didn't expect to find *you* here, giving the game away with that racket,' he scolded. 'They're elvers, Rosy, baby eels. This was once the Island of Eels, after all – how Ely got its name, before they drained the fens. I've been *miles* upriver,' he boasted. 'Caught a fish with the old meat-hook, and I was looking forward to a fry-up. But here's Uncle Jim with the dog.'

Jim took in the situation at a glance. He scooped Rosanna up on his shoulders, saying mildly, 'Just look

at you in your jimjams. I don't know what your mother will think!' He put on a gruff voice for Merle and said *she* was old enough to know better. He gave Derry a look, but allowed him to bring up the rear as they walked to the house, with Topper the Jack Russell leaping up and nosing at Derry's haversack, which held the fish.

'He didn't tell me off, not then,' Derry said ruefully next morning at breakfast. 'He bagged my catch and said if I was keen to work at nights, I could clean up an oil spill. *Your* fault, Rosy, startling Nipper when you yelled. I wanted to get to bed, as the feast was off, but no such luck...' He didn't look bleary-eyed; at almost thirteen he seemed to have boundless energy and, as Janet remarked, he appeared to grow taller by the day.

'He didn't whop you?' Merle asked. Not that her easy-going father had ever laid a hand on her, his only child. She was well named, with those blackbird-wings of hair framing her freckled face and bright, dark eyes.

'Not his way, you know that. I've to chop a load of wood this morning for the stove. I thought I was on holiday while my parents are abroad!'

'No such luck,' Merle mimicked him saucily.

Janet turned from the kitchen stove where she was cooking eggs and bacon for Jim, who was washing and changing after his night's stint.

‘No such luck for you either, Merle. You can help with washing-up. Fancy taking Rosy outside at that time of night – and scaring her, too . . . If you’ve finished your boiled egg, ask Grandma and Aunt Wendy what they fancy for breakfast – hint that it’s time to rise and shine. The sun’s been high this past hour or so . . .’

‘Can I go, too?’ Rosanna asked quickly. She wiped the egg yolk off her mouth with her serviette, bunching it clumsily through the Donald Duck ring, kept for her exclusive use. Aunt Jan knew how to make you feel special.

‘All right. But no jumping on Mummy, mind, she can do without that, at the moment. Put your dishes in the sink. A bit more bacon, Derry?’ Janet winked at him, to show she wasn’t cross. He was Jim’s nephew, one of the Bird clan, but she was as fond of him as if he was her own flesh and blood, like Rosanna. She’d have loved a big family, but was nudging forty now. Looking at her, you could imagine what Merle would be like later on.

‘Right ho, Aunt Jan, thanks,’ Derry agreed readily. He patted his lean torso. ‘Wonder why I’m so thin, when I eat so much?’

‘*Worms!*’ Merle called back, as she scuttled up the stairs with Rosanna at her heels. ‘There’s nasty medicine for that . . .’

‘That’s not nice,’ Rosanna reproved her.

‘You’re shooting up,’ Janet told Derry. ‘You’ll fill out later; be broad like your dad and your Uncle Jim, I reckon.’

*

Grandma Birdie was still snoozing. Time had ceased to matter to her. Sometimes she went to bed in the early evening, even before Rosanna at seven o'clock; sometimes she was still pottering about at midnight, making messy fish-paste sandwiches that she shared with the mewling cats, and cocoa. Cups set down carelessly left white rings on the table. Janet's way was to allow her to do as she liked; her mother-in-law had been kind to her when she first married Jim, left King's Lynn and had to learn fen ways.

Wendy sighed, came to reluctantly. 'What's the time?' she yawned. Rosanna resembled her mother. Both had biscuit-coloured hair, hazel eyes, snub noses and fair skin. Although Wendy had long since outgrown her sickly childhood, Janet cosseted and protected her younger sister still.

Wendy was expecting her second child at any moment. Her husband Basil hoped to return from sales trips round the agricultural merchants of East Anglia in time for the birth. He'd taken the precaution of leaving his wife here for the last month of her pregnancy, though at home in King's Lynn medical facilities were more easily accessible. Janet had cared for Wendy when Rosanna was born; she'd do the same for the new baby. It was a family tradition.

