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# *Prologue*

*March 2020*



The arrivals hall at Vienna airport was so quiet that Lorna had no difficulty picking her out, even though they had never met before. She had short brown hair and a boyish figure and brown eyes that lit up when Lorna peeped out from behind her gigantic instrument case and said:

‘Susanne, right?’

‘Hello,’ Susanne answered, stringing out the word in a sing-song way, and then, after a moment’s hesitation, she drew Lorna into a welcoming hug. ‘We’re still allowed to do this, aren’t we?’

‘Of course we are.’

‘I’m so excited you’re here at last.’

‘Me too,’ said Lorna, automatically. But it was true.

‘Good flight?’

‘Fine. Not too busy.’

‘I’ve brought my car.’ She looked with sudden apprehension at the gleaming black flight case that contained Lorna’s double bass, and said: ‘I hope it’s big enough.’

Outside it felt almost cold enough to snow, and the street lights cast sparse coronas of amber across the night air. As they walked to the car park, Susanne asked more questions about the flight (did they check your temperature at the airport?), asked Lorna if she was hungry (she wasn’t) and explained some things about the arrangements for the next few days. Lorna and Mark would be staying in the same hotel, but he was flying in from Edinburgh, and wouldn’t arrive in Vienna until tomorrow morning. Their gig would start at around nine in the evening, and the next day they would take the train to Munich.

‘I can’t come with you to the concerts in Germany,’ she said. ‘Much as I would like to. The label just doesn’t have the budget to pay for my travel. We’re doing everything on a shoestring. Which is why you’re being picked up in this, and not a stretch limo.’

She was talking about her own car, a ten-year-old Volvo estate covered with scratches and dents which did not inspire Lorna with confidence. Nevertheless, it certainly seemed big enough for the job in hand.

‘This should be fine,’ Lorna said, but when she took a closer look inside the car, she saw an unexpected problem. There was a baby seat in the back, surrounded by all the detritus of someone for whom childcare was the number one priority – wet wipes, food wrappers, plastic toys, soothers – but more worryingly, every remaining square inch seemed to be filled with rolls of toilet paper, plastic-wrapped in packs of nine. She reckoned there were about twenty packs in there.

‘Sorry about these,’ said Susanne. ‘Let me just . . . Well, let’s see what we can do.’

They began by trying to get the bass into the car through the boot lid, but it immediately encountered a solid wall of toilet rolls. Lorna took out about nine or ten packs and put them on the tarmac but they still couldn’t slide the neck of the bass through all the packs of toilet paper on the back seat. So then they took the top layer of rolls off the seat and stacked them by the side of the car and between them managed to manoeuvre the bass deep inside, past the baby seat, so that its head was almost touching the windscreen and the boot lid would just about close. When they tried to pack all the toilet rolls around it, however, they wouldn’t fit.

‘Maybe if we took the instrument out of the case,’ said Susanne, ‘and filled the case with toilet paper . . . No, I don’t think that would work.’

Eventually the problem was solved when Lorna sat in the passenger seat with the neck of the bass pressed up against her cheek, and Susanne loaded eight or nine packs of toilet paper onto her lap, in a tower which reached to the roof of the car.

‘Do you feel safe?’ she asked, anxiously, as she began to drive along the almost empty roads leading towards the centre of Vienna.

‘Very,’ said Lorna. ‘They’re like an air bag. If we crash into something they’ll probably save my life.’

‘You don’t look very comfortable. I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t worry, I’m fine.’ After a moment or two, she said: ‘Look, it’s kind of . . . an obvious question, but why have you bought so much loo paper?’

Susanne glanced at her in surprise, as though the answer was self-evident. ‘I just decided to stock up. I mean, maybe I went overboard a bit, but still . . . you can’t be too careful, can you?’ She drove on, negotiating a set of traffic lights. But she could tell that Lorna didn’t really understand her explanation. ‘Because of the virus, right?’ she added, to leave no room for doubt.

‘You think it’s that serious?’

‘Who knows? But yes, I think so. Have you seen the footage from Wuhan? And now the whole of Italy’s been locked down.’

‘Yes, I heard,’ Lorna said. ‘They’re not going to do anything like that here, are they? I mean, there’s no chance the gig tomorrow will be cancelled?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think so. It’s already sold out, you know. It’s not a huge venue – two hundred or so – but that’s pretty good for jazz these days. And in the morning a journalist wants to speak to you, for a music website. So there’s a lot of interest. Everything’s going to run smoothly, don’t worry.’

