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Keeping Mum

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Extract

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Chapter One

I AM ON MY STOMACH, HALF ACROSS MY MOTHER'S body. Her skin smells of sleep and – by association – milk. Downstairs, the front door slams. My mother pushes me away and rolls on to her side. Her hair fans out on the pillow and though she is facing the light that streams through uncurtained windows, her eyes are closed. There are tears in her lashes. She is not sleeping but crying. After a few moments, I clamber out of bed.

Maybe I was three, maybe younger. If three, it was the year Hitler assumed the office of war minister and Neville Chamberlain went to see him at Berchtesgaden. A fortnight later, at the end of September 1938, Chamberlain and the French chief minister Edouard Daladier were summoned to Munich to sign an infamous agreement with the Führer and Mussolini. Though I had no way of knowing it, things might have been worse. I might have been born Czech, or even more calamitously as it proved in the end, German. As it was, the sunlight that streamed into the bedroom illuminated a

complacent, apolitical family home. Not a happy home, not in the slightest bit happy; but then, what people did with themselves was their own business. This widely shared belief was what gave these bricks and mortar their Englishness.

My father went to work early in order to impress the bosses – but that was just his way. The rest of the road tramped off half an hour later to clerks' desks or jobs in shops, to college kitchens or inspection pits in oily garages. Their wives set about the washing or cleaning; at the end of the morning they stood on chairs to gossip across the garden fences. My mother did little of any of these things but that too was just her way. For her, the world was huge and for the most part shapeless. We had gone up in it by coming to live here, but only in the way a bubble rises from the marsh. Some would say she did not know how lucky she was. The rented house we lived in was modern and the road lined with generous grass verges. Every so often a tree had been planted along the way to add grace and scale and as it happened there was one outside our house, showering blossom in spring. It made no difference to my mother. Those early-morning tears came from something much more deep and dark and incoherent than disappointment with her surroundings.

The back garden of the house was bounded on three sides by high cedarwood fences and had for its lid a milky-blue sky, vaster than anything we could have imagined possible in London. There, in the Victorian canyons of my parents'

childhood, the sky was like a piece of fabric cut up in narrow strips and stuffed to fill a crack or stop a draught. In the crowded streets no gutter was without its stalking, strutting pigeons. Rats whose ancestors had seen the Romans plopped down the drains or scratted in the ceiling. The flinty yellow brick of houses and tenements was black with soot and even a little sunshine revealed how dense the air was with dust and grit. Victorian – Dickensian – factories and workshops stood alongside dwellings: yards away from my father's birthplace was a marble-cutting business worked in the open air, the steam-driven saws sending up fogs of fine white powder. My mother had grown up next door to rag-pickers.

Now, in place of all that, a yawning sky, blustery keen air and rain so fresh that it seemed to improve the washing on the line. While my mother's best scorn was reserved for the people she had left behind, her vandalism soon found its full outlet under such an all-seeing eye. She would walk across the chalky borders of the garden and stamp down shows of spring daffodils, or dash the dregs of her tea into the rose bushes, scattering petals. On hot days she would sit on a chair outside the kitchen door, her legs exposed to the crotch of her knickers, her back turned resolutely to the pleasures of the lawn, smoking and throwing the dog-ends at the dustbin. Though she was hardly thirty years old, she dressed like someone twenty or even forty years older, a bundle of garish rags and lumpy cardigans. Congenitally hard of hearing, when she was

not being badgered by someone else's speech her expression assumed a startling emptiness. She was inside there somewhere, but on her own.

My father made the transition to the country more easily by playing the part of bluff yeoman. He was in fact a telephone linesman, shrewdly aware that he had joined the most meritocratic branch of the civil service, as Post Office Engineering was in those days. Climbing up telephone poles was merely a way of looking round to see how the land lay. He was ruthlessly ambitious and a quick learner. He already had two voices, one more polite than the other. When he bought shoes, they were brogues. His shirts were check and his jackets sporty. He took himself off every Sunday for what he liked to call a walk round the parish. By the standards of the times he lived in, he was exceptionally good-looking, with a straight nose inherited from his mother and a burly no-nonsense figure, honed by childhood boxing. He wore his moustache clipped in the manner of Clark Gable and smoked both cigarettes and a pipe.