'You know I can't tell the time yet,' Rosanna reproached her mother now. Daddy had decreed, with a nudge from his wife, no wrist-watch until she had learned to do so. He was the more easy-going of her parents and Rosanna missed him when he was away.

Merle regarded the roman numerals on her watch. She herself had only recently fathomed the numbers out. 'Thirty-five minutes past – no, twenty-five to eight! Mum says what d'you fancy for breakfast?'

'Nothing,' Wendy said faintly, just as Grandma Birdie decided, 'A nice poached egg, lovey. Make sure the white ain't watery, mind.' She put one sticklike leg out of bed, then the other, with a pink bedsock hanging off her toes, pausing to get her breath back before the rest of her emerged.

'Get up and get washed, then,' Merle told them cheekily. 'Nothing won't take long to cook!'

How could it take any time at all? Rosanna puzzled.

Then Wendy was gulping and saying, 'Get Jan – right away, girls –'

'Do as she says,' Grandma Birdie advised, suddenly galvanised into action, reaching for her flannel gown hanging from the bedknob, and her slippers under the hang of the bedspread. There wasn't time to ferret out the missing bedsock. 'Better get me teeth in, I suppose,' she added.

Why did Grandma Birdie need her false teeth, when she usually didn't bother? Rosanna wondered.

The girls were dispatched to watch Derry splitting logs on the splinter-covered patch of ground outside the woodshed. Nipper whizzed past on his bike, his long legs pumping like

the greased pistons he had handed over to the relief engineer. He was heading towards the road.

‘Gotta fetch the doc, Jan says keep the gals out here, Derry – s’long as it do take . . .’

Rosanna’s face puckered. Derry put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

‘Mummy –’ she began uncertainly. She’d been told about the baby of course, even where it was growing, Aunt Janet had insisted on that, but no one said how it would escape from Mummy’s tummy. Would it burst, like a balloon? She shuddered. Derry gave her shoulder a squeeze.

‘Your mum’s all right, nothing for you to worry about. Babies get born every minute all over the world. You can see her as soon as it’s all over. When I’ve finished up here, we three might go for a walk.’

‘Can’t we go out in the boat?’ Merle wheedled.

‘Maybe.’

‘I’d rather watch your puppets, Derry,’ Rosanna said, thinking fearfully of what she’d seen in the water last night. Whatever the others said, she *knew* they were snakes . . .

‘Good idea,’ Derry approved. ‘They’ll have to let us in sooner or later. Treat for this evening, though, eh?’

Doc Baxter bumped his car along the rough track, veered to the cinder drive to the house, tyres squealing, waving at them through the door flap.

‘Shouldn’t be long now,’ Derry assured Rosanna.

'You don't know,' Merle reminded him. 'You haven't got any brothers or sisters.'

Derry chopped into a large log, making them jump as wood-shavings flew.

'Feels as if I have, with you two tagging along all the time.'

They were having a 'scratch lunch' on the river bank. Jim sat with them for five minutes while they ate cheese rolls and Grandma Birdie's rock-of-ages jam tarts.

Merle poked Rosanna on the back.

'Uncle Jim,' Rosy began reluctantly.

'Yes, Rosy?'

'Can Derry take us out in the boat?'

'Don't see why not,' he agreed unexpectedly. 'Just to the bend, mind, not to Ely. It's easy to imagine it's not as far as it is, when you can see the cathedral: it's an illusion, you see.'

'Like the floating moon?' Merle asked.

Just what was an illusion? Rosanna wondered.

'It's all that sky, the water-level above the land. Bewitching, that's what your mum said when I first brought her here. Sometimes I get the feeling I'm still at sea.'

Rosanna found that puzzling. What did he mean? She looked up. In the vast sky a cloud or two billowed like ships' sails.

'Might have good news, when you get back. Listen for my whistle.'

Rosanna took off her sandals, following Merle's example, because there was the usual puddle in the well of the boat. Derry steadied it, with one foot on the bank, settling her beside Merle, opposite the rowlocks.