Lorna allowed the relief to show on her face. This tour was a huge thing for her. The first time she and Mark had taken their live set out of the UK; the first time anyone had paid for them to play more than one gig at a time; her first earnings from music in over a year. By day she was one of four women working on the reception desk of a fifteen-storey office block in central Birmingham. Her colleagues had a vague idea that she played music in her spare time but they would have been amazed to know that something like this was happening: that someone was paying for her to go to Austria and Germany, that she was being put up in hotels – that a journalist, for heaven’s sake (even a journalist from a website), wanted to interview her. Lorna had been looking forward to the tour for weeks, living for it. It would break her heart if this weird little virus were to derail everyone’s plans.

Susanne left her at the hotel and promised to come round in the morning, straight after breakfast. It was a budget place, some miles



from the centre of town. The rooms were tiny, but Lorna was grateful just to be there. For half an hour or more she lay on her bed, thinking. She wondered whose idea it had been to equip such a small room with a strip light that couldn't be dimmed. She wondered why she had chosen to play an instrument that took up more space in the room than she did, and had almost got jammed in the lift. Above all, she wondered why anyone would react to the global spread of a virus by buying almost two hundred rolls of toilet paper. Was this really people's darkest fear: that one day, because of a terrible economic crisis, or a crisis of public health, or the onset of climate catastrophe, they might not be able to wipe their bottoms?

She looked at her watch. Nine-thirty. Eight-thirty in Birmingham. It would be a good time to call home. By 'home' she meant the UK, but she didn't plan to call her husband, Donny, who would be out with his friends by now. Nor did she want to call her parents, who were on holiday, taking advantage of the unexpected (and unwanted) expansion of their leisure time now that Britain had finally left the EU and all the British MEPs were out of a job. No, it was Gran who would be waiting to hear from her. Lorna had promised to Skype her as soon as she landed in Vienna. Gran, for whom every flight was a potential disaster, a plane crash waiting to happen, would be sitting at home in a state of low-level anxiety until Lorna called to say that she was back on *terra firma*.

She sat up on the bed and flipped open her laptop, a cheap purchase from the dodgy electronics dealer down the road from her flat, which so far had served her well. There was no desk or table in the room so she put a pillow on her lap and settled the computer on it, then clicked on her grandmother's Skype username. As usual there was no answer. There never was. Why did she keep trying to do it this way? You had to call her landline first. Landline and letter: Gran didn't trust more modern forms of communication, but she believed in the reality of these. She had owned a tablet for six years now – it had been an eightieth birthday present – but couldn't really work out how to use it. You had to call her landline, call her on Skype at the same time, and talk her through the process. You had to do this every time.

When the rigmarole was over at last, Lorna found herself looking at the usual view on her laptop screen: the top half of Gran's forehead.

'Can you hold it at a different angle?' she said. 'Tilt it down towards you.'

The image shook violently and tilted in the wrong direction. Now all she could see was Gran's hair, permed and tinted blonde as always.

'Is that better?'

'Not really.'

'I can see you all right.'

'That's because I've got the camera in the right place. Never mind, Gran, it doesn't matter.'

'I can see you.'

'That's good.'

'We can still talk anyway.'

'Yep, we can.'

'Where are you?'

'In my hotel room.'

'In Venice?'

'Vienna.'

'That's right. It looks very nice.'

'Yeah, it's pretty cosy.'

'How was your flight?'

'Good.'

'No problems?'

'No problems. How are you, Gran?'

'I'm fine. Just been watching the news.'

'Yes?'

'It's a bit worrying, actually. It's all virus this, virus that.'

'I know. They're talking about it here as well. The woman who picked me up from the airport had about two hundred loo rolls in her car.'

'About two hundred what?'

'Loo rolls.'

'How ridiculous.'

‘Perhaps you should get a few spare ones.’

‘Why on earth would I do that?’

‘Or a few extra tins of baked beans or soup.’

‘Rubbish. People do go over the top. Anyway, Jack usually does the shopping for me, or Martin. They can get me anything I want.’

‘I suppose so. It’s just that . . . nobody seems to know what’s going to happen.’

‘Do you think we’ll get it over here? The virus.’

‘They’ve got it in Italy.’

‘I saw that. Everyone’s been told to stay indoors. It’ll be like the plague, won’t it? The Black Death, and all that caper.’

Lorna smiled. This was one of Gran’s favourite idioms. She used it all the time without realizing it. Only she could describe the Black Death as a ‘caper’.

