ANDREW MACKIE

The JOURNEY *after the* CROWN



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Title: The Journey After The Crown, **Format**: 129x198, **Output date**:10/03/22

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HQ Digital
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

This edition 2022

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First published as *The Tour* by Penguin Random House Australia 2021

First published in Great Britain by
HQ, an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2022

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9780008530327



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Printed and Bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Prologue

November, 1953

After more than two weeks at sea to simmer the tension between them, Violet and Daisie Chettle couldn't stand each other, let alone stand *next* to each other. Not even to meet the Queen.

On the main deck under the hot afternoon sun, the eighty-strong crew of the *SS Gothic* waited silently for Her Majesty and the Duke to board. Over twenty minutes had passed as the men sweated in their heavy pressed uniforms and the women felt the sting of the Jamaican sunlight on their impeccably made-up skin.

Violet stood halfway along the third row, wringing her hands against her stomach as a seagull gloated on the port-side railing, its mouth cocked open in the repressive heat. She was about to meet her idol, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She'd long adored the monarchy, and this sudden proximity to it was a greater accomplishment than she had ever imagined.

'The pomp and aggrandisement of this woman! She was only crowned five months ago,' Daisie had lectured Violet earlier that day. 'It's all a pantomime. Fool the people. Distract them from the machinations of politics and entitlement.'

Violet had shushed her. 'Smite the Lord's name if you must, but stay away from the Crown,' she'd whispered angrily, fearful they might be overheard.

She observed the seagull on the railing. It danced sideways, closer to the rows of freshly shaved men in clean naval regalia.

Daisie stood in front of her. 'Your uniform would be an enticing target to a bored seagull,' she heard Daisie remark to the towering officer standing to attention at her right. His gaze remained unwavering.

'To attention! Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of England, and the Duke of Edinburgh,' the steward announced loudly, and within seconds the Queen and Prince Philip appeared from the starboard doorway, escorted towards the waiting group by the po-faced Private Secretary Ratcliffe.

Violet's heartbeat accelerated. She'd been instructed to avoid eye contact but couldn't help stealing a glance. Poised, youthful, feminine, perhaps slightly withdrawn, the Queen might have been any young woman on a great occasion. Her skin was flawlessly fragile, paler than the impression gained from paintings and photographs. She wore a blue pleated dress, a single string of pearls and a pillbox hat that sat just so on her judiciously waved hair. She smiled patiently as she walked along the front row.

Prince Philip shone just as brilliantly. He was tall and imposing, but even his blinding naval wear, a vivid white suit with matching cap, couldn't subdue the humour that radiated from him. He paused to chat jovially to a chief engineer, as if they were old friends, then glanced down the line at Daisie, who stood out among the uniformed men like a wildflower in the desert. She blushed at the attention, a gentle smirk following in its wake. Violet scrunched her nose nervously, willing Daisie to stop being herself.

The Queen's official lady-in-waiting, Lady Caroline Althorp, hovered. Lady Althorp was a refined, well-bred woman with a slender neck and pale girlish skin despite her thirty-one years. As

they approached Daisie's place in the line she discreetly whispered near the Queen's shoulder.

'You're with Lady Althorp?' the Queen asked Daisie, her eyes round with genuine curiosity. The sharp timbre of her voice made the routine enquiry sound personal and authentic. Violet couldn't help but watch and listen.

'Why yes,' Daisie replied, unintimidated, adding, 'Your Majesty,' as an afterthought.

'Thank you for your service,' the Queen responded seamlessly before she glided on.

Violet breathed out. 'Never look at Her Majesty directly,' she'd been told by Lady Althorp, 'unless you are invited to do so.'

Violet's chest tightened again, her heart leaping at the thought of her turn. She parted her lips slightly to take in more oxygen. She stared straight ahead, her hands clasped in front of her as instructed as she resisted her instinct to fidget. 'Still. Perfectly still,' her inner voice repeated.

The shape of the Queen approaching edged into her peripheral vision. Violet's breathing became heightened again, and she focused on the foreground as the Queen passed mere inches before her.

Then she was gone.

Violet's shoulders dropped as her heart sank.

Her Majesty stopped to chat with the chef two places along. The seagulls cawed and trilled. They weren't laughing at Violet, but that's the way it sounded. Once again Daisie was the chosen one and Violet simply didn't exist.

And then the vomit rose in Violet's throat.

PART 1

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On the hottest day of the summer of 1947, twelve-year-old Daisie Chettle watched a bead of sweat gather on her twin sister's forehead as they waited in the living room for their parents to stop arguing. The drop collected on Violet's brow as their parents exchanged tense whispers in the kitchen.

'Another desperate promise. How many *slices* have you had since *her*?' Daisie heard her mother exclaim in a hushed voice.

