

DINEY COSTELOE

The
Throwaway
Children



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Raised voices again. Rita could hear them through the floor; her mother's, a querulous wail, the man's an angry roar. For a moment she lay still in bed, listening. She couldn't hear what they were saying but it was clear that they were arguing.

Rosie, her sister, was peacefully asleep at the other end of their shared single bed, the stray cat Felix, curled against her. She never seemed to wake up however loud the shouting downstairs. Rita slid out from under the bedclothes and tip-toeing across the room, crept out onto the landing. Limp green light from a street lamp shone through the small landing window, lighting the narrow staircase. A shaft of dull yellow light, shining through the half-open kitchen door, lit the cracked brown lino and cast shadows in the hall. The voices came from the kitchen, still loud, still angry. Rita crouched against the banister, her face pressed to its bars. From here she could actually hear some of what was being said.

'...my children from me.' Her mother's voice.

'...another man's brats!' His voice.

Rita shivered at the sound of his voice. Uncle Jimmy, Mum's new friend. Then Mum began to cry, a pitiful wailing that echoed into the hall.

'For Christ's sake!' His voice again. 'Cut the caterwauling, woman... or I'll leave right now.'

A chair crashed over, and the shaft of light broadened as the kitchen door was pushed wider. Rita dived back into her bedroom, making the door creak loudly. She leaped into bed, kicking a protesting Felix off the covers and pulling the sheet up over her head. She tried to calm her breathing so that it matched Rosie's, the peaceful breathing of undisturbed sleep, but her heart was pounding, the blood hammering in her ears as she heard the heavy tread of feet on the stairs. *He* was coming up.

'Rita! Was you out of bed?' His voice was harsh. He had not put on the landing light, and as he reached the top stair, Felix materialized at his feet, almost tripping him over.

'Bloody cat!' snarled the man, aiming a kick at him, but Felix had already streaked downstairs.

Jimmy Randall paused on the landing, listening. All was quiet in the girls' room. Softly he crossed to the half-open door and peered in, but it was too dark to see anything, and all he could hear was the steady breathing of two little girls asleep.

Must have been the damned cat, he thought. Don't know why Mavis gives it houseroom, dirty stray. If it was my house...

It wasn't. Not yet. But it would be, Jimmy was determined about that. A neat little house in Shrewsbury Street, a terrace of other neat little houses; well, not so neat most of them, unrepaired from the bombing, cracked windows, scarred paintwork, rubble in the tiny gardens, but basically sound enough. Jimmy wouldn't mind doing a bit of repair work himself, provided the house was his at the end of the month. His and Mavis's, but not full of squalling kids. All he had to do was get his name on the rent book, then he'd be laughing.

Rita heard him close the door but lay quite still in case it was a trick, in case he was standing silently inside the room waiting to catch her out. It was a full two minutes before she allowed herself to open her eyes into the darkness of her room. She could see nothing. Straining her ears she heard his voice again, not so loud this time, and definitely downstairs.

For a while she lay in the dark, thinking about Uncle Jimmy. He had come into their lives about

two months ago, visiting occasionally at first, smiling a lot, once bringing chocolate. It was for Mum really, but she'd let Rita and Rosie have one piece every day until it had gone. But Rita was afraid of him all the same. He had a loud voice and got cross easily.

Rita wasn't used to having a man in her life. She hardly remembered her daddy. Mum said he had gone to the war and hadn't come home. He had gone before Rosie was even born, fighting the Germans. Rita knew he had been in the air force, flying in a plane high over Germany, and that one night his plane hadn't come back. There was a picture of her daddy in a silver-coloured frame on the kitchen shelf. He was wearing his uniform and smiling. Wherever you moved in the kitchen, his eyes followed you, so that wherever she sat, Rita knew he was smiling at her. She loved his face, his smiling making crinkles round his eyes and his curly fair hair half-covered with his air force cap. Rosie had the same sort of hair, thick and fair, curling round her face. Rita's own hair was like Mum's, dark, thin and straight, and she always wished she had hair like Rosie's... and Daddy's.

Then, a while ago, the photo had disappeared.

'Where's Daddy?' Rita demanded one morning when she sat down and noticed the photo had gone. 'Where's Daddy gone?'

Without looking up Mum said, 'Oh, I took him down for now. I need to clean the frame.'

Daddy had not reappeared on the shelf, and Rita missed him. 'I could clean the frame,' she offered. 'I'm good at cleaning.'

'It's being mended,' explained her mother. 'When I came to clean it I found it was broken, so I've taken it to be mended.'

Rita didn't ask again, but she somehow knew that the photo wasn't coming back and that this had something to do with the arrival of Jimmy Randall.

Jimmy Randall had changed everything. He was often there when Rita and Rosie came home from school. Mum used to meet them at the school gate, but since Uncle Jimmy, as they were to call him, had become part of their lives, Mum was too busy, and it became Rita's job to bring Rosie home safely.

'You must hold her hand all the way,' Mum said, 'and come straight home.'

So every school day, except Thursdays, Rita took Rosie's hand and crossing the street very carefully, walked them home; almost every day when they got home, Uncle Jimmy would already be in the kitchen with Mum.

On Thursdays Gran met them at the school gate and gave them tea. Sometimes she let them play in the park they passed on the way.

'I don't like Uncle Jimmy,' Rita confided to her grandmother one Thursday when they were having tea. 'He shouts. I dropped a cup yesterday, and he sent me upstairs with no tea. It didn't even break. Gran. It's not fair.'

Gran gave her a hug. 'Never mind, love,' she said. 'Perhaps he won't be around for long.' But Lily didn't like him either.

Lily Sharples was Mavis's mother. A widow herself, she still lived in the small brick house in Hampton Road, where she had lived all her married life. It had been spared by the Luftwaffe, whereas others in the vicinity had been flattened, and despite further raids, Lily remained, stubbornly, during the occupation.

'It's been my home for nigh on thirty years,' Lily told Mavis, 'and when I leave it'll be feet first.'

Lily was worried about Mavis and her family. Mavis had been on her own for five years now, and Lily wasn't surprised that she had found herself another man, it was only natural, and anyway, the girls needed a father. It was just that she wished that the man wasn't Jimmy Randall. She could see why Rita was afraid of him. He wasn't used to children and his temper was short. On one occasion Lily had seen him slap Rita across the face. The child had run to her, burying her burning cheeks.

against her grandmother, and, holding her close, Lily turned on him, saying, 'There was no need for that!'

Jimmy glowered at her and snarled, 'They need a bit of discipline. They've got to learn their place.'

'This is their place,' Lily had snapped. 'It's not yours!' But Lily was increasingly afraid that it was going to be. She decided to speak to Mavis. 'You know the girls are scared stiff of that Jimmy, don't you?' she said. 'It's not right that they should be afraid in their own home.'

'What about me?' complained Mavis. 'I need someone. Now Don's gone, have I got to stay on my own for the rest of my life?'

'No, of course you ain't,' replied her mother, 'but you do have to think about yer kids. If they're scared of Jimmy, is he really the right bloke for you?'

'It's only 'cos he makes them do what they're told,' Mavis said defensively. 'It's only 'cos they ain't used to having a dad around. They'll get used to him. He's just got a short temper, that's all.'

'He don't love 'em,' said Lily mildly.

'Course he don't,' Mavis said. 'They ain't 'is. But he'll look after them, same as he looks after me.'

'Are you going to marry him?'

Mavis shrugged. 'Don't know. Maybe.'

Lily gave her daughter a long look and then said, 'He stays here, don't he? He sleeps here, when the girls is in the house. It ain't decent, Mavis. Your dad wouldn't 'ave stood for it.'

'Things is different now, Mum,' Mavis replied. 'The war's changed everything. Too many men didn't come home. Jimmy did and I'm going to hang on to him.'

'He ain't even got a job,' Lily pointed out. 'How's he going to look after you?'

'He's getting a job,' answered Mavis. 'He's out looking for work now. He's heard they're looking for people on the building sites. His mate, Charlie, says he can get him a job where he works. You'll see.'

The day after Rita had heard the row downstairs, she and Rosie went to school as usual. Uncle Jimmy had not been there at breakfast but poor Mum had a bruise on her face.