The pipe gave him a curiously authoritative air, as of a young British bulldog, a man of dangerous parts. Although we had come no further than fifty miles from London, men in his mould were scattered all over the dying Empire, implacable and incorruptible. He was exactly the sort of stout fellow who would know what to do when the drums fell silent and the house servants slipped away out of the compound. Instead of the unblinking animosity of the jungle, however,

he had a crazy wife and a skinny child, a rented house and a hundred feet or so of chalky mud.

Though this was still a very young garden, it sagged in the middle like a ruined sofa. That same soft curve was replicated by a rose trellis that had already begun to bow for lack of support. The laths were whimsically coated in flaky and weathered blue distemper, a colour to be found inside the house on the bathroom walls. How to explain this oddity, except as an example of my father's restless and chippy individualism, his gift for doing whatever the hell he liked with the material world? The man next door, a retired policeman, explained in a slow country voice how there were special creosotes that could be used on such a thing as a trellis. This conversation took place over the boundary fence. My father simply stared his neighbour down with his pale blue eyes.

'Suit yourself,' Mr Blundell muttered unnecessarily, as his head disappeared from view.

For miles round was chalk. Wherever a section had been cut, say to accommodate a road through the soft and rounded hills, stiff grey topsoil perched like breadcrumbs on an altar of grubby white. There were cliffs of the stuff in forgotten woodland spinneys, stained green by gouts of winter rain. Only half a mile away along the same reef on which our house had been built was a cement works which mined chalk from two huge holes in the ground, connected to each other by a subterranean tunnel. The mixing tank, in which an iron sweep rotated day and night, had a blackboard fastened to its

crusty wall. It showed the number of days that had passed without an industrial accident.

My father's mind was baffled by it all. His childhood had been spent looking out on to a small flagged yard with a mangle shed and an outside privy, the only view the upper three walkways of a Peabody building. The yard was bounded by a high brick wall topped with the brown glass of broken beer bottles. It helps explain my father's character. Otherness – not all, but most – was the enemy of his childhood and all his life he retained a truculence towards other people that could be truly awesome. In his world, nobody acted from a disinterested motive. All vicars were poofs, all policemen bent as meat-hooks. Even the most prestigious shops would rook you if they could and in humbler transactions it was imperative to check change for foreign coin. A kind word disguised a sinister intention and to be asked directions in the street was the obvious prelude to begging. It made him a mean-minded man. He learned how to dissimulate to his office superiors, but at the family hearth his suspicious mind was given full rein. Even at his death, some fifty years into the future, he was still living behind walls topped by broken glass.

All the same, in this new place he had found for himself, he gave the countryside every chance to seduce him. He bought a spindly and cumbersome pushchair and in this he would walk me to Cherry Hinton, then a bucolic village decorated with straw wisps. Horse-drawn drays delivered beer to the ivy-covered pub, the horses with ribbons plaited in

their manes. Always interested in how things worked, my father would bid me watch as the barrels rolled off the dray, cushioned by a huge sack of sawdust, before disappearing down a steel-hooped ladder into the cellar. I seem to remember a track or path that led back down to the cement works, where he would stand, smoking, sometimes holding me up to watch the cement being mixed. Nearby, men coated in grey dust from head to toe sat on the steps of a small green cabin, watching my father watching them. They gargled water from black screw-top bottles and spat it out in silver gouts.

The painted trellis in our garden, the geometric borders, formed a sketch of what someone recently coming into the country would consider a lovesome thing – but it was only a sketch, the roughest of drafts. The chalk mocked the Adam in my father. Some of the chunks his spade turned up were as large as house bricks. His one great success was in the front garden, where a hedge of lavender ran away with itself so successfully that in the summer season brown-faced gipsies would plunder it, breaking off the stems with a blackened thumbnail, before being repelled by my mother with lumps of chalk. They left behind a scribbled mark on the gatepost, which was bad luck to receive but even worse luck to wash off. An Irishwoman a few doors down came to inspect the mark and hastily crossed herself.

