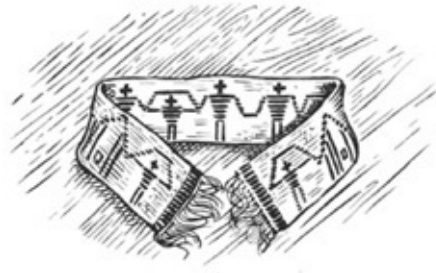


Lynne Reid Banks



KEY
TO THE
INDIAN

THE
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Lynne Reid Banks

ILLUSTRATED BY PIERS SANFORD



HarperCollins Children's Books

To Chaim, with love

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1

Anyone for Camping?

“Okay, you chaps, I’ve got an announcement to make.”

The three boys stopped eating and looked up. Adiel and Gillon exchanged puzzled glances. It was the “you chaps” that did it, together with their father’s hail-fellow-well-met manner. He simply was not the “you-chaps” type. But stranger was to come.

“What would you say to our all going camping?”

Adiel dropped his jaw. Gillon dropped something noisier, his knife and fork onto his plate. A piece of toad-in-the-hole was dislodged and fell to the floor in a small shower of rich brown gravy.

“Oh, Gillon, don’t show off! What a mess!” said their mother, irritated. “Kitsa! Leave it!” – as the cat, lurking hopefully under the table, pounced. Gillon wrested it from her and plonked it triumphant back on his plate.

“You’re not planning to EAT it now?” His mother snatched it up and left the room with it, returning at once with a wet cloth. “What are you talking about, Lionel, camping?”

“Camping is what I’m talking about. What do you say, boys?”

Adiel said, quite gently, “Are you feeling all right, Dad?”

“Never better.”

“*Camping?* I mean, are you kidding? *Camping?* You mean, on our own, without you.”

“No, no, of course not. With me.”

There was a silence. Omri glanced at his mother. She had mopped up the splashes of gravy and was crouching by the table beside Gillon, staring glassily at her husband. The two older boys were staring, too.

Only Omri was not reacting with astonishment. He sat with narrowed eyes, only pausing for a moment before hacking into another batter-encrusted sausage. Camping indeed! That’d be the day when his dad even dreamt of such a hearty outdoor pursuit, especially after the one and only time they’d ever tried it, which had ended in total disaster on the same day it began.

Omri grinned secretly at the memory of the four of them trailing home, not from some wide moorland or forest but from the local common, after they had failed to put up the tent and the sky had opened, drenching everything including the food; this had been left exposed after Gillon nicked

premature sandwich out of the cool-chest and left the lid off. The sunroof on the car had also been left open. Their dad, humiliated by his defeat-by-tent, couldn't say much except, "That's it, boys. Home." Their mother had been very nice, she hadn't even laughed, at least not much. It was only later Omri had stopped to wonder why there had been a casserole and five baked potatoes in the oven when she had been told they wouldn't be back for two days.

Now there his dad was, at the head of the table, beaming at them, the very picture of a hearty extrovert father. He was even tilting his chair back and rubbing his hands. Gillon snorted.

The front legs of their dad's chair hit the floor. "What, may I ask, is so funny?"

"You, Dad. Camping. You're not serious, you can't be."

"Don't you want to go, then?"

Gillon considered it. Then he said, "Would it be like last time?"

"Of course not," said their father haughtily. "That was just play-camping. You're older now and we'll do it properly – we can, now we live in the country."

Adiel said, "But when could we do it?"

"How could you do it?" said their mother. "You'd need a tent big enough for four, a stove, sleeping bags and God knows what."

"We've got sleeping bags from school trips," said Adiel.

"We could buy lots of new stuff!" said Gillon.

"Anyway, where would you go?"

"From here? There are wonderful camping places in almost every direction! We wouldn't have to fall back on some suburban common."

Omri looked out of the window. It was true. All around them stretched the glorious Dorset countryside. Hills, woods, fields, rivers – and the sea, only a few miles away. It *might* be fun. The only thing was, there was something behind this. Omri knew, somehow, that this wasn't really about camping. That their father had a hidden agenda.

It had to be to do with the Indian.

Only two days ago, his dad had found out.

When the family had first moved into this old Dorset farmhouse, Omri had made some makeshift shelves in his bedroom out of raw planks standing on loose bricks. In the hollows of two of the bricks, Omri had hidden his most precious possessions – the plastic figures of his friends: Little Bull and his wife Twin Stars, their baby Tall Bear and, separately, Matron and Sergeant Fickits. They were toys now, but they hadn't always been toys. Through the fantastic magic of an old bathroom cupboard, and a key that had belonged to his great-great-aunt, and then to his mother, they had come to life. They had turned into real people, people from the past, whom the magic of the cupboard and the key had brought into Omri's life at various times in the last few years.

How carefully Omri had guarded his secret, and how hard it had been to keep from telling anyone. With the two people who already knew – his best friend Patrick, and Patrick's cousin Emma – living miles away, there was no one to share it with. He dared not tell his brothers, though there'd been times when it had almost just burst out of him.

Then he'd found the Account, which had changed everything.

The Account was a sort of journal, contained in an old leather-bound notebook left hidden in the roof-thatch by his great-great-aunt Jessica Charlotte. Omri's mother called her her 'wicked' great-aunt, and she *had* admitted to at least one pretty bad act when she'd stolen her sister's earrings and been the cause of a tragedy. She had been a singer and actress with psychic gifts, and she'd owned the

farmhouse; the Account had been written on her deathbed.

From this wonderful document, Omri had learnt how the key and the cupboard had been made, and how the magic had got into them. Luckily, Patrick had come to spend a half-term with him, in time to share the latest marvel – Jessica Charlotte herself, brought back from the past to sing them a music hall song and make herself, however briefly, part of their lives.

And then, two days ago, his father had gone to Omri's room while Omri had been out, to put up the proper shelves he'd promised him, and had disturbed his arrangements and *found the figures*. He'd put them all into the cupboard and locked the door. Of course they'd come to life inside, and his dad had put a lot of twos and twos from the past together, and *realised*. And later he'd seen them, been introduced to them. And accepted it... It took a special kind of grown-up not only to accept magic when he saw it, but to promise and swear that he'd never, ever tell a living soul.

Omri knew his secret was safe. And at last he had someone in the family to share it with.

There was a problem, though.

They'd talked about it, Omri and his dad. They'd gone out for a long walk together by the sea yesterday, and talked about it.