‘You look after yourself, that’s all,’ Lorna said. ‘Stay inside and take care.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Gran said. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

★

The first two hours of the next morning were spent in a café next to the hotel, where Lorna had breakfast, did her interview, and then met Susanne for coffee. The interview was stressful: she had no experience of talking to journalists. The interviewer was a cheerful hipster in his early thirties who spoke perfect English and seemed to want to ask her more about Brexit and Boris Johnson than harmonics and walking bass lines. When she did finally drag the subject around to music, she ended up talking mainly about other members of her family: about her Uncle Peter, who played violin in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and then about Gran, of all people. ‘I think all my musicality comes from her,’ she said. ‘My grandmother, Mary Lamb. She’s a wonderful pianist. Could probably have been a concert pianist, actually. But she became a housewife and mother instead, and ended up playing “Jerusalem” once a week at the local WI.’ After that she had to spend some time explaining what the WI was, and was pretty sure that by the time the explanation was finished, her original point had been lost. It was a shame Mark hadn’t been there. He had way more

experience with this sort of thing, and was always so funny, and so irreverent, the mood would have been far lighter.

But Mark did not arrive at the hotel until 1.30, at which point he and Lorna immediately went looking for somewhere to eat. Most of the restaurants in this district were characterless, fast-food sorts of places. They walked for about ten minutes until they found something that looked more traditional: a gloomy interior with guttering candles and heavy oak tables and no translations on the menu. Weeks later, Lorna would remember the atmosphere that day in the restaurant, and in the city generally, as being strange, unsettled: there was an air of tension, as if it was slowly dawning on people that some change, some unseen, imminent event was about to knock their daily lives off kilter in ways that they did not yet understand and were not prepared for. The feeling of subdued apprehension was difficult to define, but palpable.

Lorna ordered a salad and a tonic water; Mark had a massive open sandwich and two lagers. She did worry about his eating.

‘Don’t look so disapproving,’ he told her. ‘I need to eat to keep my strength up. And Scotland’s cold, you know. You need a lot of body fat to survive up there.’

She started telling him about the interview. ‘He wanted to know how we met.’

Mark paused, his fork halfway to his mouth.

‘I don’t remember how we met,’ he said.

‘Yes, you do. You came to our college. We all had the chance to sit in with you.’

‘Ah yes, that’s right,’ he said, looking much more interested in the food on the end of his fork.

‘I was the best,’ Lorna said, waiting for Mark to nod in confirmation. He didn’t. ‘At least, you said I was the best.’

‘Of course you were the best,’ he said, chewing.

‘So then we went for a drink afterwards. You asked me which of your albums was my favourite and I said I’d never heard of you until today.’

‘That I do remember. I was charmed by your candour and horrified by your ignorance, in equal measure.’

‘And then we just . . . took it from there.’

‘Taking it from there’ had involved playing together for a few hours the following week, at the flat in Moseley where Mark had been staying at the time. After that they had started to make recordings, remotely – Mark sending her files from his home studio in Edinburgh, Lorna adding the bass parts at home. In this way they had amassed many hours’ worth of music, which would eventually be distilled into one seventy-minute album for Mark’s Austrian record label, and in the process they had evolved a style in which the slow, ambient drones that Mark coaxed meditatively out of his guitar were underpinned and enriched by Lorna’s contributions on bass, which she approached as a melodic instrument, often using a bow. It was an extraordinary thing, for her, to go from promising student to recorded musician in such a short space of time, but the fact was that the collaboration worked – she and Mark had simply clicked, from the very beginning – and although the UK press was not interested and it was hard to get gigs at home, sales of their album in the rest of Europe had been respectable, and now here they were, in Vienna, on the first date of a six-day tour, doing their best to recreate the textures of those studio recordings in a live setting. That evening, as Mark did one of his solo spots midway through their set and Lorna watched from the side of the stage, she marvelled again at the way this man – this overweight, filthy-minded, carelessly dressed, altogether slightly seedy-looking man – could make music like an angel when it suited him, using his fingers and his pedals to make his guitar sound like an entire orchestra, filling the room with complex harmonies and overtones and fragmented lines of melody that held the young audience in a kind of ecstatic trance.

‘Miserable lot of fuckers in there tonight,’ he said to Lorna as they sat down to dinner afterwards.

‘What are you talking about? They loved it.’

‘I didn’t feel we were getting much back from them,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen livelier crowds in a morgue.’

Susanne looked genuinely mortified, as if the behaviour of this audience was her own personal responsibility, so Lorna rushed to reassure her:

‘Take no notice. They were a great crowd. It was a great evening. This is his way of showing gratitude, believe it or not.’

For dinner they had been joined by Ludwig, the owner of the record label. He had brought them to a restaurant called the Café Engländer, although there didn’t seem to be anything very English about it: the food was Austrian, and came in generous portions, including a *Schnitzel* which, when it arrived, looked big enough to satisfy even Mark’s appetite.

‘Look at that,’ he said, his eyes gleaming. ‘Just take a look at that!’

Susanne and Ludwig beamed, proud that their national cuisine was meeting with such enthusiasm. Only Lorna, who had ordered a salad again, looked disapproving.

‘You’ve got about three quarters of a calf there,’ she said to him, in a low voice, so that the others couldn’t hear. ‘Someone like you shouldn’t be eating something like that.’