'Your bleeding relatives, I shouldn't wonder,' my mother jeered.

The houses on the opposite side of the road were of an

older stock. Once, our more established neighbours had been able to stand in their front rooms, which they no doubt called the sitting room, gazing out from their bow windows on to nature. Now, instead of rooks on sentry-go or ponies stirred to a gallop by some trick of the wind, they had us. Next door but one was a gap in the housing row where one day a side road would be built and more houses added, right up to the borders of a commercial apple orchard. At the end of the road, two massive billboards advertised this promise. We ingrates were the forerunners of 'Homes for the Future'.

I always imagine some architect laying down his pencil on the final drawings of this development and finding them good. Another boat sent out into the ocean of opportunity, another chance for the man in the street to rise to the challenge of the street's design. The Homes for the Future depicted on the advertising hoarding showed a family of cyclists pedalling towards the viewer – mother, father and young boy. They were laughing for joy.

It is a rainy spring day in 1940. I am collecting nuggets of slimy chalk when my father comes out of the back door and, pointing to a Tiger Moth wobbling towards Marshall's airfield, in a weeping sky, asks me whether I noticed him earlier, waving to me. I stare at the plane and the mild panic in my expression amuses him.

'You didn't see me?' he persists. 'I could see you plain as anything.'

'What was I doing?'

'Picking your nose, as usual.'

I can locate this fateful little conversation exactly, to the last white snail hanging on a blade of grass. We were three yards from the back wall of the house, in front of savagely pruned roses. My father smoked as certain actors did then, dragging the cigarette from his lips with calculated and manly vigour. I knew so very little about him but I did, tender though I was, sense a mood of danger behind the bantering.

In fact, he was giving me his Clark Gable. My mother (a rather crazed Vivien Leigh) joined us with two flowered tea-cups. There was much more of this suppressed danger in the adult conversation that followed. I utterly failed to register the importance of what was being said and wandered away. This, as I can see now – only too clearly – was a mistake. When I looked up again, they had gone inside. Soon, what had been promised arrived. The shouting began and there was the sound of breaking crockery. Perfectly secure in a reserved occupation, with only his garden to think about, my father had gone out that morning and volunteered for RAF aircrew.

I must have been in the first year at school. I can remember the name of it – Blinco Grove Primary – but very little else. It seems to me I was only there for a day, during which we played some outdoor game-in-a-circle with a scuffed yellow ball and then were put down on cots to sleep for half an hour or so. I can recall the dust-impregnated blankets and the

faintly sour smell of the boarded floor but not a single lesson, nor anyone's name. By stretching my memory to the limit, I can vaguely remember being given Canadian chocolate compressed into a brick inches thick. Was that then, or later?

The route home from school lay through a street of villas that had donated their railings to the war effort, leaving behind soft plugs of lead in the low walls. You turned into the main road by a parade dominated by a fish and chip shop and then crunched across a kind of clinker court to a broad pavement. To people I met along the way, I was some lallygagging freak, a thin and pigeon-chested child who had betrayed the promise shown in my only photograph to date, where I sat plumped in a chair, looking sullen and clutching a toy horse.

There was a man halfway along this road home who sometimes passed the time of day. I was peering into his hedge one afternoon when he came out of his front door, his watery eyes lighting at once on what I was looking at.

'It's a bumblebee,' he said.

'I know.'

'Ah, you know that much, do you?'

We studied each other. The bags under the man's eyes were dark blue, a colour heightened by white stubble and flyaway hair. There was food caked to his chin. He nodded, as if in answer to an unspoken question.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm doolally.'

I told him my name.

'That's no name for a hero. Don't you want to be a hero?'

At which his daughter came out and shepherded him wordlessly back into the house. The door slammed with enough force to make the knocker clack. I did not know whether I wanted to be a hero and crossed the road with tears in my eyes. Blubbing was something to feel guilty about, like physical imperfection or dimwittedness. On her best days there could be no one more inventively ribald than my mother, yet the slightest sign of turmoil in others plunged her at once into black despair. It was always better to dissemble in front of her.