It wasn't their problem, it was Little Bull's. Little Bull was an Iroquois Indian from the late eighteenth century. And he was in trouble. Or rather, his whole tribe was, and as Little Bull was chief, he was deeply concerned. And when he had suddenly been magicked back to Omri's time, when the key was turned and the cupboard door opened, his first words had been: "This good! I have much need!"

(Well – his *very* first word had been "Brother!" He and Omri were blood brothers.)

Luckily the problem, though urgent, was not something that had to be dealt with on the spot. It was an on-going problem the tribe was experiencing, which Little Bull had tried to explain – something to do with British treachery, which made Omri puzzled and uncomfortable, though he didn't really grasp what it was all about. But Little Bull seemed to take it for granted that Omri, whom he had originally assumed to be a Great Spirit with all sorts of magic powers, would come to his help.

"We'll have to go back," said Omri as they walked along the cliff-tops with the salty wind blowing over the English Channel into their faces.

"Explain to me. How does one 'go back'?"

Omri did his best. He himself had only gone back once, to Little Bull's village when it had been under attack by the Iroquois' enemies, the Algonquins.

"You have to get into something," he said. "You remember my wooden chest, the one I got in the Saturday market? The one with the initials L.B. on it?"

"L.B.! The initials on the plaque are L.B."

Omri nodded hard. The plaque was a stone slab built into their house. It had an inscription engraved on it, signed with the initials L.B. The moment Omri had seen this, when they first came to look at the house their mother had inherited, he had known the house would be lucky for them. Those initials – the same as Little Bull's – always, wherever he encountered them, had a magic significance. He told his father about this as well as he could.

"This magic of yours seems to crop up in unexpected places," said his father slowly. "L.B. L.B. rings a bell somehow – about something else – can't place it at the moment... Well, tell more about going back."

"We found out the key fitted the lock on the chest," Omri said eagerly. "The key fits a lot of different locks. So I got into the chest, and Patrick locked it, and next thing I knew I was in Little

Bull's village in a forest clearing, just at sunset. Long ago... You see, Dad, when you go back, you're small, just like when they come to us. You have to have something to – to –"

"Inhabit?"

"Yes! To bring to life. They didn't have plastic toys back then, so I – I mean, my – my spirit or whatever bit of me actually travelled back in time, became part of a painting on the side of an Indian tent."

"A wigwam."

"No, a wigwam's something different. This was a tepee. They have animal designs painted on them. I think I was a beaver... or maybe a porcupine." Omri had glanced anxiously at his father, half expecting him to laugh, but his face was entirely serious. "Animals are very important to Indians. Not just to hunt. I've read about it. Each clan – d'you know what a clan is?" His father had nodded frowning. "Each clan has its own clan-animal. Little Bull's clan-animal must be an elk, he's named for that kind of bull, they didn't hunt buffalo. I expect he got it in a dream – dreams are *well* important to Indians."

"Yes. I think I knew that."

"Anyway, I was sort of stuck there on the outside of the tepee and then there was an attack by an enemy tribe. They set the tepee on fire and I was nearly burnt to death," he concluded, as carelessly as if such an adventure happened to him all the time.

His father stopped in his tracks. "My God! That time we came home and you had a burn on the side of your head! You made up some cock-and-bull story about a bonfire—"

"Right! Luckily Patrick turned the key and brought me back just in time. It hurt like hell," Omri remembered.

His father stood on the cliff path with the rough grey Channel behind him, staring at Omri. "This is dangerous," he said with an air of discovery.

"Yes it is. It can be."

"I thought it was... just the most wonderful fun," said his father.

"That's exactly what I thought, at first. It's not fun. Not always. It's – I mean, it's real people."

"Yes. Of course I realised that when I saw them. I just... I suppose I just—"

"It's natural, Dad. You have to kind of get into it. But things really happen. You do have to – to think ahead. You can't just – do things."

"On impulse."

"Right."

"Yes. I see that. Anything could happen. Obviously you mustn't change anything back there."

"No," said Omri with great feeling. He didn't want to even think about the time he had feared he had changed something so drastically that he, himself, might never have been born.

They walked on slowly. Then his father said, "But your wooden chest was destroyed in that freak storm. So what could we use?"

Omri thought of telling his dad that the storm, too, had happened because of the key. But he had a strange feeling of wanting to *protect* him from too much knowledge. He might scare him and then he would back off. Not that his dad was a coward, but you wouldn't have to be one to be scared of magic that could bring a hurricane all the way from the Texas of a hundred years ago, to rampage over England destroying everything in its path...

So he just said, "Well, it has to be big enough to hold us both. And it has to have a keyhole for the key."

"But if we were both in it together, who'd turn the key?"

“Yes. That’s the problem we had before. Patrick and I could never go back at the same time.”

~~They had tramped on for a while in silence, and at last his dad said, “This is very difficult to get your mind around.”~~

Omri knew it. But Little Bull’s urgent looks and words pressed on his brain.

His dad was frowning. “We need to do some research. Read up on the history. Find out what was happening back then.”

“What is happening.”

“What is happening...” He was furrowing his brows. He looked remarkably like Omri, when he did that. “It seems as if it’s all happening at once. History... time... in layers, kind of. When we ‘go back’, if we find a way to, we’ll just – drop through a number of layers and be back in Little Bull’s time.”

Omri thought that was a good way of putting it.

“But how can we be sure of getting to the right layer?” asked his father.

“That’s easy. We have to either go back with Little Bull, or with something of his, something that belongs to the right time and place. The magic latches on to that.”

“Like a kind of ticket to the right destination.”

They had walked on, frowning, thinking.

Little Bull was no longer with them. He, Twin Stars and their baby son, Tall Bear, as well as Matron and Fickits, had all been sent back through the cupboard as soon as they’d had a talk, right after meeting Omri’s father. They’d all been anxious to return to their own time, especially Matron – a superior sort of nurse, who had been in the middle of her rounds at St Thomas’s Hospital in the London of 1941. The bombing of the city in World War Two had begun, and she was frantically busy. Sergeant Fickits had just been preparing for a drilling session with his trainees in *his* time, which was back in the nineteen-fifties.

As for the Indians, after a short, tense speech by Little Bull (during which Twin Stars allowed Omri to hold the baby, Tall Bear, in the palm of his hand, a sensation so entrancing that Omri had frankly not listened very carefully) they had asked to be sent back, too, but with the proviso that Omri and his father should make every effort to follow them soon.