'Only fish today,' he whispered. But she daren't look at the water; she watched Derry at the oars. Droplets showered them, pleasant in the heat. She noticed the scab on one knee, which he'd scraped a day or two back when he'd slithered down the rough bark of the big tree where he was building a hide. There weren't too many trees on the marshes, he'd said, so you had to make the most of 'em. There was plenty of wildlife to watch.

The scab was inflamed at the edges, with gathering yellow pus spots; she recalled a recent throbbing graze on her elbow. She rubbed the place surreptitiously. Uncle Jim said the soil round here was grand for growing vegetables, but good at growing germs too, like lockjaw, which sounded alarming, if you didn't watch out. Derry didn't make a fuss about that sort of thing; he'd insisted it was nothing when Janet tried to examine it yesterday. He was so much older and braver than she was, though he was visibly wincing now as he flexed his legs with the effort of rowing.

'One day,' Derry told them, his floppy fair hair lifting off his forehead in a sudden, welcome river breeze, 'I'm going to circumnavigate the world; I'm going to sail across the great oceans and round the Cape of Good Hope.' His clear blue eyes looked beyond them, as if out

to sea. He came from a family of sailors, after all: his forebears from Lynn had trawled the icy waters round Greenland in the last century.

‘And *I’m* coming with you!’ Merle asserted confidently.

Rosanna wanted to echo that, but she knew they wouldn’t believe her. She was a cry-baby, as Merle said. Derry was much kinder. That’s why Merle was jealous: Aunt Janet sometimes reproved her for that.

They duly turned at the bend; they swished through the water and were soon back at their mooring. They heard Uncle Jim’s whistle as they stepped out onto dry land, and it was echoed by the exuberant honking of Doc Baxter’s horn as he left the house. The baby had arrived!

TWO

Wendy, propped up in bed, cradled a little white flannel-wrapped bundle in her arms. Rosanna glimpsed a red, wrinkled neck, black hair; this gave her a funny feeling inside, she didn't know why.

'Not now, Merle,' Janet restrained her, as Rosanna went through the door. 'I'll be back in a few minutes,' she called out to her sister. 'Jim's phoning Basil's office, to see if they can contact him. Perhaps they'll let him come straight here when they hear what a rough time of it you've had.'

'You've got a baby brother, Rosy, are you pleased?' Wendy asked. Her voice sounded funny, faint. 'Would you like to sit by me, and hold him?'

Rosanna shook her head, but she said what she thought her mother wanted to hear.

'He's nice, Mummy. What's his name?'

'Russell, we thought, Daddy and me, because that was my maiden name. Russ for short. Goes with Rosy, doesn't it?'

Rosanna wasn't sure, but nodded dutifully. 'Have you got to stay in bed?' she asked. Was Mummy ill?

‘For a few days. You need rest when you’ve had a baby, you see . . .’

Janet reappeared. ‘Isn’t he lovely? What a whopper! Nearly ten pounds. Rosanna, you’re a very lucky girl. Downstairs now, it’s teatime. I have to see to Mummy.’

See to what? Rosanna wondered. And why was she lucky? If she hadn’t seen the snakes last night, she would have wished on the floating moon for a baby sister because no brother could ever live up to Derry.

Merle set the chairs out in a semicircle in the kitchen. Rosanna, on her father’s lap, leaned possessively against his hairy tweed jacket, sniffing the reassuring odours of pipe and brilliantine. She fiddled with his tie while Captain Codswallop, that spiky old fisherman, with red cheeks and nose, white beard and fierce eyebrows, berated his wife as usual. The puppets’ heads were rough-hewn by Derry, he’d improvised the script, and his hands manipulated them within their baggy clothes, courtesy of Janet’s ragbag. The puppets wrangled on the shelf of the half-door to the pantry, where Derry crouched, unseen, on the stone-flagged floor.

Ma Codswallop disappeared under the counter, reappeared with a baby in her arms. She rocked it furiously, lah-lahing.