In the front room was a revolving bookcase, the improbable first prize in a whist tournament at which my father had of course triumphed. It carried *Newne's Encyclopaedia of Gardening* and nothing else. If, when it was spun, the shelf containing the encyclopaedia came to rest facing the door, Vivien Leigh would be in merry mood. If not, there would be trouble. I sat on the rag rug, spinning the shelves and thinking about the man called Doolally and what he was doing, whether he was having his tea. There was the sudden smell of scent in the hallway and my mother came in with what she called jam doorsteps. She put the plate down beside me and checked her hair in the mirror, humming.

'I'm just going to pop out for an hour,' she said, far too casually.

My father had already gone. Though I hardly knew him, it seems significant to me now that I didn't miss him more. Without him, the house had taken on a different character. There was no more shouting. The radio was tuned to dance

music, tea was sweetened with jam and when the last of the coal was used up, my mother slept inside a fake fur coat, the bedclothes heaped up in a pyramid. When she remembered, she would obligingly warm my sheets with hot water inside a Tizer bottle. Like her, I slept in my clothes. As for the garden, it reverted all too quickly to what it had been before we came there, the borders indistinguishable from the lawn, the lawn itself a tiny meadow.

I spent a great deal of time alone in the house, licking the salty grime from the window and looking down the road to watch for my mother's return from wherever she had been. Between five and six the neighbours passed, trudging home from work. By eight, the pavements were deserted. There was very little traffic and no one we knew had a car, or had ever owned one. When it had been dark an hour or so, with nothing but the wind left in the street, I would take myself off to bed. All the interior woodwork in the house was painted chocolate brown and it seemed to soak up the light furnished by low-watt bulbs. For fear of the dark, I would leave the landing light on. Flushing the lavatory also helped, for then I could fall asleep listening to the cistern grumbling and muttering to itself.

Not to be able to sleep brought on an agony of terror. My parents had given me the back bedroom, not much smaller than their own. Beyond the high fences, the branches of the commercial apple orchard chattered. It was from this direction I imagined the Germans would come, appearing out of

the trees like smoke. If not Germans, then ghosts. Alone for too long, I could hear much more than the sighing all houses make when the last light is extinguished. Boots scraped along floors and there was music and the distant hum of voices. Sometimes, having put myself to bed, I heard gunshots.

'That's right,' my mother said with her elaborate sarcasm. 'That's exactly what you did hear. We was all shooting each other. The corpses are buried in Lord Muck's garden.'

'Who's Lord Muck?'

'Work it out for yourself.'

Cambridge was simply a town. The colleges had no place on my map, which was centred on Drummer Street bus and coach station. After 1942, the streets were stiff with Yanks, ambling along with wide shoes and cocky linen hats, their hands in their pockets. They looked fitter and cleaner than the miserable bundles of khaki they occasionally encountered.

'It is usual to salute an officer in this country,' I heard an elderly captain complain to three airmen young enough to be his children.

'Damn right,' some waistgunner or bombardier replied without malice, pushing him gently aside as though he were a rose sucker in our garden.

'Bloody Yanks,' the captain yelled after them, voicing the common opinion.

Then, suddenly, I am sixty miles away in another school, no more than three or four dusty rooms beside an elevated

suburban railway station, learning copperplate handwriting, doing simple addition and subtraction and (for suspiciously long periods) drawing on ragged sheets of sugar paper with a thick and greasy pencil. The teachers are surely unqualified: what kind of a place is this, with its whispering somnolence, more like a Mexican hotel lounge than a classroom? I cannot see on to the station platform because it is masked by advertising hoardings, though these do not reach completely to the ground and disembodied legs occasionally walk past, pause, or in cold weather, stamp. The arrival of the trains make the nailed-down sash windows of the schoolroom shudder, a friendly and somehow reassuring whisper from the world outside.

