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A Cuckoo in Candle Lane

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Published by Orion

Extract

Chapter One

Battersea, South London, 1953

Sally Marchant ran headlong down the street, arms and legs pumping like pistons and socks bagging around her ankles. Just before the corner she risked a quick glance over her shoulder, then scuttled round onto the main road where she leaned thankfully against the pawnbroker's window, skinny chest heaving as she dragged freezing air into her lungs. Why do they always pick on me? she thought, her eyes staring blankly across the busy main road, to where huge ugly factories flanked the dirty River Thames.

She set off again, walking rapidly and hoping she had lost her tormentors in the warren of streets and alleyways. It was just before she reached her own turn-off that they jumped out in front of her from the shelter of a shop doorway, and her stomach lurched as she braced herself for the confrontation.

The two girls straddled the pavement, hands on hips and arms akimbo to bar her way.

'Well, well, what 'ave we here? It's the ginger nut,' one of them jeered.

'My hair ain't ginger.'

'Yes it is, you daft cow.'

'It ain't ginger . . . it's auburn.'

'Don't kid yourself,' she sniggered, her eyes travelling pointedly down to Sally's feet. 'New shoes?'

'Yeah, but what's it got to do with you?'

The girl's pugnacious face glinted in triumph. 'You're a liar,' she shouted. 'We saw you on Saturday in Rosie's secondhand shop, and

them shoes look like the ones yer mum fished out of a box of rummage.'

'Ugh!' The other girl's long thin face stretched into a grimace of distaste. 'I bet all yer clothes are secondhand – *and* full of fleas.' She scratched herself vigorously, turning to her friend. 'Are you itchy too?'

'Yeah, I am, now you come to mention it,' she replied, raking her nails through her hair. Then, grinning maliciously at Sally, she added, 'By the way, Spooky, 'ave you seen any ghosts lately?'

Sally clenched her hands into fists, nails digging painfully into her palms in an effort to hide her humiliation. I won't let them see me cry, she thought, I won't. Lowering her head she dodged into the road to pass them, running off with the sound of their laughter ringing in her ears.

A few minutes later she turned into Long Street, halting momentarily to catch her breath. Then, after a final quick check behind her, she darted left into Candle Lane where three doors down at number five she lifted the letterbox to grope for the key that dangled on a piece of string. Carefully pulling it through she opened the door and stepped into the narrow hall, eyes clouding when she saw her dad's coat hanging on the rack. Sick with disappointment she crept upstairs to her room, clambered into bed, and curled into a tight ball under the thin blankets.

Her feelings of isolation increased at the sound of children playing in the street below her window. Boys playing football or marbles, girls with skipping ropes, their voices high as they jumped in time to a chant . . .

> PK *penny a packet*,
> *First you chew it, then you crack it*,
> *Then you stick it on your jacket*,
> *PK penny a packet*.

She longed to join in their games, to play outside as they did, but her dad would never allow it. After school she was forced to remain in her room, out of his way, and only allowed downstairs for dinner. When he went to the pub she could stay in the kitchen

until bedtime, and picturing the lovely fire burning in the hearth, she prayed he would be going out tonight.

The noise in the street gradually became distant as she allowed her mind to drift, trying to escape the cold and loneliness by retreating to the elusive and beautiful place she saw only in her dreams.

At last Sally felt safe and warm, in an altered state, floating above the bed and gazing down at her own body wrapped in a cocoon of untidy blankets. She wasn't afraid; she felt light and free, happy to let this moment go on for ever.

The bedroom door was thrust open, her peace shattered as she was propelled violently back into her body, the sudden jolt leaving her feeling disorientated and blinking rapidly at the speed of the transition.

'Come on, Sally, yer dinner's ready. Didn't you hear me calling?' her mum asked, peering round the door.

'Oh, sorry . . . I must 'ave fallen asleep,' she stammered.

'Well, get a move on. You know yer dad don't like waiting for his grub,' Ruth Marchant urged as she scurried away.

Reluctantly Sally crawled out of bed and padded downstairs, shivering in her thin clothes as she entered the kitchen. Careful not to make any noise she pulled out a chair, whilst glancing surreptitiously at her dad sitting at the end of the table. He was reading a newspaper, his dark greasy hair flopping onto his forehead.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, she sat down, relieved when he didn't look up. Please, she thought, as she turned to see her mum carrying two steaming plates across the room, please let him be in a good mood.

'Here you are, Ken,' her mum said quietly.

'About bloody time too,' he snapped. 'In future, see that me dinner's ready when I come home.'

'Yeah, all right love, it won't happen again,' she said meekly, placing their plates on the table.

Sally could sense the tension in the room and her stomach churned with nerves. His anger hung in the air . . . palpable . . . waiting to explode.

Lowering her eyes she looked at the grey mutton stew, thick

with pearl barley, and felt a wave of nausea. Beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead. 'Mum,' she gasped. 'I'm sorry, I can't eat it. I feel sick.'

A chair was shoved back, screeching across the lino and she jerked with fear, eyes widening as her dad leaped to his feet, the chair crashing onto the floor behind him.

'What's this?' he ground out, leaning menacingly over the table. 'Feels sick, does she? Like mother, like daughter, is it?'

Ruth crouched low in her chair, cowering away from him. 'No, don't be daft, Ken, she's only ten.'

'What! Don't you dare call me daft, you bloody bitch,' he yelled, suddenly lunging forward to grab a handful of her jumper, the material straining as he yanked her roughly towards him. Drawing back his other hand he slapped her violently across the mouth, the force of the blow splitting her bottom lip. 'Now get that brat out of my sight, or else!' he screamed.