‘What’s this?’ the captain cried. ‘That ain’t mine, I tell yer . . . I been away too long at sea!’ He held up his hand, counted the fingers. ‘One, two, three, *four* years . . .’

His wife said in an aside: 'Not long enough, old feller . . .' Then, 'It's a wise child as knows its own father,' she insisted. She dodged the upraised stick he displayed threateningly, turning the bundle to face the audience. '*Look!*' she cried, in triumph.

Derry had been busy with glue, cotton wool and Janet's only lipstick. The baby sported a beard and bulbous nose like the captain. Basil joined in the laughter.

'Are you trying to tell me something?' he joked to Derry. 'I didn't notice young Russ's moustache! Mind, I'd barely had time to tell Wendy how clever she was to produce a baby boy this time when Janet said Rosy wanted me to watch the show.'

'Off to bed now,' Grandma Birdie reminded the little girls. 'I'll be up shortly! I'm sleeping alongside you, tonight.'

'Are you sure you don't mind giving up your room, Grandma?' Basil asked. 'It'll be for a couple of weeks, I'm taking my holiday as from now.'

'My dear, it's no trouble.'

'Can someone give me a hand?' Derry called. 'My leg's stiffened up . . .'

'I knew I should've asked Doc Baxter to look at that while he was here,' Janet worried.

'Stockholm tar, or a dab of iodine, that'll do it,' Jim advised.

'Not if I can help it,' Derry said, as his uncle hauled him up. His face was flushed.

'I'll pop in and say goodnight,' Basil told Rosanna. 'Be good for Grandma Birdie, mind.'

'Can I go and see Mummy first? *Please*, Daddy.'

'Better not, darling, she's asleep, and so, I hope, is the baby. You can see them in the morning, but you must wait until after the nurse has been. No more jumping in our bed first thing . . .'

Rosanna's face puckered. 'I'm not a lucky girl,' she said loudly. 'I'm *not* . . .'

 Basil looked appealingly at Janet.

'Well, I think you are, Rosy, and you soon will, too,' she said, giving her niece a warm hug.

Jim and Basil raised a glass or two to the baby while Janet settled mother and baby for the night. She came downstairs just as Jim was about to go and check all was running smoothly under Nipper's care.

'Jim, get on the telephone over there. Tell Doc Baxter he's needed. This is an emergency, I reckon.'

'Not Wendy, is it?' Basil exclaimed.

'No, she's comfortable, apart from those wretched stitches. It's Derry. I looked in, and he's running a fever, babbling. He could have blood poisoning, from that scabby knee.'

'Bad enough to get the doc out again, is it?'

'I wouldn't say so if it wasn't.'

'All right, old girl. You get him ready. Shan't be long.'

'Want me to carry him down here, put him on the settle?' Basil asked.

‘Good idea, Baz. Can you manage by yourself?’

‘I’ll shout if I need help.’

‘Oh, don’t do that, we don’t want the girls rushing to see what’s up . . .’

Rosanna, sandwiched between Merle and Grandma Birdie in bed, was still awake. She managed to free one hand, rub her tear-filled eyes. The stairs creaked. She strained her ears. There was Daddy’s voice: ‘Easy does it, put your arms round my neck . . .’ And Aunt Janet: ‘Careful, now . . .’

Then Merle shushed her, nipped out of bed and crossed to the window. It was still fairly light outside, the moon not yet shining, but there was a yellow dazzle from car headlights, visible through the gap in the curtains.

‘Doc Baxter. Wonder why he’s back?’ Merle plumped back into bed, giving her cousin a push nearer their bedmate.

Mummy, Rosanna thought. Mummy’s ill, though she’d said she wasn’t.

‘I need,’ she said urgently, ‘to go.’

‘What, right now?’

‘Yes, *now!*’

‘You’ll have to crawl over me, then, the potty’s under my side . . .’

Rosanna made for the door instead, rushed out on the landing.

‘Daddy, where are you?’ she shouted. All the lights were on downstairs. Her father hurried to the foot of the stairs.

‘Get back to bed at once! Nothing for you to worry about! Don’t let’s hear another peep out of you, until morning . . .’