My mother and father have disappeared and I am living with Elsie, my mother's sister. I have no more idea of how this happened than a parcel might have of the workings of the Post Office. It is the first of many holes in my memory. Was I sent away in anger, or for my own protection? Cambridge was one of the safer places to live during the war: who thought up the bright idea of posting me to a house behind the Kingston bypass, ten miles from the epicentre of the Blitz?

Here I am at eight years old, walking to school in New Malden and collecting pearly cobwebs from the suburban hedges with a twig doubled over into a hoop. In the basement of the church building that houses the school, a girl pulls down her knickers and holds up her brown gingham dress to show me what she looks like. She looks plump and well-fed,

with a little pot belly and round thighs. She draws attention to a birthmark on her haunch in the shape of a Spitfire. We stand in carbolic-smelling gloom staring at each other, flinching from time to time as snatches of conversation from the street outside seem to fall through a tiled shaft and its grating. I realise what this girl expects in return. I unbutton my shorts before pulling them down to my knees. She doubles over in disbelieving laughter before running away.

She has a friend called Phyllis, a skinny carrotty girl who wears fair-isle mittens in winter. Even the dewdrop on the end of her nose is lovable to me as we walk part of the way home together. She has a neighing laugh and an inability to look me straight in the eye. My aunt and Phyllis's mother confer in Timothy White's, staring at us both from time to time with pursed lips. Uncle Dick is given the job of explaining to me how things are. Phyllis's father is Missing in Action.

'Which means he is more than likely a gonner, see? So maybe it's best to leave the poor little mite alone.'

'I haven't done anything.'

'Course not. Never said you had. But, you know, sleeping dogs. Something like that.'

Dick had one leg much shortened and wore a surgical boot to compensate. He worked on the print side of the *Daily Express*. Of all the hundred kind and good-natured things he said, or may have said, these are the only words of his I can remember exactly. He tousled my hair, bid me stop the fleas from biting and clumped downstairs, one leg at a time. The

childless couple stood discussing me in the hall. Auntie Elsie listened to Dick's account of what had been said and I sensed her familiar emphatic nod.

'What you don't know can't hurt you,' she muttered.

There was a great deal of what I did not know. My mother never came once to visit. I can remember my father arriving out of the blue one afternoon and taking me to a distant cinema to see an American war film, *Guadalcanal Diary*, which he barracked vociferously. Because he was in uniform, nobody liked to say much and in fact one or two other servicemen joined in. It was not the war they reprehended, but our principal ally's part in it. We came out into a moist autumn night and walked home 'for the exercise'. It took more than an hour, during which time my father gave everyone who scurried past in the blackout a cheerful hullo, as though he had lived in those parts all his life. To my astonishment, when we reached the house in Knightwood Crescent, he kissed me briefly on the cheek and walked away without a word.

'Well, where is he?' my aunt cried, peering down the street, as though he might be hiding behind a privet hedge.

'He's gone home,' I muttered.

She put her arms round me and crushed me for a moment and then pushed me inside.

In that walk home from the cinema was the essence of the man. In time of war, his part was that of the bluff and trustworthy constable of virtue. The uniform helped. Bulked out

by an RAF greatcoat and with his shoes ringing on the pavement, he was offering passers-by a reassurance they may even have needed. Secretive by nature ('What you don't know can't hurt you'), he had risen to become a bomber navigator and a bit of a hero to his crew. But all that was, as he would have put it, his business. I did not know until many years later that when he joined the RAF he was sent to South Africa to train for aircrew. When he took me to see *Guadalcanal Diary* that afternoon, he had only just returned. Other fathers may have made an adventure out of such a long and dangerous sea trip. He never mentioned it.

In 1955, I was walking with him in Cheapside when a broken figure of a man gave a cry of recognition and tapped him for a pound, anything he could spare. He pushed the poor devil away with the flat of his hand. It was, he explained, his rear-gunner from the war years.

'Don't you want to talk to him?'

'Why should I want to do that?'