Edith Chettle then appeared through the kitchen doorway, her face flushed from heat and anger. It was the first time Daisie had seen her mother's calm façade broken. Red-faced, perhaps partially from shame, her father, Edward, also entered, pacing the living room carpet like a threatened dog, uneasy and stung. Guilt was written all over his stalking frame.

'Sit,' said Edith. Daisie hoisted herself onto the couch beside her sister as their mother gingerly lowered herself into Edward's armchair. He lingered anxiously behind.

'One of you will live with your father for a while.' Daisie knew it was serious because she'd called him 'your father'. She always called him Ted, so this felt solemn and strange.

'Daisie,' he said, unable to look her in the eye, 'you'll live with me. It'll be me and you for a bit.'

Daisie saw her sister's face fall, and that sadness washed over her. She didn't want to be separated from her sister or her mother, but she didn't have the courage to do anything but nod. Daisie was accustomed to getting her way over Violet, yet the quiet delight she usually took in her sister's jealousy couldn't extend to this.

A month later, on their thirteenth birthday, Father brought home a white rabbit in a hessian bag. Daisie was delighted, naming it Nicholas after *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, which they'd seen that past weekend. At first the creamy white creature slept in her bedroom inside a milk crate, but as Nicholas grew, Father's cramped flat in Worcester Park proved to be no place for pets.

'The hay and pellets attract cockroaches and mice,' he complained. 'And vermin beget more bloody vermin.'

Six months later the trial separation ended, and Edward and Daisie moved back into the family home in Kingston upon Thames. Nicholas and his hutch took up residence in the cramped courtyard. The Chettle family settled back into their old patterns, but in the space between words something had changed forever.

Father continued to choose Daisie over Violet, whether it was taking her for tandem rides on his beloved motorbike, a fire-engine red Norton 20 that had taken him longer to restore than the war had run, or bringing her to work for the day at the brickworks.

On her and Violet's sixteenth birthday Father gave Daisie a packet of Gold Flake and took great pleasure in teaching her the right way to hold, light and inhale a cigarette. She vomited most of the afternoon. But in time she took to it, giving them another shared interest that excluded Violet. She'd worked out that deep down Father had wanted a boy, at least one, and having twin girls had likely put paid to that.

In late November 1952, a few months after the girls turned eighteen, Nicholas contracted myxomatosis. The rabbit lost sight in his left eye and a large tumour started to form near his spine. Daisie knew that her beloved pet's days were numbered, and her father agitated for its end to be hastened.

On the first Friday in December a smog as thick as tar descended, choking London and darkening its already grey skies. The charcoal mist penetrated their freshly washed clothes, giving everything the odour of rotting eggs. As Daisie brought the pungent washing in she noticed that the hutch door was open and Nicholas was gone. Despite her father's protestations, she convinced her mother to go out looking, dragging her from front garden to parked car along Grove Lane and Alfred Road. Neighbours were recruited to join the search. Although it was only three o'clock in the afternoon, the light dwindled under the blanket of mist. She relied on the headlights of passing cars to search the wild privet shrubs that lined Hogsmill Lane in Kingston Cemetery.

'I can't see a thing. Perhaps we should return in the morning,' suggested Edith gently, her breath steaming in the cold, still air. 'He'll be fine overnight. Having the time of his life, I'd imagine.'

But Daisie ignored her, squinting in the faint light for any hint of the rabbit's snowy coat. Her back started to ache as she dashed from tree root to shrub, crouching under branches and driven by thoughts of the dogs and wild foxes that roamed the park at night.

'It's late. We have to go,' her mother insisted.

Edith sighed as Daisie pushed on, searching diligently in the murky stillness until she reached the intersection of Villiers Road, where a row of juniper shrubs offered an enticing haven for a frightened rabbit.

'He's here, I know it—'

Before the condensation from Daisie's breath had evaporated, Edith's foot caught on a spiky low branch. She stumbled forward through the shrub onto the roadway. The front wheel guard of a red double-decker rushed unseen from the mist, clipping her head and shoulders. Edith's body was flung with unnatural force against the granite cobblestones, where she stopped hard against the stone gutter.

It took an eternal moment for Daisie to accept what she had witnessed. The cracking sound of bone against rock found its home deep inside her.

The pastor told her not to blame herself, his intended gentle words of consolation shocking. Nobody else had mentioned fault, not even Father, for whom the rabbit was the sole culprit.

Except Violet. Resentment bristled in the silences she served in her daily routine to remind Daisie where the blame rested. Their relationship shifted into the darkness. Daisie didn't have the fortitude to push back, so the guilt lodged, numbing her sense of self and virtue to a new normal.

The House of Commons later reported that more than six thousand Londoners lost their lives to the respiratory effects of the six-day Great Smog of December 1952. Edith was the only victim of the smog who did not pass to hypoxia.