‘Grow up,’ Merle told her. ‘You’re not the baby of the family any more, Rosy Bloomfield.’

She feared more scolding in the morning, for only babies wet the bed.

But they let her sleep on, in her damp patch, and Rosanna only awoke when she heard Nurse Rayner’s booming voice outside her door.

‘Understand you had a disturbed night, Mr Bloomfield.’ Daddy must be with her. ‘Boy rushed to hospital – you could have done without that excitement, eh? What’s the latest news?’

‘My brother-in-law is ringing the hospital at ten. All well with my wife and the baby?’

‘You’ve, ah, noticed something yourself, have you, Mr Bloomfield?’

‘Well . . . I didn’t want to alarm my wife . . .’

‘Quite right. I’ll ask Doctor to examine the baby thoroughly when he calls. Looks aren’t everything, you know.’

They moved away, went downstairs, saying no more.

Rosanna put on yesterday’s blue cotton shorts and sun-top. No socks, just Clark’s criss-cross sandals. There was no one around to remind her to wash, or brush her hair. She felt suddenly hungry. But she’d look in at Mummy

first, because hadn't Daddy said she could, once Nurse had been?

Her mother lay in bed, face turned to the pillow.

'Mummy,' she began uncertainly.

Wendy was crying. 'They think I don't know, but I *heard* them . . .'

'So did I, Mummy,' the words were tumbling out now. 'Derry's in hospital, he's prob'ly got lockjaw –'

'*Derry?* What *are* you talking about? Rosanna, come here, I need one of your hugs . . .'

But Rosanna, upset by Wendy's reaction, backed away, bumping into Aunt Janet as she came into the room.

'Now, now, what's all this?' Aunt Janet said soothingly.

Rosanna didn't understand. Everyone had been so happy when the baby was born yesterday; Derry had rowed them down the river. Now *he* was very ill in hospital, and Uncle Jim was trying to get in touch with his parents, which was difficult because his brother, Derry's father, was a captain on a big liner and his mother had joined him for the Mediterranean cruise. Aunt Janet had comforted Mummy earlier and said they'd love the baby anyway, wouldn't they, *even if* . . . When she'd realised Rosanna was eavesdropping, she said, 'Why don't you go downstairs and find Merle, Rosy darling? There's nothing for you to worry about, nothing at all.' But, of course there was.

‘Sandwich?’ Grandma Birdie asked as Rosanna came into the kitchen. She indicated jars of honey and marmite. The table wasn’t laid properly and there was no sizzling bacon. Aunt Janet’s floral pinny hung in folds on Grandma’s spare frame. Merle sat at the table, licking her sticky fingers.

‘Derry’s at death’s door,’ she said dramatically.

Like Aunt Janet, Grandma Birdie tut-tutted and went, ‘Now, now . . .’

Daddy and Uncle Jim appeared, enquiring, ‘What’s cooking, Grandma?’ and Grandma smiled and replied, ‘Wouldn’t you like to know!’

So Uncle Jim stepped into the larder and came out with the cheese dish and said, ‘Well, I *do* know: bread and scrape. Always that, when there’s a crisis in the house, isn’t it?’

Then Doc Baxter, who looked as if he hadn’t shaved this morning, put his head round the kitchen door and said, ‘Anyone at home? Nurse said to make this my first call . . .’

‘I’ve to keep you occupied,’ Merle told Rosanna later, sounding more like seventeen than seven. ‘Uncle Baz asked me to. He wants to talk to Doc Baxter. Mum’s catching the bus into town to the hospital, she’s taking Derry a bag of things. Grandma Birdie’s supposed to be

in charge of us while Dad is working, but she's mangling the washing, even though Mum said to leave it till she gets back. Fancy playing snakes – whoops! – and ladders? Or ludo?'

'Dollies?' Rosanna ventured.

'Dolls are for babies, Rosy.' However, Merle opened the lid of the toy-box and rummaged around. 'Here's Ted, and here's Jazzy – her eyes have disappeared down her neck. Mum pulls 'em back with a crochet hook, they're on elastic, you see. Will she do?'