My aunt was not much more demonstrative than my father but there was a constancy in her that was enormously reassuring. She taught me multiplication and long division, always with a faint air of vexation, but I knew this to be from an inability even to imagine innumeracy. As a young woman she had crossed the river from one of the worst slums in Lambeth to work in City shops as a sales assistant. She was the model of the winsome assistant who gives a momentary

lift to the customer's heart. Her mental arithmetic was dizzying and she could parcel things exquisitely. Once a month she sent her sister stiffly conventional letters outlining my situation – a cold, a new pair of shoes, failure to learn even the basics of the piano. These were written in a round and regular hand on pale blue notepaper. The letters went unanswered.

Elsie had made the transition to a respectable way of life far more successfully than my mother. In New Malden, everybody wanted to be like everybody else and set themselves the task of keeping up appearances. People nowadays speak about the sort of community this creates as stifling: I found it very comforting. When people came to tea – and they were mainly elderly ladies looking for solace from this neat and comely young woman – the sponge cake was laid out on a fretted silver stand and there were marigolds in a pot on the tea trolley. Conversation avoided anything in the least controversial and there was great nicety in knowing when to leave.

'Well, dear,' a spindly old crone said, pulling on her gloves and nodding in my direction, 'that little fellow is much happier *here*, I am quite sure.'

My father had brothers, my mother sisters. One of these worked as a riveter at Shorts and I went to stay with her for a couple of days. She took me to the works' canteen, amid great ribaldry. She was a thickset woman with hennaed hair and a wide letter-box smile.

'Your mother's a bleeding princess,' she commented, passing me her pint to sip at.

'And you can keep your opinions to yourself,' Elsie snapped when I was returned home.

'It's the war effort,' Auntie Ivy yelled, laughing uproariously. She was wearing black serge trousers and a pink sweater and chain-smoked what she called Woodies. Every knuckle on her hands had weeping scars and her nails were torn ragged to the quick.

'I hope you've been keeping your yap shut,' my aunt said, pointing a bread-knife in Ivy's face. 'And where's his tie? I sent him to you with a tie.'

I hid my face. Ivy had worn the tie with a white shirt and those same serge trousers to walk out with me and a more elderly woman called Dot. While I threw bread to the ducks, she and Dot kissed companionably and lit cigarettes from each other's stubs.

A third and far more acceptable aunt arrived one night with a Canadian naval officer and a recording of the Inkspots' latest. When it came to the line about the green grass being buried under the snow, the Canadian mimed hearty digging, sending us into fits of laughter. Then he and Dick went into the front room to talk about the war and Elsie and her sister retreated to the kitchen for what they called a conflab. My mother's name and Ivy's were several times mentioned.

The school I went to seems in retrospect suspiciously small and woebegone. Why it was housed in church premises was another enigma, for the first time I walked into a church from choice was to attend my wedding. We were not a

churchy family. I assume that I was christened but I had no idea of the rites or ceremonies otherwise. (Church, as my mother pointed out in later years, was not for the likes of us. She was, by her own lights, being perfectly serious.)

One of the lessons I remember best was practising copper-plate script. The examples came in a landscape format exercise book with a brown cover. The text – short sentences of useful facts – was printed above a dotted line on which we copied it with a spluttering steel nib. One example began: *Gum arabic is . . .* but whatever it is, I have completely forgotten. It was lulling and not at all unpleasant work that I associated with mists and castles. The illusion of practising some ancient art was reinforced at the centrefold of the book, where the staples were red with rust. So weak were they that a thumb-nail could erase what had once been bright metal. I worried about this. The rust, the mouse-grey paper, were signs that we had been specially entrusted to keep a wavering flame alive.

The pleasure of the day was drawing landscapes with a blunt pencil, so dense with marks, so emphatic that I felt I could go and live in these pictures, walk down the winding path to some chocolate-box cottage and sit inside staring at the bombers flying overhead. They bore swastikas on their wings and tailplane. Fat bombs dropped from their bellies. In other parts of the same picture, rooks flew unconcernedly towards cauliflower trees and animals intended to be squirrels sat complacently chewing.