'Quick, go to your room, Sal,' Ruth sobbed, struggling to pull herself away from his grip, blood trickling onto her chin.

Sally hesitated, her body rigid with fear, but was suddenly galvanised into action when he turned, giving her a vicious sneer.

'Do you want me to give yer mother another slap?' he spat, raising his hand in a threatening gesture.

Heart pounding Sally ran from the kitchen, jumped the stairs two at a time and burst into her room, throwing herself across the bed. It's my fault, she thought, clutching her hands over her ears in an effort to drown out the sound of her dad's voice screaming obscenities. Mum's gonna get it now, and it's all because of me. 'Please God,' she whispered. 'Please, don't let him hurt her any more.'

After a few minutes a strange calmness began to penetrate her turbulent thoughts; she felt the lightest of breaths on her cheek, like an angel's kiss. Gentle hands caressed her hair and she opened tear-filled eyes to see the room glowing in a golden shimmering light. She smiled; it would be all right now. Her friend was here.

Ruth was peering in the mirror, gingerly dabbing at the blood on her lip, when the door burst open.

'Mum, are you all right?' Sally gasped, her face creased with anxiety. 'I heard me dad go out. Did he hit you again?'

Seeing the fear in her daughter's eyes Ruth tried to smile reassuringly, but ended up wincing as the cut re-opened. 'I'm fine, sweetheart. Come over here and sit by the fire. Do you still feel sick?'

'No, I'm all right now. My friend came and made me better.'

'You and yer friend, Sally. How many times 'ave I got to tell you? It's all in yer imagination.'

'But, Mum . . .'

'Now that's enough,' Ruth snapped. 'I ain't in the mood for your silly stories, I've got enough on me plate as it is.'

'I'm sorry,' Sally whispered.

Ruth's voice took on a softer note. 'I tell you what,' she said, trying to make amends, 'you must be hungry. I've still got some stew left, would you like it warmed up?'

'Yeah, thanks, Mum.'

When Sally had finished eating, she rose, taking her plate to the sink. 'Do you want me to wash the dishes, Mum?'

'No, it's all right, I'll do them later,' she answered, leaning back in the chair and widening her legs. 'Come on, come and sit on the floor in front of me and I'll do yer hair.'

Once Sally was settled it was blissfully quiet for a while, and as Ruth absently drew the brush through her daughter's thick, shiny red hair, she noticed how the flames from the fire reflected and enhanced the colour, turning it to a beautiful burnished copper. She smiled softly at the memories evoked, a face floating into her mind, but then Sally's voice intruded, startling her back to the present.

'Mum, are we going to see me gran tomorrow?'

'Yeah, of course we are.' Ruth looked forward to going to Tooting to see her mum and sister Mary, whose husband was a travelling salesman covering the North of England. Harry was a good-looking bloke and often away from home for long periods, but he earned good money so her sister wanted for nothing.

'Mum, why hasn't Auntie Mary got any kids?'

'I dunno, pet. Perhaps the stork will bring her a baby one day.'

Sally twisted around, looking up at her quizzically. 'Why don't she get one from the chemist's?'

'That's not where you get them from, love.'

'But, Mum, we saw a lady buy one last week, don't you remember?'

Puzzled, Ruth Marchant shook her head. 'No, darling. I dunno what you think you saw, but you can't buy babies.'

'You can yer know,' Sally said sagely, wagging her head, her little face full of the importance of what she had seen. 'When we went to the chemist's, I saw Mr Brown putting a baby in his scales. He told the lady it was ten pounds, and a lovely little whopper.'

Ruth snorted, trying to hold back her laughter. 'Oh, Sally,' she finally managed to gasp, pressing the back of her hand to her sore mouth, 'you are funny. I dunno where you get your ideas from. Look, dear,' she added, fighting to keep a straight face, 'you can't buy babies by the pound, like potatoes.'

Sally frowned in consternation. 'But the lady paid Mr Brown for it . . . I saw her.'

'No, the baby already belonged to her – she just wanted to check its weight, that's all.'

A stream of questions followed and Ruth did her best to answer them, until at last Sally leaned back contentedly, her curiosity satisfied for the time being.

'Mum, will you brush me hair again?'

Ruth smiled affectionately and it wasn't long before she noticed that Sally's head had begun to nod up and down with each stroke of the brush. 'Come on now, you're falling asleep and it's time you were in bed.'

'All right, Mum,' she yawned, rising slowly to her feet. 'Night, night,' she whispered tiredly, leaning over for a kiss.

Ruth washed the dishes, tidied up, and then gazed around the spartan room. Satisfied there was nothing Ken could find fault with, she flopped down in front of the fire, stirring the dying embers to life with the poker before adding a few more lumps of precious coal.

With a sigh, she remembered that there was still the grey pinafore skirt she had managed to find for Sally in the secondhand

shop to alter. The hem needed taking up, but somehow she wasn't in the mood for sewing. Instead she dug into her apron pocket, fishing out a packet of cigarettes. These were her one luxury; she would buy only enough meat for Ken and Sally, just putting vegetables on her own plate. She smiled ruefully; they didn't notice and the few spare coppers enabled her to buy a couple of packets of Woodbines a week.

Perhaps I should stop smoking, she thought, then I could save up and buy new clothes for Sally. No, she shrugged, assuaging her guilt; there was no point in doing that. Ken would go mad if he saw Sally in new clothes. He resented any money spent on her, and in a perverse way, it seemed to please him when she looked scruffy.

Ruth took a nervous drag on her cigarette and glanced at the clock. He wouldn't be home for at least another hour and by then she would be in bed, pretending to be asleep. She grimaced. He was hitting her more and more lately – but then, after what she had done, it was no more than she deserved.