Part One

A Lost Letter Finds Its Way

1992

It started with a letter. A letter that had been lost a long time, waiting out half a century in a forgotten postal bag in the dim attic of a nondescript house in Bermondsey. I think about it sometimes, that mailbag: of the hundreds of love letters, grocery bills, birthday cards, notes from children to their parents, that lay together, swelling and sighing as their thwarted messages whispered in the dark. Waiting, waiting, for someone to realize they were there. For it is said, you know, that a letter will always seek a reader; that sooner or later, like it or not, words have a way of finding the light, of making their secrets known.

Forgive me, I'm being romantic – a habit acquired from the years spent reading nineteenth-century novels with a torch when my parents thought I was asleep. What I mean to say is that it's odd to think that if Arthur Tyrell had been a little more responsible, if he hadn't had one too many rum toddies that Christmas Eve in 1941 and gone home and fallen into a drunken slumber instead of finishing his mail delivery, if the bag hadn't then been tucked in his attic and hidden until his death some fifty years later when one of his daughters unearthed it and called the *Daily Mail*, the whole thing might have turned out differently. For my mum, for me, and especially for Juniper Blythe.

You probably read about it when it happened; it was in all the newspapers, and on the TV news. Channel 4 even ran a special where they invited some of the recipients to talk about their letter, their particular voice from the past that had come back to surprise them. There was a woman whose sweetheart had been in the RAF, and the man with the birthday card his evacuated son had sent, the little boy who was killed by a piece of falling shrapnel a week or so later. It was a very good programme, I thought: moving in parts, happy and sad stories interspersed with old footage of the war. I cried a couple of times, but that's not saying much: I'm rather disposed to weep.

Mum didn't go on the show, though. The producers contacted her and asked whether there was anything special in her letter that she'd like to share with the nation, but she said no, that it was just an ordinary old clothing order from a shop that had long ago gone out of business. But that wasn't the truth. I know this because I was there when the letter arrived. I saw her reaction to that lost letter and it was anything but ordinary.

It was a morning in late February, winter still had us by the throat, the flowerbeds were icy, and I'd come over to help with the Sunday roast. I do that sometimes because my parents like it, even though I'm a vegetarian and I know that at some point during the course of the meal my mother will start to look worried, then agonized, until finally she can stand it no longer and statistics about protein and anaemia will begin to fly.

I was peeling potatoes in the sink when the letter dropped through the slot in the door. The post doesn't usually come on Sundays so that should have tipped us off, but

it didn't. For my part, I was too busy wondering how I was going to tell my parents that Jamie and I had broken up. It had been two months since it happened and I knew I had to say something eventually, but the longer I took to utter the words, the more calcified they became. And I had my reasons for staying silent: my parents had been suspicious of Jamie from the start, they didn't take kindly to upsets, and Mum would worry even more than usual if she knew that I was living in the flat alone. Most of all, though, I was dreading the inevitable, awkward conversation that would follow my announcement. To see first bewilderment, then alarm, then resignation, cross Mum's face as she realized the maternal code required her to provide some sort of consolation . . . But back to the post. The sound of something dropping softly through the letterbox.

'Edie, can you get that?'

This was my mother. (Edie is me: I'm sorry, I should have said so earlier.) She nodded towards the hallway and gestured with the hand that wasn't stuck up the inside of the chicken.

I put down the potato, wiped my hands on a tea towel and went to fetch the post. There was only one letter lying on the welcome mat: an official Post Office envelope declaring the contents to be 'redirected mail'. I read the label to Mum as I brought it into the kitchen.

She'd finished stuffing the chicken by then and was drying her own hands. Frowning a little, from habit rather than any particular expectation, she took the letter from me and plucked her reading glasses from on top of the pineapple in the fruit bowl. She skimmed the post office notice and with a flicker of her eyebrows began to open the outer envelope.

I'd turned back to the potatoes by now, a task that was arguably more engaging than watching my mum open mail, so I'm sorry to say I didn't see her face as she fished the smaller envelope from inside, as she registered the frail austerity paper and the old stamp, as she turned the letter over and read the name written on the back. I've imagined it many times since, though, the colour draining instantly from her cheeks, her fingers beginning to tremble so that it took minutes before she was able to slit the envelope open.