Poor Jasmine did indeed stare blankly, though she looked better when Rosanna covered her nakedness with crumpled clothes. She put her in the doll's pram and wheeled it round the kitchen floor.

Then Daddy came back; he grabbed hold of Rosanna and hugged her tight.

'I'm sorry I neglected you this morning, darling . . .'

Doc Baxter was right behind him; he cleared his throat noisily, and told Basil, 'I'm sorry, old man. They're the most lovable of all children . . . That's what he'll always be, a child. Make the most of him. You've got your lovely daughter. I'll call in again tomorrow. Goodbye, girls.' And he was gone.

'Put me down, Daddy,' Rosanna said, muffled against Daddy's chest.

Grandma Birdie was in the real world today. She plonked the linen-basket on the table and said encouragingly, 'A nice cup of tea, that's what we can all do with.'

'I know you like grapes.' Janet handed the bag to Derry over the hump in the bedclothes where his leg rested in a cradle. 'Pips, mind, but don't spit 'em on the floor or the nurses'll be after you. Well, how's things today?'

'Not too bad. When can I come home, Aunt Jan?'

'Well, they're moving you to over by the door, they say. That's a good sign.'

A man in the next bed was racked by a bout of harsh coughing.

Janet pulled the curtains briskly round the bed.

'You should be in the children's ward. Poor chap can't help it, but think what you might catch . . .'

'I'm too long in the leg for the kiddies' beds, they say.' Derry picked off a sprig of grapes. 'Go on, you have some, too. How's the baby? Sorry I put a damper on the celebrations.'

Janet hesitated, then confided, 'The baby may be – well, not quite right. Wendy and Baz are very worried, as you can imagine. Doc Baxter's calling this morning to say one way or the other.'

'You shouldn't have come here, it doesn't matter about me,' Derry said, concerned.

'Course it does, Derry. Jim and me, well, we're responsible for you while your parents are away. You know, it's little Rosy I keep thinking about. She'll have to grow up fast, bless her. Wendy will have her work cut out, if what we suspect is true.'

'Merle looking after Rosy, is she?'

'She's promised to.'

'Tell them I'll be back shortly, to keep them in order.'

'I will.'

Rosanna didn't see Derry again because ten days later Daddy drove them home to Lynn. She heard him tell Mummy they would get a second opinion there, but Mummy wept and said what was the use? They both knew what was wrong with the baby and it couldn't be put right.

'Just love and accept him,' Janet said. 'He hardly ever cries.'

'Sometimes I wish he would.' Wendy sighed.

'When will Derry be back?' Rosanna asked, as they loaded up the car.

Janet gave her an affectionate squeeze.

'I'm not sure, lovey, but soon I hope. He's up and down, like a yo-yo, poor boy. But he's hobbling round the ward now, thank goodness. He wanted me to give you this.' She produced a carrier bag. 'Don't look inside till you're under way. His mother will be home shortly, and likely he'll be all right to go back to boarding-school in September, eh? Why don't you write him a letter? He'd appreciate that.'

'I can't write properly yet,' Rosanna reminded her.

'Well, draw him a nice picture; you can sign your name, can't you?'

'I'll write to him,' Merle decided. 'I can do real joined-up writing. Pictures are for babies.'

'Don't tease Rosy, Merle, you know how much you'll miss her.'

'All aboard!' Basil said, screwing on the radiator cap having checked the water-level.

'See you at Christmas!' Jim called, ready to give a bump start if needed, but the little car moved smoothly away.

They all waved: Janet, rosy-cheeked from bending over the bubbling copper, poking the linen; Grandma Birdie, hanging on to Merle so she wouldn't dash forward and get run over; Jim and Nipper smudged with oil.

In little more than a year's time, the war began. Jim, being in the Royal Naval Reserve, was called up; Basil joined the army; and Janet, Merle and Grandma Birdie left the pumping-station and moved to Lynn, to live with Wendy and her family in a terraced house near the Muck Works. As for Derry, evacuated with his school, Rosanna didn't see him for a long, long time. But she sat his puppets on top of her books on her bedroom shelf.