“I need *counsel*,” Little Bull had said forcefully. “English change toward Iroquois friends. Many years Iroquois fight at side of English against French. Many warriors die. Now they turn from us. Our people do not understand, need chiefs to tell what best to do.” He shook his head, scowling. “Our need is for English man. Wise man, explain what is in English heads,” he said, staring at Omri’s father challengingly.

Next day on the cliff top, Omri’s father said, “I know something about what the Europeans did to the Indians. It’s not a pretty story... I don’t know what we can do to help, but if our damned ancestors are up to some tricks, which they probably are – were – *are*, the least we can do is find a way to get there and give the Indians a hand.”

And now here they all were at the supper table, and Omri’s dad was gassing on about going camping. What was he up to?

Everyone was talking. Their mother was on her feet again collecting plates with a great clatter, saying that if there really was a camping holiday in prospect, they’d better do some serious planning, not go at it half-cocked like last time. Gillon was already leafing through the Yellow Pages looking for suppliers of camping equipment, and Adiel was asking if they could go as far as Dartmoor, where they could really feel they were away from civilisation. Their dad was giving every impression of being

absolutely serious about the whole project. Only Omri hadn't joined in.

~~"When could we do it?" said Adiel, who seemed quite fired up now.~~

"Oh, I thought in the half-term holiday," said their father.

"Great! Let's go for it!"

"There's a firm here says they do luxury tents," said Gillon. "No point spending money on some ratty old tent that'll drop to pieces or let the rain in."

"No point spending money on some palatial tent that you'll only use once, if that," said the mother. "I'll believe all you laid-back city types are going camping when I actually see it."

"Well, you won't see it, Mum," said Adiel reasonably. "You're not coming, are you?"

Their mother stopped in the doorway with a pile of dirty plates and there was a moment's silence. Then she turned and regarded them all with narrowed eyes.

"Well now. Maybe you'd better not count on that. I happen to be the only one in this entire family who has actually had some camping experience. Oh yes!" she added as they all gawked at her, "I was quite the little happy camper when I was in the Girl Guides."

"Mum! You weren't a *Girl Guide*! You couldn't have been!" they all – even Omri – yelled.

She drew herself up. "And why not? As a matter of *fact* I was a platoon leader. I had more badges than anyone else."

"How many?"

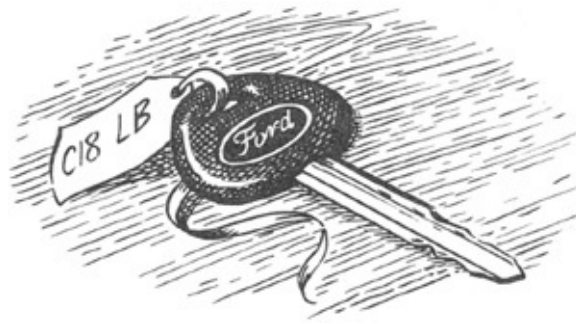
"Eleven and a half. So there." She turned, walked out, head in air.

"What was the half-badge for?" their dad called after her.

"Making a fire without matches," she called back. "Only it went out."

They were all silent for a moment. Then Gillon went back to the Yellow Pages. "*Five-man tents*," he muttered.

"I wish I were a cartoonist," said their father. "I would love to draw your mother smothered with badges, lighting a fire without matches." He winked at Omri. It was one of his slow winks, a wink that said, *You and I know what this is all about*. But Omri didn't. All he knew was that he couldn't wait to get his dad alone and find out.



2

The Wrong Shape

“Of course we’re not really going camping, Dad?”

Omri had managed to get his dad to himself by following him out to his studio across the lane. His father was putting the finishing touches to a large painting of a rooster. He was very into roosters since they moved to the country, but they got weirder and weirder. This latest one looked more like a armful of coloured rags that’d been flung into the air. But Omri liked it somehow. It was like the essence of rooster – all flurry and maleness – rather than the boring, noisy old bird itself.

“Well,” said his dad, tilting his head to one side and standing back with his palette. “I hadn’t planned that we should. I didn’t think the boys would go for it the way they did. Never mind your mother! Really, she is full of surprises...” He stepped up to the easel and put a streak of red near the top of the canvas, like a cock’s comb while the cock is in flight. “... so I’ve changed my plan. Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll arrange that Gillon and you and I will go on a preliminary trip, a sort of dummy run, to Dartmoor to pick out a suitable site and so on, while Adiel’s away at school, and then we’ll do it on a weekend when Gillon won’t want to come.”

“Why won’t he?”

“We’ll fix it so he won’t.”

“How?”

“Watch the forecasts. Pick a very wet weekend when there’s something good on the box.”

“And then?”

“And then, my hearty, outdoor lad, you and I will go off together, ignoring the weather, and no one will miss us for two days, and we’ll ‘go back’ and see what the situation is.”

“Ah!” So that was it. A way of getting away from home, just the two of them. “But have you thought about what we’ll use to go back *in*?”

“Yes. I’ve thought.”

“Well, what? We can hardly carry some wardrobe or chest or something big enough in the back of the car!”

His father put down the palette carefully on his paint-stained table with all its jam jars full of colours, brushes and its rows of squashed paint tubes. “It came to me today in the square, when I was shopping. I got a load of vegetables and I couldn’t carry them all in one go so the greengrocer said he’d take the other box out for me to the car. He asked me the registration, and I told him, and it burst on me like

blinding light.”

“What, Dad?”

“Go and look at it. The numberplate.”

Omri, frowning, left the studio and crossed the yard to the open bays, in one of which was parked the family car – a third-hand Ford Cortina Estate that his father had recently bought when their own one packed up. His eyes went to the numberplate and he stopped in his tracks.

The next instant he had turned and raced back, bursting into the studio with his face alight.

“Wow, Dad! Wow and treble-wow! You’re brilliant!”

“No, Om. It’s the magic. It couldn’t be coincidence. It means we’re meant to go.”

They went out into the yard together and stood looking marvellingly at the old car.

The registration number was C18 LB.

“C eighteen. That’s for eighteenth century, of course,” said Omri’s dad softly. “It’s a double indicator. I never thought I could believe anything like this. But I know it’s true. That’s our cupboard, Omri. Our time-machine.”