'So silly of me,' Mum had said when Rita had reached up and touched the bruise. 'I turned round too quickly and bumped into the door. Silly Mummy!'

'Silly Mummy,' echoed Rosie, beaming at her. '*Silly Mummy!*'

All day the raised voices rang in Rita's ears. Uncle Jimmy shouting, Mum crying, the sound of the overturned chair. Rita thought of little else and was scolded for wool-gathering, but by the end of school she'd made up her mind what to do. She'd go and see Gran. She didn't live far and there were no roads to cross; she would hold Rosie's hand all the way.

When school was dismissed she collected Rosie from the yard and led her out of the gate, turning away from home. Rosie trotted happily along beside her. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Round Gran's,' answered Rita, keeping a firm grip on her sister's hand.

'Oh goody,' said Rosie. 'Do you think she'll give us our tea?'

'Expect so,' said Rita, and moments later they were knocking on Gran's door.

When Gran opened the door she was surprised to see them. It wasn't Thursday. 'Hallo,' she said. 'What are you two doing here?'

'We don't want to go home,' began Rita.

'We want some tea!' broke in Rosie, grabbing at her grandmother's hand. 'Can we have some tea from Gran?'

Lily opened a tin and gave them each a biscuit. Then she turned to Rita. 'Now what's all this about not going home? Course you must go home. Your poor mum will be wondering where you are.'

'I don't want to go home,' repeated Rita. 'Uncle Jimmy might be there.'

'So what if he is?' said Lily. 'He's Mum's friend.'

'They was fighting,' Rita said. 'Uncle Jimmy was shouting and Mum was crying, and I didn't like it.'

Lily put her arms round the little girl. 'No, I'm sure you didn't, pet. But even so you have to go home, you know, or Mum'll be very worried about you. Wait while I get my coat and I'll come with you.'

They walked back to Ship Street, Rosie skipping along holding Gran's hand on one side and Rita walking silently on the other. Lily knew that Rita thought that she, Lily, had let her down. She had come to her for refuge and she was being taken back home. But what else could she do? Mavis would be out of her mind with worry when the girls didn't come home. She had to get them back as quickly as possible.

When they reached the house and opened the door, Mavis was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a pot of tea in front of her. She looked up as they came in and her eyes widened with surprise when she saw her mother was with the girls.

'Hallo, Mum,' she said. 'What you doing here?'

'I've brought the girls home,' replied her mother.

'Oh.' Mavis looked vaguely at the kitchen clock. 'Did you meet them in the street?'

'They came to see me,' said Lily carefully. 'Look, Mavis, we need to talk. Why don't you give them their tea and then we can have a chat.'

Mavis shrugged. 'It ain't ready yet. You two go and play out.' She nodded at the door. 'I'll call you when tea's ready.'

Rita grabbed Rosie's hand. 'Come on, Rosie. I saw Maggie outside.'

When the girls had gone, Lily pulled out a chair and sat down. 'What have you done to your face?' she asked as she noticed the darkening bruise on Mavis's cheek for the first time.

Mavis coloured. 'Bumped into the door.'

Lily gave her a long look but then decided to let it go. 'Reet brought them round to me, after school. She didn't want to come home. She said you and Jimmy was fighting.'

'Not fighting, no!' snapped Mavis. 'We was arguing a bit last night, that's all. Nothing in that!'

'Rita heard you,' said Lily. 'It upset her.'

'She don't have to be upset. It was only an argument.'

'Like the one you had with the door.'

'Look, Mum,' Mavis exploded, 'you ain't got no right to come round here, interfering in my life. What I do is my business. Who I see is my business and how I look after my kids is my business.'

'Mavis, they're scared of Jimmy,' Lily persisted.

'Well, they'll just have to get over it,' snapped Mavis. 'He's here to stay, and they'll have to get used to him.' She looked across at her mother and all of a sudden her face crumpled. 'I've been to the doctor today, Mum. Oh, no, not about the bruise. Jimmy's already said he's sorry for doing that. It won't happen again, he's not like that really. No, I went 'cos, well, 'cos I'm in the family way.' She pressed her hands against her stomach. 'About four months.'

'And it's Jimmy's?'

'Course it's Jimmy's! What do you take me for?'

'Is he pleased?' asked Lily, wondering if this had caused last night's row.

'He don't know yet,' admitted Mavis. 'I only went to the doctor today... though I knew really. Haven't had the curse for five months, and I'm beginning to show.'

'So, when are you going to tell him?'

'Don't know. Maybe tonight. Have to pick my moment.'

‘And the girls? You’ll have to tell them.’

‘They don’t need to know,’ muttered Mavis, ‘not for ages yet... and you’re not to tell them, Mum. Right? I got to get on with the girls’ tea so’s they’re done before Jimmy comes home.’ Mavis went on and cutting two slices of bread began to spread them with marga. ‘You want to go and call them in?’

Lily went to the front door and looked out. She saw the girls further down the street playing hopscotch on the pavement. She watched them for several moments, smiling as she saw Rita flailing her arms as she balanced on one leg, trying to pick up her stone, but her smile faded as she thought about what Mavis had just told her. The lives of her two granddaughters were certainly going to change, but even in her wildest dreams Lily could not have guessed just how much.

Jimmy did not come back to Ship Street that evening until well after the children were in bed though Mavis had made his tea in the expectation that he would be home by about six as usual. Jimmy actually lived with his widower father, but came round for most of his meals and expected them to be ready on the table when he arrived. Today, however, he had been out drinking with his mate, Charlie, celebrating the fact that he now had a job labouring on a building site. It was not the sort of work Jimmy would have chosen, but at least it brought in some money, cash in hand, and he was short of cash. There was plenty of labouring work about, what with all the bombsites to be cleared and the rebuilding. Then there was stuff you could pick up there, too, if you were careful and didn’t let the foreman see you. Clearing the rubble from the bombed-out houses, Charlie told him, you never knew what you might find. On sites reclaimed by weeds and other vegetation, you could often find something worth having, something you could sell on, down the pub. Celebration was in order, so Jimmy and Charlie celebrated.

It was late when he finally staggered into Mavis’s kitchen. Mavis was sitting at the table doing her mending, but she did not put down the jersey she was darning; she simply looked up and smiled. That made Jimmy suddenly angry. She ought to jump up to welcome him home and put his tea on the table especially as he’d got the job, especially as he’d have money in his pocket now, especially as that stupid woman would expect him to contribute to the food bills. Things were definitely going to change around here.

He dropped down onto a chair. ‘Where’s my tea?’ he growled.

‘In the oven,’ Mavis said, hastily laying aside her darning and getting up. ‘I’ll get it for you. It may be a little bit dry... I was expecting you a bit earlier than this.’ She reached into the oven and brought out a plate of sausage and mash. There had been onion gravy, too, but it had dried into a brown mass on the side of the plate.

Jimmy looked at the food she set in front of him and then turned furious eyes on her. ‘What d’you call this?’ he demanded. ‘Looks like a plate of shit!’ He swept the plate aside and it crashed on the floor. Mavis took a step back as Jimmy got unsteadily to his feet, and glowered at her across the table. ‘Get that mess cleared up,’ he shouted, ‘and get me something to eat!’

As she knelt down to pick up the broken plate and to scrape the food off the floor, she felt his towering over her. Instinctively she cringed away from him, squeaking as she did so, ‘Don’t hit me, Jimmy! I’m pregnant. I’m expecting your child.’

It made him pause, made him grip the table to steady himself. ‘Fucking hell! That’s all I need,’ he said, and slumped back down onto the chair. Then he put his head onto the table and went to sleep.

Somehow Mavis had managed to rouse him and get him upstairs. Somehow she manoeuvred him onto the bed. She pulled off his shoes and, throwing a blanket over him, left him to sleep it off. She crept out of the bedroom and peeped in at her daughters, asleep in their room. At least, she supposed they were asleep. There was no sign of either of them being awake, but you never knew with Reet. She was a deceitful kid; she must have heard them the previous night and sneaked off to her gran’s to tell tales and bring Gran round to interfere. She stood for a long minute outside the door, but nothing

stirred.