‘Someone like me?’ he said, helping himself to potato salad. ‘You mean someone fat like me?’

‘I didn’t say that. I would never call you fat.’

‘Good,’ Mark said. ‘Because I’m not fat. According to my doctor, I’m morbidly obese.’

After performing with such intensity for almost two hours, Mark and Lorna would have preferred a light-hearted conversation, but this turned out not to be Ludwig’s style. He was in his late fifties, with stylish grey hair, an austere trimmed beard, a sharp mind and an elegant and precise way of speaking. Within a few minutes he was questioning them about the state of British politics.

‘As you know, Mark, I am a committed Anglophile. I first came to London in 1977, the height of punk. I didn’t like the music much but the attitude was captivating, to a young man who had grown up in Salzburg, an ultra-conservative city with no counterculture that I’d ever noticed. It was the time of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, I remember, and for a while it seemed everyone was singing either the national anthem or ‘God Save the Queen’ by the Sex Pistols. It was somehow wonderfully revealing of your national character that these two songs could be on everybody’s lips at the same time. I think it was then that I also watched a James Bond film, *The*

*Spy Who Loved Me*, and listened as the audience cheered when his parachute opened and revealed a Union Jack. Again, so British! Flattering themselves and laughing at themselves at the same time. I stayed in London for three months and at the end of it I was in love with everything I found there: British music, British literature, British television, the sense of humour – I even started to like the food. I felt there was an energy and inventiveness in this place that you didn't encounter anywhere else in Europe, and all done without self-importance, with this extraordinary irony that is so unique to the Brits. And now this same generation is doing . . . what? Voting for Brexit, and for Boris Johnson? What happened to them?'

Before either Mark or Lorna could offer an answer to this difficult question, he continued:

'It's not just me. This is what we're all asking ourselves. You know, this is a smart country we're talking about, a country that we all used to look up to. And now you've done this thing that to us, as far as we can tell, diminishes you, makes you look weaker and more isolated, and yet you seem really pleased with yourselves about it. And then you put this buffoon in charge. What's going on?'

Mark glanced at Lorna and said, 'Well, where do you begin with that one?'

'I suppose for a start,' she said, 'you begin with the fact that London and England are not the same thing.'

'For sure,' said Ludwig. 'I understand that.'

'And England and the rest of the UK are not the same thing,' Mark added. 'I moved to Edinburgh for a reason.'

'I understand that too. But still, you're an Englishman at heart, right?'

'It's not how I'd define myself. It's not my core identity.'

'I don't think,' said Lorna, choosing her words carefully, 'that there's such a thing as a typical English person.'

'Well, I would like to find one, if I could,' said Ludwig. 'And when I found them, I would ask them two questions: this new path you've taken in the last few years – why exactly did you choose it? And why did you choose this man, of all people, to lead you down it?'

Just then Susanne's mobile phone buzzed. She picked it up to look at the message.

'Wow,' she said. 'Looks like you were just in time.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's from the venue. They're closing their doors, starting tomorrow, on the orders of the city authorities. No more public events. No more gatherings of more than fifty people.'

The others received this information in silence, at first. The mood was suddenly sombre.

'Well, that was bound to happen,' said Ludwig. 'They've been talking about it for days.'

'At least it's not a total lockdown, like Italy,' said Susanne.

'That will come,' Ludwig assured them.

'Where are we meant to be going tomorrow?' Mark asked. 'Is it Munich?'

'I'll contact the venue first thing in the morning,' said Susanne, 'and let you know what they say. But I'm sure there won't be a problem.'

Lorna dug into her salad and took a couple of mouthfuls of white wine. It was sweeter than she was used to, and slipped down like honey. She looked around the restaurant and reflected that this was such a beautiful moment for her: so different to her life in Handsworth, so different to her daily working life: a world of welcoming faces, kindred spirits, graciousness and *Gemütlichkeit*. She hoped that it wasn't going to be snatched away from her before she'd had time to savour it.

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The next morning Susanne met them at the Hauptbahnhof, to see them safely onto the 8.30 train for Munich. She was starting to look worried. Mark and Lorna had five more dates on their tour: Munich, Hanover, Hamburg, Berlin and Leipzig. It seemed likely now that at least some of them would be cancelled, even though each of the different German states was taking these decisions independently, making its own judgement call.

'The trouble is, once one of them imposes restrictions, the others



will feel they have to follow. And I'm not going to be with you to make sure things go smoothly.'

'We'll be fine,' said Mark. 'If the venues close we'll just have to wrap up warm and play outdoors. Do an acoustic set. Mark Irwin and Lorna Simes unplugged.'

'Oh, I'd be sorry to miss that!' said Susanne.