Omri went to bed that night feeling so excited he couldn’t sleep. Another adventure, and with his Indian! The adventure with Jessica Charlotte, his ‘wicked’ great-great-aunt who had actually made the key, had been complicated and thrilling in its way, but it was more like a detective story than a risk adventure, and it had all happened here in his bedroom, under the thatch. A lot of it, most of it, had happened in his head while reading the Account. Now a real, true adventure was in the offing. And his dad would be part of it!

It might be a bit of a problem, though, leaving Gillon behind.

He was really getting worked up about the camping trip. He kept calling through the thin dividing wall between their two bedrooms, keeping Omri awake more than ever.

“I’m going into town tomorrow after school to get a camping mag. They’ll have proper ads for them for gear, and articles to read and stuff.”

“Mm.”

“It’s not true that Mum’s the only one who’s camped. Remember Adiel went to the Brecon Beacons with his class?” Omri pretended to be asleep and didn’t answer. “Omri? Remember?”

“Yeah.”

“He said it was grisly,” called Gillon, but with relish, as if ‘grisly’ was good. “Rained the whole time. And he got lost in a bunch of mist and hurt his leg sliding down some rocks and they had to hunt for him for *hours*. His teacher thought he was dead, for sure! Om?”

“Mmm.”

“You still awake? I’ve heard of lots of hikers and climbers getting lost on Dartmoor! One lot died of exposure. We’d better buy some rope and rope ourselves together. We’ll need proper climbing boots, knapsacks, sleeping bags... maps, compasses... a stove...” His voice finally petered out on a lengthy list of prospective purchases.

Omri was nowhere near sleeping. He was actually sitting up. He’d switched on his pencil torch and was making notes. Maps and compasses... Could you get maps of north-eastern United States back to the eighteenth century? Sleeping bags, knapsacks and a stove certainly sounded as if they’d be useful. If only they could take them!

He kept imagining himself, and his dad, in the car. They could put all the stuff they’d need there. If you were touching a sleeping bag that was wrapped round a bunch of other useful stuff, you would all go back. They’d have to really think hard. It would be no use wanting to pop back from

Little Bull's time to get something they'd forgotten.

Wait.

The car.

Omri could see himself and his dad sitting in the front seats of the car, which was parked in some remote spot, with the bundles of stuff they were going to 'take back' on their laps, and his dad with the key, the magic key.

How to lock the car? With the window open, reach through it and stick the key in the door from outside?

Or put it in the ignition?

Omri suddenly jumped out of bed and went to where the cupboard was standing in the middle of the new shelf. The key was in the lock. He took it out and looked at it. His heart sank.

The key was magic, yes. And it was a 'skeleton' key, that would fit a lot of locks. But car keys were different. They were a different shape. They weren't cylindrical, for one thing. They were flat.

Omri suddenly knew, without any doubt, that no way would the magic key slide into either the door lock or the ignition of their car. This wasn't going to work.

Yet there was no doubting the signs. The numberplate, C18 LB, was like a summons. The car was in their cupboard, all right. It was just a matter of solving this little key problem.

This called for a consultation.

Clutching the key tightly, he tiptoed through Gillon's room to the head of the stairs at that end of the house. This was a Dorset longhouse – not like an Iroquois one, but a special kind they had in that part of England, one room deep with stairs at each end, no corridors. He crept down the narrow wooden stairway, which opened into the last little sitting room at this end, that his parents had designated as a TV-free zone. As he'd hoped, his dad, who didn't like TV much, was sitting there reading.

"Dad!" Omri hissed.

His father looked up. "Hello, Om. What's up? Can't you sleep?"

"Where's Mum?"

"Watching something ghastly about hospitals. Ber-lud everywhere," he added, quoting Gillon.

Omri glided over to him. "I've thought of something ghastlier. Look at this key. Think of the car."

His father took it from him and examined it. "Oh *hell*," he said softly.

"See? It's not going to fit."

"Of course not! Why didn't I think of that? I was so excited about the numberplate..."

Omri sat beside him on the mini-sofa. "What'll we do?"

They sat silently for a long time, thinking. Omri had time to notice that the book his dad was reading was one of his books about Indians – his dad must have gone into his room earlier and taken it from his 'library'. It was a huge tome called *Stolen Continents* that Omri had bought second-hand. Now it slipped to the floor and neither of them picked it up.

The whole adventure was poised on the edge of being aborted. Before it had even begun.

"You know, Omri," his father said at last, "there *is* an answer. There's got to be. The trouble for me is, I don't know enough about the whole business to find the solution. I've been thinking. The story of yours, that won the Telecom prize. That was true, wasn't it – I thought at the time it had an absolute ring of truth. So I know about the first part. But a lot has happened since then and developments. I think what you'd better do is try to tell me everything."

"Now?"

His dad looked at his watch. It was only ten pm. "Are you tired? It's school tomorrow."

“I couldn’t possibly sleep.”

“Okay, start talking. Keep your voice down.”

Omri talked for an hour.

He told about how he’d brought Little Bull back after a year, just to tell him about his winning story, and found he’d been wounded in a raid on his village and left to die. Only Twin Stars going on to find him and lug him somehow on to his pony – and then Matron, who’d proved as good as a surgeon, taking the musket-ball out of his back – had saved him.

He told Patrick’s adventure, back in nineteenth-century Texas, how he’d met Ruby Lou, a saloon bar hostess, and how they’d saved Boone, Patrick’s cowboy, from dying alone in the desert. How Omri had brought him back just as a hurricane had hit the cow-town, and the hurricane had come back with him.

He kept remembering things and wanting to go back, or off at a tangent. His father, who had had a notebook and pencil at his side while reading *Stolen Continents*, made notes.

When Omri came to the recent part, about Jessica Charlotte, he was getting really sleepy.

His dad interrupted. “Listen, why don’t you just give me the Account to read for myself? And you get off to bed.”

So Omri tiptoed upstairs again and fetched Jessica Charlotte’s notebook. He carried it reverently downstairs and put it in his father’s hands, and stood there while he stroked its old leather cover and ran his forefingers around the brass corner-bindings.

“It’s fascinating, almost magic just holding it,” he said. “I can’t wait to read this. Go on, bub, get some sleep.” Just as Omri was starting up the stairs, his dad added: “Don’t keep yourself awake, but do Mum’s trick.”

“What’s that?”

“Mum says that when she’s got a problem, she thinks about it last thing before she drops off. She swears her subconscious works on it while she’s sleeping, and sometimes in the morning the solution just appears.”