~~Mavis went back downstairs, cleared up the mess on the floor and making herself a cup of tea, s~~
down, exhausted. Would Jimmy remember in the morning? she wondered. It wasn't how she'd meant
to tell him about the baby, not blurt it out like that, but the words had burst out all by themselves.
Would he remember? Would he react better when he'd thought about it, or would he walk out on her
leaving her to cope with three children?

He'd like the idea of being a dad, wouldn't he? Especially if it was a boy. Surely he'd want a son,
all men wanted a son, didn't they?

For a moment she thought of Don. He hadn't minded what they had. 'As long as it's got all its bits
love,' he'd said, patting the bulge of her belly, 'that's all right with me!' And it had been. He'd adored
Rita, and would surely have felt the same about Rosie, if he'd been around when she was born.

Surely Jimmy would love his own child, once he got used to the idea he was going to be a father.
Then they could get married quickly, so that the baby wasn't a bastard.

In the morning, leaving Jimmy still snoring, Mavis got the girls ready for school.

‘You’re to come straight home today,’ she instructed Rita. ‘Do you hear me, Reet? No going round your gran’s and bothering her.’

‘Yes, Mum.’ Rita was very subdued. She had heard the crashing plate last night, and she’d heard Mum helping Uncle Jimmy up the stairs. She’d stayed still and quiet in the bed and at last drifted off to sleep. But in the morning she remembered it all, and it frightened her. She was pleased when she and Rosie set off for school before he came downstairs.

It was some time later that Jimmy pushed open the kitchen door and peered in.

‘What’s for breakfast?’ he asked by way of greeting.

‘Can make you some toast,’ Mavis suggested cautiously.

‘That’s not much for a man to go to work on,’ he grumbled, flopping down at the table. There was a pot of tea made and Mavis quickly poured him a cup, before putting a couple of slices of bread under the grill.

‘You got the job, then?’ she ventured.

‘Course I did. Told you that last night when I come home. Start on Monday.’ He hadn’t, but no point in upsetting him now when he seemed in an affable mood. He drank his tea as he watched her turn the toast and then slide it onto a plate. He reached for the marge and spread some thinly on the toast before taking a huge bite.

The last of my marge, Mavis thought bitterly. We’ve no more till next week.

‘I need your ration book,’ she said, as she watched him scrape the last smears onto his second piece of toast. ‘I can’t cope without it no more.’

Jimmy shrugged. ‘It’s not as if I’m here all the time.’

‘Enough that I need your rations,’ she said, surprising herself with her own temerity. ‘Jimmy, can’t let the girls go short and now, in my condition...’ She let the words hang in the air, waiting.

He looked up. ‘Your condition? Oh yes, I remember, you’re up the spout.’

‘It’s your baby, Jimmy!’ she said. ‘Our baby. I’m having our baby.’

Jimmy said nothing.

‘Jimmy,’ she ventured again. ‘We’re having a baby. You’re going to be a dad.’

‘I heard you,’ growled Jimmy. ‘What do you want me to do about it? Dance a jig? How do I know it’s mine?’

‘Oh, Jimmy, of course it’s yours. Whose else would it be? You’re the only man I’ve... been with. since Don died.’

‘So you say.’

Tears filled Mavis’s eyes. ‘Jimmy, you know it’s true! You know you’re the only man in my life.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I *do* say so. It’s our baby, and it’ll be born late June, a summer baby.’

‘Well, if it’s mine, it’s mine,’ Jimmy said grudgingly.

‘It is... but Jimmy, I don’t want... I mean it wouldn’t be right... I mean we need to think...’

‘For Christ’s sake, woman, spit out.’

Mavis drew a deep breath. ‘I don’t want it to be a bastard, Jimmy.’

When he said nothing she took her courage in both hands and went on, ‘I want us to get married, Jimmy. Before it’s born. That’s what I want.’

‘Married?’ Jimmy sounded incredulous. ‘Married?’

‘I don’t want it born a bastard, Jimmy.’

‘Married,’ he said again, as if tasting the word.

She waited, knowing if she said the wrong thing, he would say no, walk out and leave.

At last he said, ‘I’ll think about it. It’s a big step, getting married.’ He looked across at her. ‘If we get married and I move in here, them girls are going to have to go. I told you, I ain’t taking on no one else’s brats.’

‘What do you mean, the girls must go? They’re my daughters. Why must they go? Where must they go? Their place is with me! This is their home!’

Jimmy shrugged and got to his feet. ‘If it’s their home, it ain’t going to be mine,’ he said. ‘It’s up to you, Mav. If you want me to stand by you, to marry you, make you respectable like, well, I will, but I won’t take on another bloke’s kids. Right? Not with my own kid to think of. You got to find them somewhere else.’ He reached for his coat and putting it on, went to the door. Looking back at her he went on, ‘It’s your decision, Mav. I ain’t going to change my mind.’ And with that he left, closing the door behind him.

Mavis stared after him bemused. What did he mean, the girls had got to go? They were her girls and belonged with her. She thought of Rita and Rosie as she’d seen them that morning, setting off for school, Rosie with her hand trustingly in Rita’s as they walked along the street. It was Rita who was the problem. Reet could be difficult, especially recently. She’d been moody, not the sunny little girl she used to be. It was Reet who annoyed Jimmy, who wouldn’t do what he told her. It was Rita’s fault that Jimmy didn’t like her. She was being obstinate and rude and it wouldn’t be long before Rosie started to copy her. She always copied Rita. But Rosie was lovely. She looked so like Don.

Mavis hadn’t thought of Don much for quite a long time. She got to her feet and went to the drawer in which she had hidden his photograph. Jimmy had ‘accidentally’ knocked it off the shelf and taking the hint, she had hidden it in the drawer. She got it out now and looked at Don. He smiled back at her as he always had done, as trustingly as Rosie, trusting her with his children. She looked at his face for a long time. He’d never forgive her if she didn’t look after his girls. But he wasn’t there to forgive her, was he? He was lost, exploded, burned to ashes somewhere over Germany. He hadn’t come back and she’d been left to bring up the girls on her own. Now she had a chance to start a new life, with a new man. Surely Don wouldn’t begrudge her that. Surely he would say, ‘Go for it, girlie. Be happy! Go for it, girlie.’ Girlie, his pet name for her. She blinked back the tears that had crept into the corners of her eyes. She had to be strong. Don wasn’t here, he never would be again, and she had to get on with her life. She had the new baby to think of. She had to provide for the new baby. She couldn’t let it start off life as a bastard.

Mavis didn’t have to go to her cleaning job with Mrs Robinson today, and walking through the park on her way to the grocer’s she sat down for a rest on a bench, watching a family of tiny ducklings dashing through the water behind their mother. Mavis smiled as one went astray, swimming in the wrong direction. Mrs Duck wasn’t at all concerned; she simply swam on, leaving the lost duckling to cheep pitifully behind her.

Not such a very good mother, thought Mavis, then her smile died. I’m not a good mother either. I want this new baby and Jimmy more than I want my girls. And even as she tried to push the dreadful thought from her mind, crush it before it could take root, she knew, in that instant, that it was true. However fiercely she pushed it away, it crowded back. She needed a man, she wanted the baby, and Rita and Rosie were standing in her way.

No, she shook her head hard as if to clear the thought away, no of course they weren’t. Of course Jimmy didn’t mean it. She could talk him round. As for the girls, they’d get used to the idea that they were going to have a stepdad and a little brother or sister.

She left the peace and quiet of the park and walked along the street to Baillies Grocery. Just as she reached it she met her mother coming out, carrying her shopping bag.

‘Hallo, Mum,’ she said.

‘Mavis.’ Lily looked at her daughter carefully. ‘You all right, love?’ she asked. ‘You look a bit peaky.’

‘I’m fine, Mum. Just a bit tired, you know how it takes me.’

Lily nodded sympathetically. ‘Yes, used to take me in the same way. D’you want a cup of tea? You look as if you could do with one.’

Mavis was about to refuse, and then she thought, why not? ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘That’d be nice.’

They turned away from the shop and walked the two streets to Hampton Road. Once inside Lily put the kettle on. Mavis dropped onto a chair in the kitchen, watching as her mother put away her shopping. She said nothing. Mavis felt safe in the kitchen of her childhood, in the silence that surrounded them. Lily didn’t chatter, or ask awkward questions. She simply put her food away, put cups out on the table and then made a pot of tea. She poured it and waited.