'We'll record it and you can put it out as a live album.'

She smiled bravely, and then made as if to say goodbye to Lorna with a hug, just like the hug with which she had welcomed her only thirty-six hours earlier at the airport. But at the last moment they both changed their minds, and instead performed the awkward gesture that was now becoming common, putting their elbows together in what felt like a distant echo of normal human contact. Mark was having none of it. He put his arms around Susanne and pressed her against his soft protruding belly and squeezed her for about ten seconds.

'Sorry, but no stupid virus should stop us from showing how we feel,' he said. 'You've been great. Invite us back whenever you can, yes?'

'Of course. Things will be back to normal again soon and then we'll have you back.'

'Great.'

He kissed her on the forehead and then he and Lorna began the arduous business of loading their gear onto the train.

It was a four-hour journey and Lorna loved every minute of it. The late-winter sun was bright, the landscape shifted and evolved as they crossed the border from Austria into Germany, and like a tourist she took dozens of photos of the snow-capped Bavarian Alps and the towns and villages nestling between their slopes. She sent a couple of them to Donny and to Gran, but neither replied. In the window seat opposite her Mark dozed, occasionally snoring and then waking up with a start. Lorna suspected that he hadn't got much sleep the night before. He hadn't come back to the hotel with her after dinner: instead he'd found some guy on a dating app and had gone off to a club to meet him. She chose not to enquire about what had happened after that.

Next to the sleeping Mark sat a trim, well-dressed woman who was leafing through a German copy of *Vogue* magazine. Lorna became fascinated by how difficult she was finding it to turn the pages, because she was wearing a pair of delicate fawn leather gloves. Even though it was warm inside their carriage, and the woman had taken off her coat and jacket, she kept these gloves on for the entire journey.

★

The virus continued to chase them across Germany. In Munich, Hanover, Hamburg and Berlin, their luck held: the venues remained open until their performances had taken place, although all four of them closed their doors the next morning. Every evening, the pattern was the same: soundcheck, followed by gig, followed by a quick meal with the organizers. At these meals the conversation would always return, eventually, to the virus, to the new measures announced by the state authorities, to the new phrases like ‘social distancing’ and ‘herd immunity’ which people were now using like experts, to the new epidemic of nervous jokes about hand-washing and elbow-touching and handshake-avoiding, to the frightening reports of lockdown in Wuhan, to speculation about how Italy would cope with its lockdown and whether other European countries would soon follow suit. These conversations were mainly casual and light-hearted, with an undertone of incredulous apprehension, a sense that the things they were talking about could not really be happening or about to happen. The venue owners were also wrestling with more immediate, practical concerns: how long these closures were going to last, how they were going to pay staff and rent, whether they had enough money in their bank accounts to see them through the imminent crisis. They were alarming conversations, when you thought about them, but wine and food and laughter and human warmth seemed to make them not just tolerable but enjoyable.

Berlin was probably the best gig of all. Mark’s playing was particularly inspired that night. It was almost as if he knew this was going to be their last performance for a while, and rose to the occasion by losing himself in the music, surrendering to it completely,

with a degree of absorption and self-forgetfulness that Lorna would not have thought possible.

His performance was generous, too: generous to her. As the bass player, her role could have been merely supportive, but he never let that happen, always made her feel like an equal partner. But tonight she knew that he was playing on a different level, and she wouldn't be able to match his patient, unhurried invention, his miraculous flow of ideas. That was OK. It was a privilege to be there alongside him. They were playing in a strange venue, the basement of a record shop in former East Berlin, not far from the Fernsehturm. There was only room for an audience of seventy or so, and the place was full to bursting. Once or twice Lorna found herself looking into the crowd of young Berliners as they stood so tightly packed together, and thought about them breathing in and out, touching each other, touching the chairs and then touching the chairs that had been touched by other people, even coughing occasionally, and she felt that she could visualize this tiny, deadly organism of which they had only just become aware jumping from one person to another, from host to host, in search of its next place of residence, its next opportunity to incubate and attack. At such moments she knew that her concentration was faltering and she was letting Mark down, breaking the pact of trust that existed between two musicians who were improvising on stage together. She would quickly pull herself together and try to start playing with renewed focus. Once or twice she and Mark would conjoin: their peaks of intensity coincided and then, just for a few seconds, something magical was achieved and for those precious moments audience and performers would be lifted, time was suspended, and a feeling of something like bliss spread throughout the room. These were the moments that she lived for, but sometimes you could play a whole set and it would never happen. That night in Berlin they were blessed; nirvana came fleetingly within their grasp, and when they went out for food afterwards everyone was still on a high.

But the next morning, when Mark and Lorna reached Leipzig, a message was waiting for them at the hotel. Tonight's gig, the last one of the tour, was cancelled.