What I don't have to imagine is the sound. The horrid, guttural gasp, followed quickly by a series of rasping sobs that swamped the air and made me slip with the peeler so that I cut my finger.

'Mum?' I went to her, draping my arm around her shoulders, careful not to bleed on her dress. But she didn't say anything. She couldn't, she told me later, not then. She stood rigidly as tears spilled down her cheeks and she clutched the strange little envelope, its paper so thin I could make out the corner of the folded letter inside, hard against her bosom. Then she disappeared upstairs to her bedroom leaving a fraying wake of instructions about the bird and the oven and the potatoes.

The kitchen settled in a bruised silence around her absence and I stayed very quiet, moved very slowly so as not to disturb it further. My mother is not a crier, but this moment – her upset and the shock of it – felt oddly familiar, as if we'd been here before. After fifteen minutes in which I variously peeled potatoes, turned over possibilities as to whom the letter might be from, and wondered how to proceed, I finally knocked on her door and asked whether she'd like a cup of tea. She'd composed herself by then and we sat

opposite one another at the small Formica-covered table in the kitchen. As I pretended not to notice she'd been crying, she began to talk about the envelope's contents.

'A letter,' she said, 'from someone I used to know a long time ago. When I was just a girl, twelve, thirteen.'

A picture came into my mind, a hazy memory of a photograph that had sat on my gran's bedside when she was old and dying. Three children, the youngest of whom was my mum, a girl with short dark hair, perched on something in the foreground. It was odd; I'd sat with Gran a hundred times or more but I couldn't bring that girl's features into focus now. Perhaps children are never really interested in who their parents were before they were born; not unless something particular happens to shine a light on the past. I sipped my tea, waiting for Mum to continue.

'I don't know that I've told you much about that time, have I? During the war, the Second World War. It was a terrible time, such confusion, so many things were broken. It seemed . . .' She sighed. 'Well, it seemed as if the world would never return to normal. As if it had been tipped off its axis and nothing would ever set it to rights.' She cupped her hands around the steaming rim of her mug and stared down at it.

'My family – Mum and Dad, Rita and Ed and I – we all lived in a small house together in Barlow Street, near the Elephant and Castle, and the day after war broke out we were rounded up at school, marched over to the railway station and put into train carriages. I'll never forget it, all of us with our tags on and our masks and our packs, and the mothers, who'd had second thoughts because they came running down the road towards the station, shouting at the

guard to let their kids off; then shouting at older siblings to look after the little ones, not to let them out of their sight.'

She sat for a moment, biting her bottom lip as the scene played out in her memory.

'You must've been frightened,' I said quietly. We're not really hand-holders in our family or else I'd have reached out and taken hers.

'I was, at first.' She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. Her face had a vulnerable, unfinished look without her frames, like a small nocturnal animal confused by the daylight. I was glad when she put them on again and continued. 'I'd never been away from home before, never spent a night apart from my mother. But I had my older brother and sister with me, and as the trip went on and one of the teachers handed round bars of chocolate, everybody started to cheer up and look upon the experience almost like an adventure. Can you imagine? War had been declared but we were all singing songs and eating tinned pears and looking out of the window playing I-spy. Children are very resilient, you know; callous in some cases.

'We arrived eventually in a town called Cranbrook, only to be split into groups and loaded onto various coaches. The one I was on with Ed and Rita took us to the village of Milderhurst, where we were walked in lines to a hall. A group of local women were waiting for us there, smiles fixed on their faces, lists in hand, and we were made to stand in rows as people milled about, making their selection.

'The little ones went fast, especially the pretty ones. People supposed they'd be less work, I expect, that they'd have less of the whiff of London about them.'

She smiled crookedly. 'They soon learned. My brother

was picked early. He was a strong boy, tall for his age, and the farmers were desperate for help. Rita went a short while after with her friend from school.'

Well, that was it. I reached out and laid my hand on hers. 'Oh, Mum.'

'Never mind.' She pulled free and gave my fingers a tap. 'I wasn't the last to go. There were a few others, a little boy with a terrible skin condition. I don't know what happened to him, but he was still standing there in that hall when I left.

'You know, for a long time afterwards, years and years, I forced myself to buy bruised fruit if that's what I picked up first at the greengrocer's. None of this checking it over and putting it back on the shelf if it didn't measure up.'