‘I told him, last night,’ Mavis said, at last breaking the silence. ‘About the baby.’

‘And?’

Mavis shrugged. ‘And he was fine about it.’ She sipped her tea. She could feel her mother’s eyes on her, and she went on, ‘A bit surprised, of course, but he likes the idea of being a dad.’ She raised her eyes to meet Lily’s. ‘We’re going to get married... so the baby’ll be OK, you know?’

‘D’you want to marry him?’ asked her mother. ‘Really want to marry him? Jimmy, who knocked you about?’

‘It’s only happened once,’ replied Mavis defensively, ‘and he was ever so sorry. It was only ’cos he’d had a bit to drink. Won’t happen again.’

‘Till he’s had a bit to drink again,’ said Lily wryly. ‘What about the girls? What about Rita and Rosie? What do they think?’

‘They don’t know yet, but they’ll be all right.’

‘You know they’re scared of Jimmy.’

‘So you keep saying,’ snapped Mavis, ‘but they’ll get used to him. They’ll have to.’ Her tone softened a little as she added, ‘They’ll like having a baby in the house, a little brother or sister.’

‘So when are you going to get married then?’ Lily knew it was no use tackling the question of the girls at this stage. Mavis had made up her mind. Maybe as the days passed...

That evening Jimmy arrived at the house carrying a suitcase. He dumped it at the bottom of the stairs and pushed open the kitchen door. The children were sitting at the table having their tea, and when he opened the door, they fell silent, watching him with wide eyes. He reached into his pocket and slapped his ration book onto the table.

‘There you are,’ he said. ‘Now perhaps I’ll get a decent tea. I’ll put my stuff upstairs.’ He turned back at the door and added, ‘And I want my name on the rent book. Right?’ Picking up his case, he marched upstairs to Mavis’s bedroom.

‘Is Uncle Jimmy coming to stay?’ Rosie asked.

‘Yes,’ Mavis replied. ‘He’s going to be your new daddy.’

‘I don’t want a new daddy,’ cried Rita, jumping up from her chair. ‘I don’t want him. I don’t like Uncle Jimmy. He’s horrid.’

‘That’s enough of that, young lady,’ snapped her mother. ‘He’s coming to live with us, and that’s that.’ Mavis reached over and shook Rita hard. ‘And I suggest you keep a civil tongue in your head.’

‘Why’s he coming to our house?’ asked Rosie.

‘Because we want to be a family,’ Mavis answered. ‘You’ll grow to love him, like I do.’

‘I shan’t,’ stated Rita. ‘I shan’t love him. He doesn’t love me.’

‘Well, he certainly won’t love you if you talk like that,’ said Mavis. ‘Now, finish your tea and get out to play.’

Rita crammed the last of her bread into her mouth and without another word went outside.

‘Can I play out, too?’ demanded Rosie, slipping down off her stool.

‘Just for a little while,’ agreed Mavis, and Rosie darted out to join her sister in the street.

Mavis was glad to see them go. She wanted them out of the way when Jimmy came back downstairs. She could hear him moving about in the bedroom and wondered what he was doing, but even as she got up to find out, she heard his footsteps on the stairs.

‘I’m going out,’ he said as he met her in the hallway.

‘What about your tea?’ she ventured as he opened the front door.

‘I’ll have it when I come in.’

When he had gone, she went upstairs to her room. The wardrobe door stood open and half her clothes had been pulled out and dumped on the bed. His were still in his case, but Mavis realized that she was expected to hang his up for him in the space he’d made, and she set about doing so, sorting and rehung her own meagre wardrobe to accommodate his.

While she was busy upstairs, Rita came in from the street. She had seen Jimmy leave as she and Maggie had been trying to teach Rosie to skip.

‘Back in a min,’ she’d said and leaving Rosie with Maggie, she’d darted back into the house. She could hear Mum upstairs so she crept into the kitchen. Quickly she opened the drawer of the dresser and there he was. Her daddy, smiling out through the cracked glass of his frame. She’d discovered the photo some days earlier, when looking in the drawer for a pencil. Quickly Rita pulled the frame open and slid Daddy out from under the glass. She looked round for somewhere to hide him. She could still hear Mum moving about upstairs, so she couldn’t risk taking him up there. There was nowhere in the hall to hide him, so she opened the door to the front room. They never used the front room, well, not at Christmas when Gran came, so he wouldn’t be found in there. She picked up the cushion from what had been her daddy’s armchair and slid the photo inside its cover. Then she put the cushion back and slipped out into the street again. Daddy was safe now. She didn’t want another dad; her daddy would always be her daddy. If Uncle Jimmy moved into the house, well, let him, but he would never, ever, be her dad.

A few weeks later there was a loud hammering on the front door and Mavis, opening it, was surprised to find her mother on the doorstep.

‘How did that child get that cut on her forehead?’ demanded Lily. ‘How come Reet’s got a black eye?’

‘She... she fell off her stool last night,’ faltered Mavis. ‘She hit her face on the gas stove.’

‘Hit her face on the gas stove,’ echoed Lily scornfully. ‘I don’t believe you. There’s much more to it than that.’

‘She fell off her stool...’ Mavis began again.

‘Knocked off it more like,’ asserted Lily. ‘By that Jimmy, I bet. You shouldn’t have him in the house, Mavis. I’ve told you before. He’s bad news. He knocks you about—’

‘No! No, Mum,’ Mavis burst out. ‘Who said that? Has that Rita—’

‘He knocks you about,’ repeated Lily, ignoring her interruption, ‘an’ he knocks the girls about, an’ whatever you say, he’s going to go on doing it. Men like him always go on doing it.’

‘Mum, it wasn’t like that. Reet fell off her stool. You know what she’s like. She was fidgeting. She’s always fidgeting, you know she is. An’ she fell off and hit her face, poor little kid.’ Mavis’s eyes challenged her mother to disbelieve her and Lily looked a little less certain.

‘That’s what she said—’ began Lily.

‘Because that’s what happened, Mum. Did you see her on the way to school?’

‘Yes, they were just going in.’

‘~~Look, Mum, I was just leaving. I got to be at Mrs Robinson’s in twenty minutes. Walk with me to the bus, eh? I must go or I’ll be late.~~’ She edged her mother towards the front door, and Lily allowed herself to be eased out of the house and into the street. Mavis closed the door behind her and, taking her mother firmly by the arm, began walking towards the bus stop.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ she said, ‘but I mustn’t be late. The cleaning takes me a bit longer these days and I don’t want Mrs Robinson to turn me off. I was going to come and see you when I’d finished. Jimmy’s going to the registry office today to get the wedding sorted. You have to put your name on a list for three weeks or something... not sure quite what, but Jimmy knows and he’s going to do it in the dinnertime.’

‘You really want to marry him, Mavis?’ asked Lily, trying to walk more slowly. She wanted to talk to Mavis, to have things out with her, but knew that here in the street wasn’t the place.

‘Yes, I do,’ Mavis asserted. ‘He’ll make a great dad.’

‘Oh, Mavis, you know—’

‘Sorry, Mum, here’s my bus.’ Mavis stuck her hand out to hail the bus and scrambled aboard as soon as it stopped. She turned back, looking at her mother still standing on the pavement. ‘I’ll come and see you tomorrow, Mum. Tell you the wedding date and that.’

The bus began to draw away, and Mavis moved inside, waving to her mother through the window.

Lily watched her go with distinct misgivings. She remained unconvinced that Rita had simply fallen off her stool. No, Jimmy Randall had something to do with it. Jimmy Randall was not good news, not good news at all.

On the bus, Mavis sat back against the seat for the five minutes to took to reach her stop. She realized that all her muscles were tense and she made a conscious effort to relax. She wasn't sure she had convinced her mother about Rita's black eye, but for now, she'd avoided her questions. She had a breathing space to decide what she was really going to do. Tomorrow she'd have to face her question but by tomorrow she'd have a wedding date and with luck Lily would be carried along on the tide of preparation.