They stood there in the lobby, feeling a bit deflated and stupid. Lorna clutched on to her enormous glossy instrument case, whose very size seemed more ridiculous than ever.

They called Susanne and she offered her sympathy. 'I did tell you this would probably happen,' she said. She offered to book them on a flight home that day but they knew this would involve extra costs that the record company couldn't afford.

'There's no need,' Mark said. 'We'll just hang out, and take the flight you booked for us tomorrow morning. Don't worry about us, we'll be fine. We'll go out and have a look around the city this afternoon.'

Lorna knew that this was what she should be doing, but she couldn't summon the enthusiasm for it. She understood that under the circumstances they were lucky, very lucky, to have almost completed the tour, missing out on only one gig, but still, the sense of anti-climax was strong. She let Mark go on his walk – who knew what alleyways it would lead him down – and stayed in her hotel room, flicking between channels on the TV until finally she decided to call Gran one last time. The news about the virus was quite worrying now. Lorna was actually starting to feel paranoid about catching it, about getting too close to people, shaking their hands, being breathed on. As for Gran, she was eighty-six, and although she was fit and well (apart from her aneurysm), still, if she were to catch it there was every chance it would hit her hard. She seemed to have quite a devil-may-care attitude towards health issues these days, and Lorna felt it was probably time to impress upon her the importance of being careful in the weeks ahead.

This time, for a change, the Skype tone rang out only three or four times before there was a response at the other end. And this time, for a change, it was not Gran's high, wrinkled forehead that loomed into shaky view, but the face of Peter – her father's younger brother – fully visible and centred perfectly on the screen.

'Oh, hello,' she said. 'I didn't know you were visiting.'

'I only decided this morning,' he said.

'Have you driven up from Kew?'

'Yes, got here about an hour ago.'

Her Uncle Peter lived alone in a small terraced house about half a mile from Kew Gardens in south-west London. It was a two-hour drive up to his mother's, but he did it quite regularly, once every two or three weeks. She had been widowed now for more than seven years and although she was at last getting used to it, he knew – and Lorna knew – that there were times when she still found the loneliness almost too much to bear. He felt it was his duty to come up and see her whenever he could.

‘Did you want to speak to Gran?’ he asked. ‘I’ll go and get her.’

Lorna was left staring at a screen which remained blank until a large and handsome feline, his pelt a lively collage of black and white patches, jumped onto the table and glared into the camera with accusing green eyes, before turning round and offering her an impudent view of his backside. ‘Charlie, get off that table!’ Peter could be heard saying, and a hand reached out to whisk the complaining creature, Gran’s devoted companion, decently out of view. After that two faces filled the screen, which Peter had rotated to landscape. Gran was looking very pleased with herself. Her eyes gleamed with the happiness of being in the presence of her youngest son. There was an element of triumph in it.

‘Look who turned up on my doorstep this morning,’ she said.

‘That’s nice,’ said Lorna. ‘How long’s he staying?’

‘You’ll stay the night, won’t you?’ Gran said, turning to Peter.

‘Oh yes.’ Then he asked Lorna, ‘So where are you at the moment?’

‘Leipzig,’ she said. ‘But the show tonight’s been cancelled.’

‘Oh no! Not because of the virus?’

‘Everything’s closing down here, all over Germany.’

‘You be careful,’ said Gran. ‘Don’t go breathing in any germs. And keep washing your hands. That’s what we have to do, apparently. Keep washing our hands.’

‘I’ve got a concert in two weeks’ time,’ said Peter. ‘I wonder if that’ll go ahead.’

‘Are you still coming home tomorrow?’ Gran asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I should think Donny will be happy to have you back safe and sound. What are you going to do with the rest of the day?’

'I don't know.'

'You should visit the family vaults,' said Peter, unexpectedly.

'What?'

'We've got family buried in Leipzig, somewhere.'

'We do?'

'Yes. That's right, isn't it, Mum?'

'Well, I don't know about that. But your great-grandfather,' she said, speaking directly to Lorna, 'was German.'

'Really?' said Lorna. 'Your father, you mean?'

'No, not my father. Grandad's father.'

Peter chipped in to correct her: 'Not his father. His grandfather.'

Gran looked confused for a moment, and then agreed: 'Oh yes. Grandad's grandfather.'

'So my great-great-grandfather,' said Lorna.

Gran turned to Peter for confirmation. 'Is that right?'

'That's right. You mean Carl.'

'That was him. Carl. Geoffrey's grandfather.'

'And he was from Leipzig?' Lorna asked.

'Oh, I don't remember that. He had a German accent. I could hardly understand a word he was saying.'

'Yes, he was,' said Peter, emphatically. 'I've been working on the family tree.'