So Omri did ‘Mum’s trick’. As he lay, drifting off to sleep, he thought about the two keys – the cupboard key, and the car key. He laid them side by side in his imagination. They were so different that anyone who didn’t know what a key was, wouldn’t have seen a connection between them. It seemed extraordinary, even to Omri who had always taken the function of keys for granted, that something so small could make the difference between being able to open a door or make a car go, or be completely stymied.

And in this case, it was the difference between being able to go back into the past, or being stuck here. Between being able to have a great adventure, and not. Being able, maybe, to help Little Bull with his dire trouble, and having to leave him and his tribe to their fate.

There *had* to be an answer. There *had* to be.



3

A Surprising Ghost

Omri woke up early the following morning. Before he'd even opened his eyes, he 'looked' at the two keys, still lying side by side in his imagination as they had been in his last, sleepy thoughts the night before. His body stiffened. One of the keys had changed!

It was the car key.

He'd often seen it in reality, hanging in a box of little hooks inside the front door of the cottage where his father and mother always hung it as soon as they came in from driving so it wouldn't get lost. Last night, when he'd visualised it, it had been the key he knew – a flat metal key with a round flat top made of some plastic material with an 'F' for Ford imprinted on it.

Now the key, as clearly in his mind as if he could see it in front of his eyes, no longer had that round black plastic bit at the top. It was all metal. It was as if the whole key had been remoulded.

He sat up sharply in bed. *Remould the key!*

How could they? And if they did, what good would it do? Only the magic key could take them back in time.

Unless...

He jumped out of bed and barged through into his parents' bedroom, which adjoined his. The door flew backwards, hitting his father, who was doing the same manoeuvre in reverse, and nearly knocking him flying.

"Shhhh!" they both hissed, and then stifled laughter. Omri could see his mum's shape under the duvet, still sound asleep. It was far too early for her to wake up – not much past six o'clock.

Omri backed into his own room and his dad followed, closing the old-fashioned plank door silently behind them and lowering the latch so it wouldn't click. Then he turned to face Omri. He looked very tired, but his face was flushed with suppressed excitement.

"You've thought of something!" Omri guessed at once.

"We'll have to whisper. Listen." Omri now noticed he was holding Jessica Charlotte's notebook. "I read this, all of it, last night. It has *got* to be the most extraordinary, fascinating, amazing thing I have ever read. Of course I'm crazy about old diaries and stuff from the past. *God*, when I read something like this – what am I talking about, there IS nothing like this, this is *unique*, but when I was reading it I got so *caught up*, wanting to know more and more about the time she lived through, the

First World War, and the period before that – it was like having her right in the room, telling me—”

“Yeah, Dad, I know, I read it, I know just what you mean. But about the key.”

“Yes! Well! Isn’t it obvious? I mean, Jessica Charlotte *made* the magic key. She fed her ‘gift’ and she called it, into it without even meaning to. Remember what she said?” He was searching through the yellowing pages, and found the place, marked with a match. “Yes, here! *I hardly knew it then – only knew I was bending all my strength on making the key perfect, and I felt something go out of me and then the key grew warm again in my hands as if freshly poured, and I knew it had power in it to do more than open boxes. But I didn’t know what. I only knew my heart had broken and that I would have given anything to have it be yesterday and not today.*”

He looked up. He had a strange expression in his eyes, almost as if he were on the brink of tears. “Poor woman,” he said, his voice full of pity. “You can understand it so well. She’d just seen her beloved little niece Lottie – who was your grandmother, Mum’s mother whom Mum never knew – for the very last time. She must’ve been full of bitterness and sorrow, and anger against her sister for saying – well, implying – that she wasn’t good enough to be with that little girl she loved more than anyone in the world... You know what I figured out, Om? If a person *has* any sort of magic gift, it gets more powerful the more strongly the person’s feeling. Like her son, Frederick, putting magic into the cupboard because he was so angry about plastic ruining his toy business.”

“Yeah, Dad. I read it, you know.”

“Om, please, don’t be impatient. Let me work my way through this. You had days, maybe weeks to read the Account and digest it. I had it all in one go and it’s fairly knocked me sideways. I didn’t sleep a single wink last night.”

“Sorry – I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s okay, it’s okay. Give me a sec, and I’ll cut to the chase.” But his head was down, he was still turning the pages of the notebook. “It’s just, I’m so utterly gobsmacked about Jessica Charlotte and her story, I’ve half-forgotten about Little Bull...” He looked up at Omri. “But yes, the key. It came to me. Now listen. If we could find a figure, a plastic toy, that might be Jessica Charlotte – I know it’d be difficult, but there can’t be *that* many figures that look like her – *if* we could... and if we could bring her forward in time, to us, we might ask her to copy the car key for us. *She* could make magic, the way she did the other.”

Omri stared at him, his brain racing. *Of course!* A slow, face-filling grin spread over his features and he saw an answering look of incredulous delight dawn on his father’s face.

“Don’t tell me you’ve got one!”

“Yes! We’ve already brought her once—”

“What!”

“Shhh! I haven’t had a chance to tell you everything. I was concentrating on Little Bull...”

“*You brought her! You’ve met Jessica Charlotte!*”

For answer, Omri dived under the bed and got out another of his treasures – an old cashbox, black and silver, the paint wearing off, a blob of red sealing-wax still blocking the slot. He opened it cautiously. His father was so eager he was trembling. Omri carefully took out the little woman-shaped key in the red dress with the big plumed hat, the size of his finger. His father took it from him and held it reverently as if it were a holy relic.

“This is her?” he whispered wonderingly.

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was in here, in the cashbox that I found with the Account, buried in the old thatched roof. The

magic key opened it. She was fast asleep, but later I – well, me and Patrick—”

“Patrick and I—”

“Yeah, well, she woke up, and we decided... I mean it was just before she was going to steal her sister’s earrings, you know, the night she made the key. And I wanted to change her mind and get her *not* to steal them...”

His father’s face sagged suddenly with horror. “My God, Omri! You didn’t, did you?”

“No. Patrick said not to. Because if I *had*, it would have changed history. Everything that came from stealing the earrings – things linked to other things, like a chain – wouldn’t have happened, and – I might never have been born.”

His father swallowed hard. His face had gone very pale. “I wonder if we ought to be meddling with this,” he said at last. “I wonder if we ought not to just – just put the key, and the cupboard, and the cashbox, and the Account, the plastic figures and everything else, safely away somewhere and – and just forget it.”