'But you were chosen eventually.'

'Yes, I was chosen eventually.' She lowered her voice, fiddling with something in her lap, and I had to lean close. 'She came in late. The room was almost clear, most of the children had gone and the ladies from the Women's Voluntary Service were putting away the tea things. I'd started to cry a little, though I did so very discreetly. Then all of a sudden, *she* swept in and the room, the very air, seemed to alter.'

'Alter?' I wrinkled my nose, thinking of that scene in *Carrie* when the light explodes.

'It's hard to explain. Have you ever met a person who seems to bring their own atmosphere with them when they arrive somewhere?'

Maybe. I lifted my shoulders, uncertain. My friend Sarah has a habit of turning heads wherever she goes; not exactly an atmospheric phenomenon, but still…

'No, of course you haven't. It sounds so silly to say it like that. What I mean is that she was different from other

people, more . . . Oh, I don't know. Just *more*. Beautiful in an odd way, long hair, big eyes, rather wild looking, but it wasn't that alone which set her apart. She was only seventeen at the time, in September 1939, but the other women all seemed to fold into themselves when she arrived.'

'They were deferential?'

'Yes, that's the word, deferential. Surprised to see her and uncertain how to behave. Finally, one of them spoke up, asking whether she could help, but the girl merely waved her long fingers and announced that she'd come for her evacuee. That's what she said; not *an* evacuee, *her* evacuee. And then she came straight over to where I was sitting on the floor. "What's your name?" she said, and when I told her she smiled and said that I must be tired, having travelled such a long way. "Would you like to come and stay with me?" I nodded, I must have, for she turned then to the bossiest woman, the one with the list, and said that she would take me home with her.'

'What was her name?'

'Blythe,' said my mother, suppressing the faintest of shivers. 'Juniper Blythe.'

'And was it she who sent you the letter?'

Mum nodded. 'She led me to the fanciest car I'd ever seen and drove me back to the place where she and her older twin sisters lived, through a set of iron gates, along a winding driveway, until we reached an enormous stone edifice surrounded by thick woods. Milderhurst Castle.'

The name was straight out of a gothic novel and I tingled a little, remembering Mum's sob when she'd read the woman's name and address on the back of the envelope. I'd heard stories about the evacuees, about some of the things that went on, and I said on a breath, 'Was it ghastly?'

'Oh no, nothing like that. Not ghastly at all. Quite the opposite.'

'But the letter . . . It made you—'

'The letter was a surprise, that's all. A memory from a long time ago.'

She fell silent then and I thought about the enormity of evacuation, how frightening, how odd it must have been for her as a child to be sent to a strange place where everyone and everything was vastly different. I could still touch my own childhood experiences, the horror of being thrust into new, unnerving situations, the furious bonds that were forged of necessity – to buildings, to sympathetic adults, to special friends – in order to survive. Remembering those urgent friendships, something struck me: 'Did you ever go back, Mum, after the war? To Milderhurst?'

She looked up sharply. 'Of course not. Why would I?'

'I don't know. To catch up, to say hello. To see your friend.'

'No.' She said it firmly. 'I had my own family in London, my mother couldn't spare me, and besides, there was work to be done, cleaning up after the war. Real life went on.' And with that, the familiar veil came down between us and I knew the conversation was over.

We didn't have the roast in the end. Mum said she didn't feel like it and asked whether I minded terribly giving it a miss this weekend. It seemed unkind to remind her that I don't eat meat anyway and that my attendance was more in the order of daughterly service, so I told her it was fine and suggested that she have a lie-down. She agreed, and as I gathered my things into my bag she was already swallowing

two paracetamol in preparation, reminding me to keep my ears covered in the wind.

My dad, as it turns out, slept through the whole thing. He's older than Mum and had retired from his work a few months before. Retirement hasn't been good for him: he roams the house during the week, looking for things to fix and tidy, driving Mum mad, then on Sunday he rests in his armchair. The God-given right of the man of the house, he says to anyone who'll listen.

I gave him a kiss on the cheek and left the house, braving the chill air as I made my way to the tube, tired and unsettled and somewhat subdued to be heading back alone to the fiendishly expensive flat I'd shared until recently with Jamie. It wasn't until somewhere between High Street Kensington and Notting Hill Gate that I realized Mum hadn't told me what the letter said.