'What was his name?' said Lorna, suddenly excited at the thought of visiting old churchyards and discovering the graves of forgotten ancestors.

'Schmidt,' said Peter. 'Carl Schmidt.'

'Oh,' said Lorna. 'That doesn't narrow it down much.'

'Not really. Bit of a needle in a haystack.'

'I think I'll probably just go to a museum or something.'

'Good idea.'

'Well, you be careful,' said Gran. 'And keep washing your hands, for goodness' sake.'

They said goodbye to Lorna and Gran went into the kitchen to make tea, the third pot of the visit already. Peter followed her and stood by the kitchen window while she busied herself with the mugs and the teabags. He looked out over the garden: the flower

beds he had been told off for trampling on as a boy; the sloping rectangle of lawn down which he used to toboggan whenever the snow had grudgingly consented to fall; the spreading sumac tree with whose skeletal branches and lime-green leaves he had grown so familiar throughout long afternoons of reading or daydreaming: an entire, miniature landscape he had known intimately since he was ten years old and which had barely changed at all in the succeeding forty-nine years. The family had moved here in 1971. Before that they had lived a few miles away, in Bournville, where his mother had been born and had spent her own childhood. She would never leave this house now, he was sure of that, even though it was far too big for her. 'I shall die here,' she had started to say, apparently thinking that this event was more and more imminent. Close to her heart, an aortic aneurysm was growing. Little by little, millimetre by millimetre, every year. It was inoperable, her specialist had told her.

'Will it burst?' she had asked him.

'Maybe,' he had said. 'In a year's time, or two years, or five, or ten. You might be lucky.'

'And what happens when it bursts?' she had asked.

'That,' he had told her, 'will be what we call a *lethal event*.'

Ever since then, she had referred to the aneurysm as her 'ticking timebomb'. There was nothing to be done about it, except to carry on with life, curse the fact that it prevented her from driving a car any more, and hope for the best. Or hope that something else carried you away first, maybe, because at her age, something was going to get you, wasn't it? Sooner rather than later. She had never thought about the future much, any more than she liked to dwell on the past: she lived life in the moment, a strategy that had served her well enough for most of a century.

Peter found it frustrating, all the same, this tendency of his mother to live only for the present. Recently he had fallen prey to an obsession with family history, something that had begun with the death of his father and gathered momentum after his partner had left him and he found himself living alone with too much time on his hands. He had been searching archives online and sifting through the paperwork in his mother's house whenever he visited, but the

resource he really wanted to tap was her own memory, and that was proving to be hard work. Not because her memory was fading, but because the past was a subject which appeared to hold no interest for her. Any droplets of information he could extract were offered grudgingly, and yet she was the last survivor, now, of her generation, the only one living who could recall family stories going back to the 1950s and 40s. What could she tell him, for instance, of the forgotten Carl Schmidt, her late husband's grandfather, who had come to Birmingham in mysterious circumstances in the 1890s, and had lived there through two world wars – wars in which the main aggressor was his native country? What had his position been? What kind of man was he?

'Oh, I don't remember much about him,' she said. 'I was very young. He seemed very severe and frightening. I was scared to death of him.'

Sitting in an armchair by the bay window, with Charlie on her lap purring in his patch of sunlight, she reached across to pick up the *Daily Telegraph* which was folded open at the Quick Crossword.

'Come on,' she said. 'Seven across, "Fashionable" – six letters, beginning with T.'

This was a flagrant attempt to change the subject, and Peter wasn't having it.

'You must remember something,' he said.

'"Trendy",' said Gran, and pencilled it in.

'I mean – when was the first time you met him?'

She sighed, knowing that she would get no peace out of Peter when he was in the mood to press her like this.

'Well, I can remember *that*, of course.'

'When was it?'

'At the end of the war.'

'So, around 1944, 1945?'

'Oh no, I mean the very end.' She took a cautious sip of her tea, which was still too hot. 'Right when it was all over,' she said. 'VE Day, and all that caper.'