“No, Dad! It’s no use. I tried that. I did try – you know I did – I put the cupboard and key in the bank and I swore I wouldn’t take them out and mess about with the magic any more, but – but you can’t *not*, somehow. I couldn’t, anyway. It – when I read the Account, I – I just felt the magic calling me.”

His father was gazing at him with a very strange, troubled expression. “Omri. You don’t suppose —”

“What?”

“Well... don’t be scared. But Frederick obviously inherited some part of Jessie’s ‘gift’, or he couldn’t have put magic into the cupboard he made. I just wondered if that – magic power – if... After all, they were your blood relatives. Perhaps it’s something that can be – passed on.”

There was a long silence. They stared into each other’s eyes.

“Wouldn’t...” Omri found he had to clear his throat. “Wouldn’t – Mum have had some of it?”

His father frowned and went to the window. It was framed by deep eaves of thatch. The sun was just coming up over the hill on the horizon, the one that had on its top a strange little circle of trees like a peacock’s crown.

“I suppose Mum never told you about the time she saw a ghost.”

Omri jumped. “A ghost!”

“Yes. She told me about it ages ago. I didn’t believe her. Of course. I didn’t believe in anything unprovable in those days.”

“Whose ghost did she see?”

“Well, that’s one of the things I was thinking about, lying awake last night.” He looked down at the little woman-shape in his hand. “I only have her description to go on, and I only heard the story once. Years ago, before we were married. She told it to me when I was saying I didn’t believe in anything supernatural, including an afterlife. And she disagreed, and we were sort of quarrelling. She told me this story, to prove me wrong. And I...” He paused, and swallowed, “I laughed.”

“Tell me!”

“She said she was visiting her mother’s grave – Lottie, who’d died in the bombing of London when your mum was still a baby. Lottie was buried in the same grave as her father, Matthew, in Clapham Cemetery, near where she was born, where *her* mother still lived. Jessica Charlotte’s sister.

“Maria.”

His father nodded. “Yes. Maria, who brought your mother up. She was an old lady by then, in her eighties, but she went every week to the cemetery to put flowers on Lottie’s grave. Mum didn’t often

go because she was busy with her own life by then, she was a student, but that day Maria wasn't with Mum and Mum felt she had to drive her to Clapham instead of letting her go by herself on the bus. Mum said she felt guilty about not taking her gran more often but you know, if you don't even remember the dead person, it's hard to visit the graveyard regularly.

"Anyway, they got there, and bought some flowers at the gates, and the old lady filled a plastic bottle with water from a tap. Mum carried the things and held her gran's arm, and they walked to the grave. And then Mum gave the flowers to her gran, who knelt down by the grave. She was – you know – taking out last week's flowers and arranging the new ones in the vase with the fresh water, and suddenly Mum saw someone standing beside her."

Omri sat rigid. He felt as if ice-water were trickling down his spine. He could see it in his mind's eye. He saw the whole scene as if it were being enacted in front of him. He even saw *who his mum had seen*, before his father went on:

"She could see her clearly. A woman in an old-fashioned long dress with her hair piled up on her head. There was a strong breeze blowing, but the woman's hair didn't stir. She was looking straight at Mum."

Omri wanted to ask his dad to go on, but he felt frozen, frozen in the scene. He hardly needed to ask. He *saw*.

The woman was Jessica Charlotte.

She took a step forward, nearer to the grave, looking all the time at the young girl standing on the other side of it. She put her hand – wearing a long black glove – on the shoulder of the bent old woman, busy with the flowers, who didn't seem to notice. She patted her gently. She smiled a sad, sad smile at the young girl who was going to be Omri's mother. And she nodded tenderly down at the old lady, as if to say, "See how old she is. You must take care of *her* now." Maybe she even did say it. And then suddenly she wasn't there any more.

Omri's father was talking. He was describing the scene just as Omri saw it in his head. Which came first – what Omri saw, or what his dad said?

When his dad finished, there was a silence, and then Omri said in a choked voice, "Mum must have felt awful."

"About seeing the ghost?"

"No! About all the times she hadn't taken her gran to the cemetery. About the ghost needing to come and – and remind her to take care of Maria."

"Do you think the ghost – was Jessica Charlotte?"

"Of course it was," said Omri simply.

"You sound sure."

"I am."

"Omri – how can you *know* that?"

"Well it's not because I'm magic. It's just – I've got a very good imagination, and sometimes it just tells me things."

His father looked at him, and Omri heard what he had just said, heard it as his father must have, proof that Omri had a bit of Jessica Charlotte's gift.

They talked it all over very carefully before anyone else in the house woke up. The sun was well clear of 'Peacock Hill' and streaming into the room before they first heard the others beginning to stir, and they had to stop.

Omri, though of course he wanted to see Jessica Charlotte again, and thought it very probable that

she would have the ability to make them another magic key, one that would work in the car, was very doubtful just the same about his dad's plan.

There was nothing in the Account about her making a second time-journey. The first one – when she visited Omri and Patrick and sang them a music-hall song – was hinted at in her diary, but nothing after that. Surely if she had been brought a second time, and asked to make another key, she would have remembered it, especially so close after the first time.

Omri's father was very interested in the time question. "Does it work the same at both ends?"

"Yes."

"That's to say, if a week has passed here, a week has passed for the people in the past?"

"That's right. I know because when Little Bull came this last time, his baby was about a year old and it was a year *here* since he was born. Anyway, I knew it before."

"Okay, so let's work it out. How many days is it since Jessica Charlotte came?"

Omri thought about it. A week had passed between seeing her, and the day his dad had found the figures and discovered the secret, and three days more had passed since then.

"Ten days."

"Ten days..." His dad was looking at the notebook. "So. Right after she came here – no, it wasn't. Let me see. She made the key. That was the day of the victory parade, the day she said goodbye to Lottie, Armistice Day – November the eleventh, nineteen-eighteen. The next day she went back to Maria's to 'say goodbye', pretending she was going abroad. And that was the day she stole the earrings. So that's one day.

"Then, she writes, a week went by. And at the end of that week, she got the news that little Lottie had been accused of stealing the earrings, and had run out of the house, and her father, Matthew, ran after her and got run over and killed. And that's where her part of the Account ends."

"Well, there is a bit more..."

"Not that you can read. When she got to writing that part, all those years later when she was on her deathbed..." he looked up, and looked around. "Maybe in this very room, Omri!"

"No, it was Gillon's room."

"How do you know?"