Last night had been awful. Rita had refused to eat liver for her tea and Jimmy had lost his rag and knocked her off her stool. She'd smashed her face against the corner of the cooker, opening a cut on her forehead, and with a slam of the door, Jimmy had stalked out, leaving Mavis to deal with the blood and two screaming kids. She'd sent them both to bed, furious with Rita for provoking yet another row and subsided into a chair, burying her face in her hands in despair. She was six months pregnant, always exhausted, and Jimmy still hadn't kept his promise to marry her. He'd moved in, but no wedding date had been set.

When Jimmy finally came back home Mavis was slumped in her chair, half asleep. She started awake as he came in and plonked himself down opposite her. Now he looked across at Mavis. 'Right?' he said, as if they were already in the middle of a conversation, 'tomorrow I'll go to the registry office and you can go to the council and tell them you need a home for your kids.'

Mavis looked at him blankly for a moment and then echoed faintly, 'Registry office?'

'To sort out a date for our wedding. That's what you wanted, isn't it?'

'Yes, oh Jimmy, yes, of course.'

'And you can go to the council and get your girls took in.'

'Took in where?'

'How do I know? They have orphanages, don't they? They have to now, with this new welfare.'

'But they're not orphans.'

'Half orphans, they are. They ain't got no dad.'

'But I want you to be their dad.'

'Well, I don't want to be, do I?' rasped Jimmy. 'And what's more, they don't want me to be either!'

'They don't know what they want,' began Mavis, 'they're too young to understand—'

Jimmy cut her off. 'Your Reet understands all right. She don't want me in the house, and I don't want her. Simple as that. She'd be happier living somewhere else. I expect she'll get adopted, and she'll be far better off adopted than living with us.'

'Adopted!' croaked Mavis.

'Well, Mav, there it is. We'll get married just like you want to, and you, me and the baby'll be a family.' He heaved himself to his feet. 'God, I'm tired. Heavy work on the building site. Come on upstairs.'

In the morning Jimmy's parting words had been, 'I'll go to the registry office in me dinnertime. All right?' He gave her a hard stare and added, 'An' you'll do your bit, right?' Mavis had nodded. She knew she couldn't cope on her own any longer. She needed a man, a man who came home with a wage packet every Friday. A man to take care of the things men do take care of about the home. A man so she wasn't lonely any more. She had Jimmy. And if the price of having him was sending her daughter away for a while... well, it wouldn't be forever, would it? Increasingly it was becoming a price she

was prepared to pay... for the sake of the baby. She hadn't quite decided, she told herself, but couldn't hurt if she went to the council offices to see the welfare after she'd finished at Mrs Robinson's, just to ask. Nothing definite.

At half-past twelve, Mavis left Mrs Robinson's and walked the half mile or so to the Market Square. There, on the far side, were the council offices, housed in a grim, grey stone building, but today, with the sun shining on its windows, it seemed to Mavis to be more approachable. A sign, she thought to herself. A sign she should go in.

She crossed the square and taking a deep breath, mounted the steps and pushed her way through the heavy glass doors into the entrance hall. To one side was a reception desk, manned by a harassed-looking woman, typing. Mavis approached and the woman paused long enough to say, 'Can I help you?'

'I'm looking for...' Mavis gulped and tried again. 'I'm looking for the children's department.'

'Second floor, on the right at the top of the stairs. Room 21.'

The woman returned to her typing, and Mavis turned away. As she looked round to find the staircase, she glanced back through the glass doors at the sunlit square beyond.

I don't have to do this, she thought. I can walk out of them doors, and everything'll be like always

Like always. No man in the house. A baby coming. No regular money. Reet behaving like a sulky little brat, fighting with Jimmy; Rosie starting to copy her. Shouting and screaming and hitting. If Rita wasn't in the house there'd be peace. If Rita wasn't in the house Jimmy couldn't hit her. Rita would be safer somewhere else. And if Rita wasn't in the house Jimmy wouldn't get so angry and take it out on her, Mavis. It would be better for everyone if Rita wasn't in the house... including Rita. Mavis turned and went up the stairs to find Room 21.

Room 21 turned out to be a sort of waiting room. It was very small, furnished with a couple of old wooden chairs, and on the far side was another door and a glass window with a sort of sliding hatch. Beside the hatch was a bell. Mavis rang it. There was a scuffling behind the glass panel and then the hatch slid open and a pale-faced woman peered out.

'Yes?'

'I want to see someone about having my kids took in,' Mavis said.

'I see,' came the matter-of-fact reply. 'Name?'

'Mavis Stevens.'

The woman made a note. 'Take a seat, please.' The glass hatch slid closed again.

Mavis sat down on one of the chairs. She stared for a moment at the glass hatch. Is that all there to it? she wondered. Give your name and take a seat?

Mavis waited... and waited. After half an hour she went back to the window again.

'How long have I got to wait?' she asked when the whey-faced woman reappeared.

'It's dinnertime,' the woman replied. 'Miss Hopkins'll be back in a while. She's the one you have to see.' The glass hatch closed.

Mavis knew it was dinnertime, her own stomach was rumbling. She should have guessed the welfare lady might be out for dinner. She wished she'd thought of bringing a sandwich with her. She sighed and began re-reading the notices on the wall.

Miss Hopkins came back into the office a few moments later. She was a heavily built woman, broad in the hips and broad in the shoulders. Her hair was piled up on top of her head in a rather untidy heap and secured with what looked, to Mavis, like two hat pins. She was puffing from climbing the stairs, and she paused on the threshold to get her breath. She looked across at Mavis, but gave no greeting, simply crossed to the door beside the hatch and pushing it open, spoke to the woman inside. 'I'm back, Miss Parker.'

It was another quarter of an hour before Miss Parker appeared at the door and said, 'Miss Hopkins'

can see you now, Mrs Stevens.’ She indicated a glass-panelled door on which were written the words *Children’s Officer*.

Mavis tapped on the glass and opening the door cautiously, went in. Seeing the formidable Miss Hopkins sitting behind a desk covered with papers, Mavis almost turned and fled. But it was too late. She’d had all that waiting time to change her mind, and now, now it was too late. She edged into the room and Miss Hopkins, looking up from a paper she was reading, pointed to the wooden chair that stood in front of her desk.

‘Please sit down.’

Mavis sat.

‘Name?’

‘Mavis Stevens.’

‘Address?’

Mavis gave her address and Miss Hopkins made a note on a pad in front of her.

‘Husband’s name?’

‘I haven’t got a husband,’ stumbled Mavis, unnerved by the woman’s brisk efficiency. ‘I mean, I’m a widow. He was killed in the war.’

‘I see.’ Miss Hopkins eyed the well-defined bulge of Mavis’s stomach. ‘Children?’

‘Yes, two girls, Rita’s nine and Rosie’s five.’

‘And another on the way,’ stated Miss Hopkins.

‘Yes, well, me and Jimmy, we’re getting married soon, and...’

‘And...?’ prompted Miss Hopkins, though she thought she knew what was coming.

‘And there ain’t room for us all in the house, not with the new baby. We need somewhere for the girls to go, just for a little while, while we get settled, like. Be difficult for us all being crammed together... with the new baby an’ all.’

‘I see.’ Miss Hopkins sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers. ‘I see, so you want to move the girls out to make way for the baby.’

‘Just for a little while,’ Mavis reiterated, ‘just while, you know...’ Her words tailed off. Silence.

‘And where do you want them to go?’ enquired Miss Hopkins at last. ‘Why have you come to me?’

‘Well,’ Mavis looked a little confused, ‘well, you’re the welfare, ain’t you? I mean, you’re the children’s department. You have to look after children that don’t have no homes.’

‘But your children do have a home,’ pointed out Miss Hopkins.

‘Well, they do and they don’t,’ said Mavis, and when Miss Hopkins made no comment to this rather cryptic statement, she went on, ‘They do just now, but they won’t when Jimmy and I get married.’

‘You mean he won’t give them a home,’ stated Miss Hopkins bluntly.

‘He will, but it ain’t easy. They ain’t his family, are they? Not like the baby’ll be.’ Mavis leaned forward earnestly in her chair. ‘They ain’t his kids. He don’t feel about them the way I do.’