ONE

*VE Day*

*8th May 1945*



## I.

The air did not smell of chocolate, but chocolate was in the air. Nobody needed to put a name on the factory that stood at the heart of the village. They simply called it 'the Works'. And inside this factory, they made chocolate. They had been making chocolate there for more than sixty years. John Cadbury had opened his first shop in the centre of Birmingham back in 1824, selling ground cocoa beans for hot drinking chocolate: a devout Quaker, like his brothers, he saw the drink not only as a nutritious component of breakfast, but as a healthy substitute for alcohol later in the day. The business had grown steadily, the workforce had expanded, bigger premises had been acquired and then, in 1879, his sons decided to move production out of Birmingham altogether. The area they chose largely consisted, at the time, of sloping meadowland. Their vision: industry and nature existing in harmony, symbiotic, co-dependent. At first the factory was small. A one-storey, red-bricked building, flooded with light on three sides by generous windows that allowed views onto the green spaces all around. Next to the factory were placed sports fields, gardens and a children's playground. From here, the city centre seemed remote. This place called itself a village and it felt like a village. Workers had to travel from miles around, arriving at the railway station that in those days was still known as Stinchley Street. This arrangement could not continue for long, given that by the end of the nineteenth century the number of people employed at the Works had risen from two hundred to more than two and a half thousand. In 1895 the company acquired more of the land surrounding the factory buildings, and soon the workers could enjoy further recreation grounds and a cricket pitch. But the Cadbury family's ambitions went beyond that. They imagined houses: affordable houses, well-built houses, houses with deep gardens where trees could flourish and fruit and vegetables could be

grown. Quakerism, as before, was at the heart of their project, and their goal was ‘the amelioration of the conditions of the working-class and labouring population in and around Birmingham by the provision of improved dwellings, with gardens and opened spaces to be enjoyed therewith’. Whenever it was possible, they bought up more and more pockets of land in this swathe of countryside to the south of Birmingham, determined that less visionary, more profit-hungry developers should not get their hands on them. And in this way the village grew, reaching outwards, extending, putting out shoots, blossoming in plant-like formations until it covered hundreds of acres and consisted of more than two thousand houses, many but not all of them occupied by Cadbury workers, and although it was soon surrounded and hemmed in on all sides by other, more ordinary suburbs, by Stirchley and Cotteridge and Small Heath and King’s Heath and King’s Norton and West Heath and Northfield and Weoley Castle and Selly Oak, still this village never lost its character. At its hub lay the village green. Close to the village green stood the junior school with its clock tower housing the famous carillon. Surrounding the school were Woodbrooke Road, Thorn Road and Linden Road, throughways which, however much traffic would fill them in the years to come, somehow always kept their sense of calm, a pastoral memory of shade and leafiness that was embedded in their very names.

What should it be called, this special place? You might have thought, for the people who named it, that with its almshouses and playing fields, its miniature boating lake and white-flannelled cricketers, the village was built as an archetype – a parody, almost – of a certain notion of Englishness. The little stream which wound through its very centre was called the Bourn, and many expected that Bournbrook would be the chosen name. But this was a village founded on enterprise, and that enterprise was to sell chocolate, and even in the hearts of the Cadburys, these pioneers of British chocolate manufacture, there lurked a residual sense of the inferiority of the native product, compared to its Continental rivals. Was there not something quintessentially, intrinsically European about the finest chocolate? The beans themselves had always come from

the far corners of the Empire, of course – nothing unBritish about that – but the means of turning them into edible chocolate had been invented by a Dutchman, and it was a truth universally acknowledged – if for ever unspoken – that it was the French, and the Belgians, and the Swiss, who had since brought the making of chocolate to a pitch of near-perfection. If Cadbury's chocolate was ever truly to compete on this field, it would have to be branded in such a way that it trailed in its wake an overtone of European refinement, Continental sophistication.

So Bournbrook, they decided, would not quite do. A variation was chosen. Bournville. The name of a village not just founded upon, and devoted to, but actually dreamed into being by chocolate.

## 2.

By Monday morning, 7th May, there was still no definite news. The war was over, it seemed, but the peace had not yet begun. People were getting restless, and impatient for an announcement. Were they expected to keep going into work? When would they be allowed to celebrate? After almost six years of sacrifice and deprivation, surely it wasn't asking too much to have a few sing-songs and bonfires, and for the pubs to stay open late? Chatting over the fence, Samuel's next-door neighbour Mr Farthing said it was a bloody disgrace, pardon his French, and Sam agreed and said the government was asking for trouble if it didn't allow them all to let their hair down and have a good time for a day or two. People would remember it when the election came around.

Doll had plenty of views about politics, but she was never asked to take part in conversations like this. While her husband and Mr Farthing were putting the world to rights over the back fence, she checked the time on the grandfather clock in the hallway and went to fetch her broom from the cupboard under the stairs. She was a creature of habit. At a quarter to eleven every weekday she always went out to sweep the front step, and had a very specific reason for doing so: because it was at this hour that the children at the school across the road took their morning break. She liked to get outside just before it started, so that first of all she had a few minutes to savour the habitual, resonant silence of Bournville at that time of the morning. Then she would hear the ringing of the teacher's handbell, and immediately afterwards, it would begin: the gradually rising babble of high-pitched voices, muffled and indistinct at first, then suddenly full-throated as the main doors of the school were thrown open and eighty-seven children thundered out into the playground. Doll loved the silence that blanketed her village for much of the day, but she loved the sound of the next fifteen minutes