"I just—" He stopped suddenly. He was beginning to feel creepy about this. He did 'just know', but he was certain. But how?

His father took a deep breath, and went on. "Okay. Anyway, when she was trying to write the last page of the Account, she became too ill and weak, and had to call in her son Frederick to finish it. This last page of her writing..." He pointed to faded, scrawly words that you could hardly make out. "...indicate to me that she was not only very ill by the time she came to write it, but that she was writing about a time when she was almost crazy. She felt Matthew had died because of her, that Lottie had been falsely accused, that more terrible things were going to happen because of what she'd done.

"Now, Omri, if you've got a bit of her 'gift', use it. Imagine her as she was – is – at this moment. Ten days after the theft of the earrings. Three days after she found out about Matthew's death."

Omri didn't have to imagine very hard. He'd been through this already, when he had read this part of the Account. He had almost seemed to be suffering with Jessica Charlotte in this awful crisis in her life. He had felt her guilt, her horror, her remorse. He didn't want to experience that again, or even a shadow of it. It was a terrible thought that, down through the layers of time, she might still be going through that; that if they brought her, they would have to see her going through it.

"She's right in the middle of it, Dad. Her – her – awful time." A new, appalling thought struck him. He took the notebook away from his father and peered closely at the semi-legible words

“*Alone... wandering... despair... river... coward... never...*” He suddenly and shockingly understood the meaning behind the word ‘river’ and the word that followed it.

“Dad! She – she tried to drown herself!”

“What!”

“I’m sure of it! Why didn’t I notice before? I was so disappointed that the Account had stopped thinking I’d never learn the secret of the magic now, I didn’t read *into* it like I did the rest. ‘Alone wandering – river – coward’. Don’t you see? She was in such a state she wanted to throw herself in the Thames, and maybe she couldn’t because she was too afraid. Or maybe she was too much of a coward to go on living... And that’s what’s going on *right now*, back in her time! Oh, Dad!” I exclaimed, forgetting to be quiet, staring at his father across the notebook. “We’re not going to bring her *now* are we?”

“If we want her to make us a key, to go back and help Little Bull,” said his father slowly, “we have to.”



“River... Coward... Never.”

It was a school day. Omri whispered to his father as the house woke up that he might pretend to be ill so he could stay home and they could talk more. But his dad said no way.

So there was a normal breakfast and Gillon and Omri set off for school on their bikes. Adiel was having a long weekend *exeat* from his boarding school. Omri envied him. But no, that was absurd. If he, Omri, were incarcerated in a boarding school, there'd be no question of any adventure.

Actually it turned out that having to be in school was a good thing. It gave his mind a sort of refreshment. When school was finished, and he went back to thinking about *it* on the bike ride home, he came to feel fresh, and at once an interesting thought occurred to him.

Bringing Jessica Charlotte might be a kind of relief to her. She'd enjoyed being with him and Patrick, it had lifted her out of her sorrow about Lottie. Perhaps it would be like that again. However terrible she was feeling, she might feel a little less terrible if she were taken out of her own life and into theirs.

No one was at home when he and Gillon arrived. The door of the cottage was never locked (what a difference from London!), so they let themselves in and made peanut butter sandwiches and milk (their mother had banned fizzy drinks from the house since she went on her health kick). Gillon drifted TV-wards and Omri, seeing him putting down roots at the other end of the house, felt safe. He was shooting upstairs and fastening the brand-new bolt on the inside of his bedroom door.

He looked at the cupboard.

The mirror in its door reflected his own face back to him. You'd never think it was anything special. Just a little white-painted metal bathroom cabinet, the sort you put medicines and tooth things in. It looked a little smarter since he'd repaired and repainted it, but it was old and essentially commonplace. No one would guess! No one who didn't know, would ever guess!

He lifted it on to the floor and opened it. The key was inside. So were the figures of Little Buns, Twin Stars and her baby, the pony, Matron and Sergeant Fickits. He took them all out and wondered where he could hide them now that the bricks of his makeshift bookshelves had gone. Eventually he found a pretty good place. There was a small, unused, old-fashioned fireplace in one wall. He reached up the chimney and found a sort of little ledge up there. He wrapped the figures individually

Kleenex, put them into a plastic bag, and put this out of sight on the ledge.

Then he wiped the soot off his hands, took Jessica Charlotte's figure out of the cashbox and stood her on the shelf of the cupboard. Just to see how she looked there.

She looked fine, just as he had last seen her, dressed up in her beautiful red dress with the bustle and the big, plumed hat. Her figure was posed in a stagey position, hand on hip, the other hand over her head, waving to them.

Omri stuck the key in the keyhole. Just for somewhere to put it. He wasn't going to do anything, of course – not without his dad.

He closed the cupboard door carefully. There. Now everything was ready. Now he would go and do his homework.

Instead, he turned the key. His hand did it. He couldn't stop it.

It gave him a shock when it happened. He really did try to restrain his hand, but his fingers acted on their own. There was the familiar click, and it was too late.

Galvanised, he turned the key back again and threw the door open.

There she was. But no longer strutting, actress-like, brazen and bold. Now she was lying very still on her face. Her hat was gone. She was in a different dress. It looked strange, somehow. So did her hair. Omri reached in and lightly touched her with the tip of one finger.

She was soaking wet.

All the muscles in Omri's face went slack. He picked her limp wet body up and laid her face up on the palm of his hand. Her face was grey. Her hair and dress streamed with water.

He realised then why his fingers had turned the key when he hadn't meant them to. His fingers knew what they had to do. They had to bring Jessica Charlotte, now. Right now. They had to recall her from the river.

For a split second, looking at her putty-coloured face, her closed eyes, her streaming hair, he thought she was drowned. But he knew she couldn't be – she had the rest of her life to live. Still, he had to help her, and there was only one way.

He laid her carefully on his bed, rushed to the fireplace, fished the bag he'd just put away out of the chimney, and frantically unwrapped the figures till he came to Matron. He thrust her into the cupboard and locked her in.

When he re-opened the door, she was standing with her arms akimbo, looking extremely severe.

"My dear young man," she said. "This cannot, I repeat *cannot*, keep occurring. You are going to get me the sack. I had a *great* deal of explaining to do, the last time. Don't you realise there's a war on? These little excursions are all very fine, but we are rushed off our feet. Do you understand? I am *on duty!*"

"Matron! Please! I'm sorry. I need you."