And you’d rather have him than them, thought Miss Hopkins. Aloud she said, ‘I see.’

She did see too, a woman at her wits’ end. Needing to get married to have support for the new baby, and for herself, but knowing that this was not going to happen unless her daughters were removed from the household. Well, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Miss Hopkins knew of a place that would happily accept such children. Perhaps...?

‘Do the girls get on all right with... your fiancé?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, yeah... mostly... well, not all the time. Rita gives him a bit of cheek sometimes and he don’t like it.’

‘Does he strike her?’

‘No! Course not!’ Mavis filled her voice with indignation, but when Miss Hopkins’ eyes bored into

her, Mavis dropped her gaze and said, 'Well, not often. But I mean, she cheeks him... says he's no her dad and that.'

'Well, he isn't, is he?' pointed out Miss Hopkins. Silence again. Mavis stared at the floor. 'So he doesn't love them... the girls?'

'Well, they're not his, are they?' Mavis demanded. 'I mean, it's natural that he don't love them like he'll love the baby. He ain't never going to love them like he'll love the baby, is he? 'Cos the baby's his, ain't it?'

'You'll have to fill in a form,' Miss Hopkins said, 'requesting assistance with housing your daughters, that's if you're serious about asking for them to be fostered for a while.'

'Just till we're sorted,' Mavis said. 'Shall I fill it in now? The form?'

'It's quite complicated,' replied Miss Hopkins. 'I think you should take it away and look at it very carefully. Go through it with your... fiancé. It's not a thing to be rushed, you know. Once you've made your application it will be considered, but I must warn you this doesn't mean that it will be granted. The decision will take time, but if accepted, places will be found for your daughters.' Miss Hopkins rose to her feet. 'It's too important to be hurried.'

Mavis stood as well, clutching her handbag in front of her, a barrier between her and the formidable woman behind the desk.

'No,' she said. 'All right, I'll take it with me and bring it back tomorrow.'

'Very well.' Miss Hopkins rang a bell and Miss Parker appeared at the door.

'Ah, Miss Parker. Please give Mrs Stevens application forms for temporary foster care and adoption.'

'Adoption!' exclaimed Mavis.

'I think that's what you're actually asking for, Mrs Stevens, isn't it? Someone to take Rita and Rosie off your hands so that you can start a new life with your new husband?'

Mavis didn't reply, and Miss Hopkins continued, 'In that case, please fill in both sets of forms and bring them back with the children's birth certificates. We can take it from there. Good afternoon, Mrs Stevens.'

As the door closed behind her visitor, Miss Hopkins put down the paper and looked thoughtful. It was clear to her that the two little girls weren't wanted at home. But she knew someone who wanted them, and if the mother returned with the right documentation, she was sure that she could hurry the application through. As the newly appointed acting Children's Officer, with several years' experience in welfare work, she was the dominant person on the new Children's Committee and decisions she made were normally rubber-stamped by those who deferred to her experience. She reached for the telephone and asked the operator for the number she needed.

Emily Vanstone stared out of the window. It was raining and the garden beyond looked damp and depressing. On the desk in front of her was a brochure showing a wide and open landscape, basking in warm sunshine. At the top were the words, *EVER-Care taking children to a better world and a better life.*

It was ten years since she, Emily Vanstone, spinster daughter of the late George Vanstone, sister-in-law of Sir Edward Sherrington and pillar of the Crosshills Methodist Church, had set up a charity to rescue children whom she described as ‘Guttersnipes’ from their poor and feckless families.

When her father, George Vanstone, mill-owner and philanthropist, died, he left his money in four equal parts. One quarter went to each of his three daughters, Amelia, Emily and Maud. The last quarter of his substantial estate was in a trust to be administered jointly by Emily and by Maud’s husband, solicitor, Martin Fielding, ‘*for the benefit of those in need*’. And who could be in more need than children who lived in the gutter?

Emily had visited Amelia and her brother-in-law, Sir Edward Sherrington, to tell them of her grand scheme. Not to ask them to contribute financially, that would have been a pointless exercise, but to use them in an entirely different way. What was the use of having an aristocratic brother-in-law if you didn’t take advantage of the fact on occasion? She had told Amelia she wanted to discuss something with them and Amelia had, rather reluctantly, asked her to dinner.

‘My orphanage will give these girls a home,’ Emily explained.

‘Girls only?’ interjected Amelia.

‘Certainly girls only,’ replied Emily. ‘It’s girls who need rescuing before they are dragged into prostitution... or worse.’

‘Is there anything worse?’ wondered Amelia vaguely.

Emily ignored her and went on, ‘They will be fed and clothed, but more importantly, they’ll be taught good Christian values. They will learn to work and they will learn to pray. They will learn to behave as a good citizen should. They will learn their place in life. They will not slide into a life of crime like their parents. The home will be run on strict principles, there’ll be no laxity, only strict discipline will turn these street Arabs into upright and worthwhile citizens. Early rescue is the key. Haul them out of the gutter before it’s too late.’

Sir Edward looked at the middle-aged woman in front of him, her greying hair swept back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, her eyes holding a fanatical gleam, and thought, Emily’s a real character off the old block.

Despite his superiority in education and social standing, Edward Sherrington had been in awe of his father-in-law, and though he would never admit it, even to himself, he was a little afraid of his formidable sister-in-law as well.

George Vanstone had had no sons, but Emily was as shrewd a business woman as ever her father had been. The mills still turned and produced increasing profits, and Emily had refused to hand over the reins to either of her brothers-in-law. This suited them all. Neither man wanted to be linked to the ‘trade’ and provided their wives received their share of the profits, they had little inclination to interfere, leaving Emily able to do much as she pleased. She had invested in numerous projects, and now, Sherrington thought, she’s investing in children.

‘I’ve talked to Martin about it,’ Emily continued, ‘and he agrees that I can set up an orphanage with the money Father left in the trust. I’ve already heard of a suitable house. It’s in Russell Green

just over Russell Bridge. Martin and I are going to see it tomorrow.'

Edward Sherrington shrugged. 'Well, you're the trustees,' he said. 'Just as long as you don't expect me to put money into it.'

'No, Edward,' Emily said smoothly, 'not your money.' Not that it is your money, she thought, it's Amelia's, but she won't put any in either. 'Not your money, Edward, your name.'

'My name?' Edward looked startled.

'I want you to be the patron. You know, with your name as patron on the headed notepaper.'

'Well, I don't know...'

'A baronet would look very well on a letterhead, don't you think?' remarked Emily, turning to her sister. No harm in reminding Edward that he had traded his title for their money.

'Indeed,' Amelia agreed. She was far too clever to remind Ned what he owed her; she was quite happy with the bargain. Moving in the upper echelons of society as Lady Sherrington, she wanted reminders of her lowly origins as little as Ned did. However, she also enjoyed playing Lady Bountiful and the thought of the Sherrington name on the letterhead of a charitable foundation was a tempting one.

'You know, Ned,' she went on, 'Emily's right. It would look very well.'

Edward actually agreed. 'Well,' he said, 'if you invite me to be your patron, I can hardly decline can I? But,' he looked at Emily over the rim of his wine glass, 'it's all I will do. I'll have no other part in this venture. Is this understood between us, Emily?'

'Oh, absolutely, Edward,' replied Emily, suppressing a smile. The last thing she wanted was Ned meddling in her affairs. 'I'll ask you for nothing else, I promise.'

The next morning Martin Fielding collected Emily and they drove out to Russell Green to look at the house she had found. Laurel House. As soon as she saw it, Emily was sure it would suit her perfectly. It was a substantial, rather ugly Victorian house standing in a large garden, the front of which was surrounded by the high laurel hedge that gave the house its name. Built in grey stone, its bleak exterior was made even more austere by a squat tower at one end. In the 1920s someone had added a brick-built wing, making the house an 'L', and providing some much needed kitchen space. At the back was a much larger garden, with a shaggy lawn and overgrown kitchen garden, beyond which was an orchard, surrounded by a high stone wall. Clearly it hadn't been lived in for some time.

The heavy door creaked open reluctantly and they stepped inside. Immediately Emily began assessing Laurel House's possibilities. Taking a notebook and pencil from her handbag, she began to make notes, already seeing the house as it would be, once it was furnished ready for the children.