"And the unhappy victims of the Luftwaffe do *not*?"

"Just for five minutes! You must!"

He didn't give her a chance to argue, but picked her up by the waist and airlifted her to the bed where Jessica Charlotte was lying, a watermark spreading over the quilt. Matron bent over her for only a moment.

"Put her on something firm," she ordered.

Omri transferred them both to his desk.

"Turn her on her stomach."

Omri obeyed. Matron knelt beside the prone figure and began artificial respiration, her hands on either side of Jessica Charlotte's ribcage, rocking to and fro with a strong, purposeful rhythm. After

short time that seemed long to Omri, he heard a sound like a tiny cough, then a choking, then some gasps and groans. Matron sat back on her heels.

“There we are. She’ll be all right now. Keep her well covered. You need to get those wet clothes off... Oh. No, I quite see that would be, er... difficult. All right. Go away and get me something to wrap her in.”

Omri stumbled to his chest-of-drawers, got out a pair of woollen socks and some scissors and hacked out a little blanket. He returned to the desk with his eyes averted and handed it to Matron.

“All right. She’s decent.”

He looked. Jessica Charlotte’s wet clothes had all been pulled off and were lying in a soggy heap. There seemed to be quite a lot of them. Matron was just finishing rolling her patient in the social blanket like a cocoon. Only her head stuck out.

“Pillow!”

Pillow! Omri’s brain raced. A much-folded Kleenex was all he could think of. At least it would soak up the water from her hair.

“There now. She’ll do. She’s half-awake. Something hot to drink, with a drop of Scotch in it. How did this happen? No, don’t tell me. I’ve seen it all before. Very little of that in wartime, y’know. Funny thing.”

“Very little of what?”

“Suicides. Too much else to think of. And then, when someone else is trying to kill you, you don’t do it for them. Well! I’m off. Have to pass this little lapse off somehow at St Thomas’s. How long have I been, ten minutes?” She looked at an all but invisible watch, pinned to the front of her uniform. “Less. Well, even matrons have to spend a penny occasionally... Hurry up, young man!”

“I can’t thank you enough, Matron—”

“Oh, pish, tush, and likewise pooh!”

He dispatched her through the cupboard, and hurried back to Jessica Charlotte. As always when involved in this business, he was beginning to feel frantic, to wish he’d never started. He always forgot this feeling in between.

She was stirring, trying to sit up. He lifted her tenderly back onto the softness of the bed, keeping his hand behind her to support her. “Miss Driscoll?” he said softly. “Are you okay?”

“Why am I – tied up?” she gasped in a panicky voice.

“You’re not tied up, you’re wrapped up to keep you warm. You – you’ve been in the river.”

She stared up at him. With her hair straggling round her white face and her bare shoulders rising from the blanket that she was clutching, she looked like pictures he’d seen of mad people in old asylums, where they used to take their clothes away and just give them blankets.

“The river!” she cried out suddenly. Then the glassy look left her eyes and she buried her face in the blanket and began to sob.

Omri found this hard to bear. He crouched beside her till his face was level. “Miss Driscoll,” he said softly. “Please don’t be upset. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault!”

Her head snapped up. She faced front, clutching the blanket, shivering all over. She spoke sharply between chattering teeth. “I’m dead. That’s what it is. I died in the river and this is my hell. It’s only what I deserve.”

“No! No! You’re okay, you’re alive, you’re just – just visiting the future like you did before. And you don’t deserve to go to hell or to feel so bad. Please don’t feel so bad. Honestly, you couldn’t help it!”

“I’m a thief and a murderer. I killed my own sister’s husband.”

“No you did not!” Omri almost shouted. “It was an accident!”

“I caused it.”

“You couldn’t know!”

Abruptly she turned her ravaged face to him. “But you! You knew! You could have warned me! You could have stopped me!”

“No, I couldn’t—”

“Yes! You said you could see my future. You must have known, you must have done!”

“I couldn’t change what happened,” mumbled Omri. “It’s – not allowed.”

She gave him that mad look again, out of the corners of her eyes. “Are you God?” she asked in a small, suddenly childish voice.

“Of course I’m not. I’m Lottie’s grandson.”

“Lottie’s—” She sat perfectly still. He could almost see her mind working. “Move back.”

He knew why she said that. She couldn’t see him properly this close. He moved halfway across the room.

“You’re nothing like Lottie. You look a little like me.”

“Well, you are my great-great-aunt.”

“Lottie’s – grandson...” She couldn’t seem to take it in. But then she began to cry again, only not as before. She almost seemed to be crying with joy.

“She lives! My Lottie lives to grow up, and marry, and have children, and be happy! At least she hasn’t destroyed *her*!”

“Of course not,” said Omri, creeping close again. His heart felt monstrously heavy with the truth he couldn’t tell her. Lottie lived and grew up and married, sure enough. But when she was barely thirty-one – still in Jessica Charlotte’s lifetime – her life was cruelly cut short by a bomb. *The Luftwaffe*, Omri thought suddenly. *The German Air Force*. In Matron’s time, right now, it might be happening. Layers. Layers of time... He shivered all over, just as Jessica Charlotte had.

She stopped crying abruptly. She picked up the ‘pillow’ and pressed it to her tiny face to stem her tears and wipe them. Then she put it down, and stood up clumsily because of the blanket.

“Where are my clothes? I hope *you* didn’t take them off!” she said, with something of her old spirit.

“No, don’t worry, a nurse did it. They’re here. I’ll put them on the radiator to dry them.”

“Radiator? Is that some heating device?”

“Yes. They’re so small, they’ll dry in no time.”

He lifted the little pile of wet clothes and squeezed some drops of water out between finger and thumb. Then he began to separate them. Some of the underclothes were so small he could hardly handle them and he was afraid of their getting lost. He placed his big comb across the ridged top of the radiator and very carefully laid the clothes on top of it – the dress, a black one; an underskirt; a strange, corset-like thing; some long pantaloons; two black threads that were her stockings. Her shoes were so tiny he had to pick them up by pressing his finger to their wetness. There was also a tiny triangular thing – a shawl perhaps. He unfolded it with infinite care. It was about two centimetres square.

When he’d finished he went back to her. “Miss Driscoll...”

“You had better call me Aunt Jessie.”

He felt a strange glow of happiness when she said that. “Aunt Jessie, then. The nurse said you should have a hot drink with whisky.”

“Pray don’t trouble yourself. I don’t drink spirits these days.”

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