The entrance hall was wide and high with a staircase that rose to the floor above in a broad sweep. Downstairs there were several reception rooms, including a morning room and a study. The old kitchen had been turned into a laundry, and from it a door led down into a large cellar that ran the length of the house. Emily did not venture into the cellar, merely opening the door and peering down into the gloom, but she was pleased to know it was there, offering plenty of storage space. The kitchen in the new wing was adequate and as she wandered through the empty rooms, Emily became certain that this was the house for her orphanage.

'We'll buy it,' she announced to Martin. 'It's perfect. We can easily accommodate at least thirty children in here. Maybe more.'

'My dear Emily, we can't rush into this, you know,' Martin said, concerned. He thought it a dreadful house, grey and forbidding. Much time, effort and money would have to be spent on it to make it habitable. 'We need to consider long and hard before we decide. There may be other houses that would be even better. It would be stupid to buy the first one we saw.'

Emily turned on him at once. 'Martin,' she said briskly, 'we've agreed to use the trust money for an orphanage. This house provides all we need, there is no point in waiting.'

'It will take a while... all the legalities of setting up a charity,' Martin pointed out.

~~'That's your job,' she said cheerfully. 'You sort out the legalities, and all the other paperwork.'~~ 'That's why Father made you a trustee. You arrange the purchase of the house, I'll get the work started.'

It had all taken longer than Emily had envisaged, but she spared no one in her determination to get the orphanage up and running. She did not squander money on furnishing the place. She had the walls painted, but kept to dark colours that wouldn't show the dirt. She bought metal beds with thick mattresses, which were now crammed, six to a room, in the five bedrooms upstairs. Long wooden tables and hard wooden chairs furnished the dining room, the erstwhile drawing room, and two second-hand sofas and some ancient easy chairs were in the newly designated 'playroom'. In the kitchen were a heavy duty kitchen table, a deep Belfast sink and a solid fuel range. There were several cupboards set against the walls and some shelves which housed an assortment of pots and pans.

Emily proudly showed Martin a new gas cooker standing in the corner. 'Two stoves, you see. Plenty of room to cook for thirty children.'

'Who's going to do the cooking?' Martin asked.

'Oh, the children will prepare their own meals,' Emily said. 'Under supervision of course. But the whole point is that it will be part of their training, you see. We're going to teach these creatures to become useful citizens.'

The orphanage had opened a few weeks later, with fourteen children and a live-in staff of four. Three, the matron, the cook and a housemaid, lived in bed-sitting rooms built into the loft above the kitchen, and the superintendent in a small flat at the top of the tower. The children were sent from an overflowing home several miles away.

Over the years the home had been run with strict discipline and at minimal cost. The children cooked, cleaned, mended and tended the garden. They were fed and clothed and went to the local schools until they were fourteen, when they were found a job and expected to hand in their pay packet at the end of each week. At sixteen, if they had a job, they were allowed to leave the house, and most of them did. Many of them went into service, where they lived in, all found, and were only paid minimal wages. A few chose to stay at Laurel House and go out daily to jobs in shops, or as live-on domestics, but they were expected to hand over half their pay packet to the orphanage for their keep.

The numbers grew, the home always full, and Emily Vanstone considered buying another house. She was actively looking for something suitable, when she received a letter that turned her attention to Australia. Her cousin, Daphne, had married an Australian service man, Joe Manton, after the war, and gone to live in Carrabunna, a small town north-west of Sydney. It was she, writing to Emily, who mentioned a nearby farm school that took children from the slums in England and taught them to be farmers.

I thought you might send some of your orphans here, Daphne wrote. It's a beautiful country and would be a new start for them, away from evils of the city.

'Australia?' snapped Edward when she told him.

'Yes. Fairbridge and Dr Barnardo's have been doing it for years.'

'Yes,' scoffed her brother-in-law, 'but they are large and well-known societies, not a small orphanage like yours.'

'We may be small, Edward, but we are well respected,' retorted Emily, adding in a more conciliatory tone, 'due, doubtless, to your patronage.'

'But, Emily,' Amelia said, staring at her sister in amazement, 'will the parents let you send the children to Australia?'

'Most of my children don't have parents,' replied Emily, 'and the parents of those who do sign legal guardianship over to me when they put their children in my care. Martin drew up all the paper

and we made sure they were watertight. I am their legal guardian. I can send whoever I want wherever I want. It's all arranged. The house is bought and I'm going over to get it all set up.'

'You're going to Australia?' Edward was incredulous.

'Certainly,' agreed Emily, 'I leave next week.'

Emily Vanstone had sailed for Australia, and when she returned six months later, the EVER-Care migrant home was ready to receive its first children. Though she'd had to change her 'farm school' idea, something she had realized that Daphne and Joe were in no way equipped to run, she had set out the principles on which the Australian home was to be organized. She had no doubt that the children who were sent there would benefit from the same firm regime as at Laurel House. Law-abiding, hard-working citizens would emerge... and be a credit to her and the EVER-Care name.

Laurel Farm, Carrabunna, was established. Though not a farm as such, it sought to feed itself as far as was possible, and the labour was supplied by its inmates. For three years Emily had, without any consultation, sent children from her orphanage twelve thousand miles across the world to a new country and a new life. She had never again visited the Australian EVER-Care home, leaving the running of it to Daphne and Joe Manton, in whom she had complete confidence. However, she liked to have her finger on the pulse of all her enterprises and she kept in close contact by letter. Then Hitler intervened and the child migration scheme was put on hold.

The war changed everything. There were even more children needing a home, children orphaned by the war, and EVER-Care accepted them all. The flow of children continued, not least because Emily Vanstone had a new admirer: a new member of the congregation at the Crosshills Methodist Church, Miss May Hopkins. Miss Hopkins was the social worker for the local council in charge of children's affairs. She admired the zealous and philanthropic Miss Vanstone greatly, and whenever she had children to place in care, it was to the EVER-Care home at Laurel House that she turned first.

The end of the war had also brought a change of government and with it plans for a new welfare system. Things began to change. There was a shift in public thinking and the new Children's Departments were expected to explore other ways of providing care for needy children. Different arrangements were to be made and the newly appointed Children's Officers were placing such children with foster families rather than residential homes like Laurel House. Miss Hopkins was expected to do the same. Public opinion on the child migration scheme had changed too. People began to think that perhaps children as young as three should not be plucked from all that was familiar and shipped off to the other side of the world. English children should be brought up in England. So Edward Sherrington's thoughts that the riff-raff should be sent somewhere else, preferably as far away as possible, were no longer publicly expressed.

Miss Hopkins did not agree with the changes, and whenever possible she still sent girls in need of care to Laurel House. From what she'd just said on the phone, it sounded to Emily as if she might soon have two new inmates for Laurel House.

Rita lay in bed, listening. She could hear the sound of Mum's voice downstairs, high and excited. There was the rumble of Uncle Jimmy's voice as he replied, but Rita couldn't hear what they were saying.

When Uncle Jimmy had come home, Mum had put a plate of sausage and mash on the table and said, 'Here's your tea, love. We must talk later. Got things to tell you... you know.' She nodded her head. 'You know,' she repeated.

'What things?' asked Rita. Why was Mum nodding and smiling like that?

'Nothing to do with you, Miss Nosey Parker,' said her mother. 'Now, you girls go out to play till bedtime.'

Listening to the voices downstairs now, Rita knew they were talking about the things that had nothing to do with her, and she wondered what they were. She crept out of bed and edged halfway down the stairs. She dared not go any further or she'd have no hope of escaping if Uncle Jimmy came out unexpectedly. She strained to hear what was said, but she could only hear snatches... something about the baby.

Mum was asking about going to an office. Had he been as he promised? Rita couldn't hear Uncle Jimmy's answer, but her mother sounded pleased. Then he said something else, and Rita heard Mum say, 'Yes, I went, I said I would.'

Uncle Jimmy's voice again and then Mum said, 'The welfare woman said just fill in the forms, and I...' then the clatter of china drowned her next words. Rita strained to hear but the scrape of a chair on the kitchen floor made her scurry upstairs. She was just in time as the kitchen door opened and Uncle Jimmy came out.

'Jimmy, where are you going?' Mum's voice was quite clear now.

'Out for a pint.'

'But what about the forms? I need your help with them. We've got to decide.'

'We have decided,' answered Uncle Jimmy. 'You fill them in. I'm going for a pint.'

Rita heard the front door slam and her mother's plaintive 'Jimmy!' to the empty kitchen.

Rita lay in bed thinking about what she'd heard. The baby. Well, she knew Mum was having a baby. It was growing in her tummy and making her very fat. She wasn't at all sure how the baby was going to get out. When she'd asked, Mum had said that when the time came the nurse would come and the baby would be born. Rita knew there must be more to it than this and she talked to Maggie down the street, who had a new baby brother.

'The nurse came,' Maggie told her, 'and she pulled him out through Mum's belly button.'

'Did you see him come out?' asked Rita in wonderment.

'No,' Maggie admitted. 'I was sent round my nan's.'

Rita had given Maggie's answer a lot of thought since. She couldn't quite believe that a baby could get out through a belly button, but what other explanation was there? Now, she wondered, was there something to do with the welfare woman Mum had mentioned? Did you have to go to the welfare office and fill in forms for the baby to be able to come out? Mum had decided it was time to fill in the forms so that the baby could be born.

As Rita finally drifted off to sleep, she thought, I'll ask Gran. She'll know.

The opportunity to ask came the next afternoon. It was Thursday, and Gran was waiting for them at the school gate in Capel Street as usual. On the way home Gran let them stop at the playground where

they went on the swings, laughing as she pushed them higher and higher. Rita loved the tall slide and was soon scrambling up the ladder to the top.

‘Look at me, Gran,’ she called. ‘I’m very high!’

‘So you are, love,’ Gran cried, ‘and too high for you,’ she said to Rosie as she ran to climb up behind her sister. ‘Come on, love. I’ll push you on the roundabout.’ Moments later Rita was there too, clinging to the bars of the little roundabout and scooting it with her foot to make it go faster.

Lily stood back and watched the two little girls shrieking with excitement, carefree on a warm afternoon and love for them welled up inside her, threatening to spring as tears from her eyes. Her beautiful granddaughters, growing up like so many after this dreadful war, with no father in the lives.

Does that matter? wondered Lily. Of course it matters! she admonished herself. Every child needs a dad, but must it be Jimmy Randall?

As they walked on to Gran’s house Rosie skipped trustingly beside her, swinging their joined hands.

‘What’s for tea?’ she asked.

‘Have to see what we can find, won’t we,’ answered Gran. ‘How does bread and dripping sound?’

‘Yippee!’ cried Rosie twisting away and dancing backwards along the path. She beamed at her grandmother and said, ‘I love coming to your house, Gran. I wish it was always Thursday.’

When they were sitting at Gran’s kitchen table eating the promised bread and dripping, Rita said ‘Gran, when it’s time for Mum’s baby to be born, how does it get out of her tummy?’

‘Well,’ said Gran, ‘when it’s time, the nurse will come and the baby will be born.’

‘But how does it get out?’ persisted Rita. ‘Does Mum have to fill in forms for the welfare woman?’

‘Welfare woman?’ Gran sounded puzzled. ‘What welfare woman?’

‘Mum said the welfare woman had said she just had to fill in the forms.’

‘Start again, Reet,’ said her grandmother, frowning.

‘I heard Mum and Uncle Jimmy talking about the baby. Mum said she’d been to see the welfare woman, and all she had to do was fill in the forms. She asked Uncle Jimmy to help, but he said they already decided and that she could do it.’

‘When was this?’ asked Gran, a frightening suspicion invading her mind. She immediately pushed it away. No, it was impossible. Mavis would never... would she? No, certainly not. Rita must have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. ‘When did you hear all this?’ she asked.

‘I was in bed, and I heard them talking down in the kitchen,’ Rita said, ‘only I couldn’t hear properly so I went out onto the stairs, and that’s what I heard them say.’

‘You shouldn’t have been out of bed,’ said Gran sternly. ‘Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves.’

Rosie looked up from her dripping sandwich. ‘What’s an eavesdropper, Gran?’

‘Someone who listens to other people’s conversations when they should be in bed,’ answered Gran. ‘Like your naughty sister.’ She turned her attention back to Rita. ‘I expect your mum was talking about the forms she has to fill in to get a ration book for the baby when it comes. Now, eat your tea and then we’ll have a game of snap.’

‘But how does the baby—’ persisted Rita.

‘I’ll tell you all about it another time,’ Gran cut in hastily. ‘There’s no time now if we’re going to play snap before you have to go.’

That evening, Lily sat in her kitchen and considered what Rita had said. The child was no fool. she said she’d heard them talking about filling in forms for the welfare, then that’s what they’d been saying. But why on earth would Mavis be talking to the welfare? She didn’t need anything from them. And what had Mavis and Jimmy already decided? Perhaps they’d finally fixed a date to get married.

Rita had said that Jimmy was going to the registry office yesterday to find out. They'd certainly need to fill in forms for that. Perhaps that was it. That *must* be it. Rita had got confused about two different parts of the conversation and misunderstood; after all, she'd said that she hadn't heard it all.

Still, Lily thought, I'll talk to Mavis tomorrow and find out what's going on. I suppose it's for the best if they get married with a little'un on the way, but I don't like that Jimmy. I don't like him and don't trust him.

Next morning she went round to Ship Street early to catch Mavis before she went to work. Mavis looked flustered when she opened the door and found her mother, yet again, on the step.

'Mum,' she groaned. 'What are you doing here?' She didn't say 'again' but it was in her voice.

Lily gave her a broad smile and said as she eased herself into the hallway, 'I just came to see how Jimmy got on with the registry office. You said he was going on Wednesday, and I wondered if he's got a date. Have you got the kettle on, love? Let's have a cup of tea and you can tell me all about it.'

Mavis sighed, led her mother into the kitchen and topped up the teapot. When she'd poured tea for each of them, she sat down across the table from Lily and forced a smile. 'Jimmy went, like he said he would,' Mavis said. 'We have to fill in the forms and then I have to show them Don's death certificate.'

'So lots of forms, then?' suggested Lily, relief in her voice. That's what Rita overheard, she thought.

'Well, we tell them we want to get married and they put the form up on the noticeboard outside the registry office. Then after three weeks we can get wed. We want to get married next month, before... Mavis laid a protective hand on her bump. 'Jimmy's taking the forms back and he'll book us in for a date then.'

'The girls'll be excited,' Lily said. 'Have you told them yet?'

'No, not yet,' answered Mavis, looking away. 'Not till everything's sorted, for definite, you know.'

'You've got to get Jimmy to go easy on them, Mavis,' said her mother. 'It'll be hard for them at first, having to share you with him... and the baby. Reet, particularly, is going to find it difficult.'

'Mum...' Mavis began and then stopped.

'What?' Lily looked at her, and saw the anguish in Mavis's eyes. She reached a hand across the table and said, more gently, 'What's the matter, Mavis? What's wrong?'

'It's the girls,' Mavis whispered. 'Jimmy won't have them here.'

'Won't have them here?' echoed Lily. 'What do you mean, won't have them here? It's their home. Where else should they be?'

'He wants them to be taken care of,' murmured Mavis, not looking up. 'He don't want them here, he just wants us to be a family, him, me and the baby.'

'But the girls, Reet, Rosie, they're your family.' Lily stared at her daughter's bowed head uncomprehendingly. 'Mavis, they've only got you!'

'He won't have them.'

'Then tell him to sod off,' flashed Lily.

'I can't, Mum. He's the baby's father. I need him here. I've got to choose!'

'And you choose him?' Lily was outraged. 'You choose that violent brute... 'cos he is violent and you know it... you choose him over your own kids? Your own flesh and blood?'

'I have to,' wailed Mavis. 'The baby's my own flesh and blood too, and I can't cope on my own. Mum, not any more.'

'You're not putting my granddaughters into no home,' Lily exploded. 'How can you even think of such a thing?'

'If you really want to know, I think they'd be happier there,' Mavis shouted back. 'Reet would, I know she would. She don't like Jimmy. She makes no effort to get on with him, and now she'

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