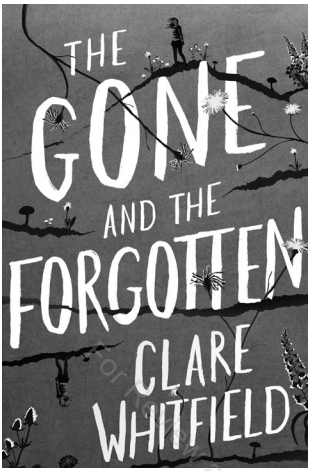


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A missing girl. Buried family secrets. An absent father. Is the truth worth searching for?

Summer, 1993. In the aftermath of her mother's suicide attempt, 16-year-old Prue must spend the summer holidays on a remote island in the Shetlands with her favourite aunt, Ruth, and Uncle Archie, a man she's barely met since her aunt married him. Prue hopes to re-establish the relationship, and that her aunt might help her understand some of the parts of the past she has been forbidden to discuss by her mother – including the identity of her father.

Prue soon finds out that her uncle was the only suspect in the disappearance of a local girl some twenty years ago. As she grows closer to him, she learns there are differing views on how the beguiling Evelyn O'Hara disappeared, but is her uncle innocent?

Truth is something Prue has always had a fractured relationship with. A single version of the truth seems impossible for her to lock down...



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Clare Whitfield is a UK-based writer living in a suburb where the main cultural landmark is a home store/Starbucks combo. She is the wife of a tattoo artist, mother of a small benign dictator and relies on a black Labrador for emotional stability. She has been a dancer, copywriter, amateur fire breather, buyer and mediocre weight lifter. Her first novel, *People of Abandoned Character*, was a Goldsboro book of the month.

THE GONE AND THE FORGOTTEN

CLARE WHITFIELD

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An Apollo Book

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT
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Dedicated to all the bewildered, waiting for something to make sense.

It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are.
Saint Teresa of Avila

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Croydon, South London, June 1993

'A lot has happened, Prue, and you've dealt with it incredibly well,' said Aunt Ruth. 'Most teenagers wouldn't have coped with what you have. You deserve a holiday.'

Prue was meant to respond but couldn't bring herself to speak; thankfully, the crackle of a bad connection filled the telephone line.

'You're very quiet. Are you all right? Sorry, that's a stupid question, of course you're not all right,' said Ruth.

'No, I am. I'm fine,' said Prue. 'Honestly I'm… What were you saying?'

'You don't have to come and stay with us if you don't want to,' said Ruth. Which meant it was imperative that she went. 'I don't want you to feel as if you are being coerced.' Although that was exactly what it felt like. 'We are all still grieving Nana and with your mum having another one of her… episodes…' Ruth trailed off.

'I can cope,' said Prue. 'I'm older now and Mum will need me when she gets out of hospital. I'd love to come

and stay with you, but I don't think a holiday right now is—'

'But Archie was so looking forward to having you here. We've been married three years now and you barely know each other, and you've never been to see where we live.' Prue very much doubted her uncle was jumping up and down in anticipation of his sixteen-year-old niece coming to stay. The man had barely acknowledged her existence the handful of times they'd met.

'And your mum won't be coming straight home after she's discharged,' said Ruth. Now this was new information.

'What? Where's she going?'

'Rehab, a rehabilitation centre,' said Ruth. 'Your mum agreed it would be a good idea to try a professional approach and she'll be admitted for three months. We're going to get her proper help this time.'

Professional help was a possibility now Nana was gone. If she were still alive, she'd never let it happen. Nana hated psychiatry, psychology and any other counselling mumbo jumbo; she was of the 'suffering is a virtue' generation.

'But what about the flat?' Prue's mind raced to all the routine chores and tasks that she took care of. 'What about making sure the rent is paid on time? What about sorting the mail? The boiler keeps going out by itself and there's a trick to getting the pilot light back on.'

'Remember my friend Anna in Clapham? She's going to come and pick up your key and deal with all of that. You're sixteen years old, Prue, this is your last summer before sixth form college and you should be enjoying yourself, not fretting about boilers. Let me worry about the flat, I promise everything will be there when you get back.'

There came another wave of crackles along the line as Prue tried to find the courage to say what she was thinking.

'Is there something else?' said Ruth.

'No,' she said. 'No, I don't think so.'

They said their goodbyes and Prue put the handset down and spun around to face Subo, who was staring straight at her from where she was perched at the top of the stairs for the duration of the call.

'Well?' asked Subo. 'What did she say? Is she going to let you stay here?'

Prue shook her head. 'No, she's still trying to make me go.'

Subo visibly deflated, resting her chin on her knees. The two had ambitious social plans they had hoped to get away with now Prue's mother was otherwise occupied. It was to be their one last summer of frivolous fun before starting A levels in September.

Prue had been staying at her best friend's house ever since her mother's suicide attempt had landed her in hospital. It had been a rare upside to all the disruption that spring of 1993 had brought. Subo Sittampalam's family were messy and loud, they laughed and argued, moving from one to the other at lightning speed. Subo and her hyper little brother complained about dinner every night and their mother would shout at them to shut up unless they wanted to cook themselves and call them ungrateful brats, then grab and kiss them on the forehead as she threw full plates down in front of them. Their father, the fatigued patriarch, forever seemed to be skulking about the house, filling holes in the wall with filler or demanding possession of the remote control for the television he had paid for. Prue was fascinated by him, the

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way he flung down the newspaper and shouted *That's it! I've had enough!* when the chaos became too much. Despite the threats nothing ever happened, and he moved slowly from room to room, muttering about his failing eyesight, back or knees.

Prue cursed herself for not speaking up to Ruth. She could have put her foot down, she *was* sixteen, but she didn't want to upset her aunt. The perpetual need to please hard wired into her bones.

The girls stomped back upstairs to Subo's bedroom as her father shouted from where he was wedged into his favourite armchair.

'Girls! Please! Ladies are meant to be light on their feet!?'

Back in the bedroom Subo turned on Radio One and it played SL2's 'On a Ragga Tip', as Prue wedged a chair under the door handle and dragged the vintage hatstand in front of the door. Subo sat cross-legged on the carpet and took the prepared tray from under the bed which had the little pre-rolled spliffs hidden between an old copy of *NME* with The Shamen on the cover. Prue opened the sash window and sat down on the sill with a leg up.

'You're not saying much,' said Subo.

'This is the problem, isn't it? I didn't say anything, as per usual.'

'Tell her you want to stay here. We could always get my mum involved. You know she'd love to stick her nose in, and she loves having you – she thinks you're a good influence on me.' Subo pushed Prue's foot off the windowsill and sat next to her.

'I probably should go,' said Prue. 'I've never visited them up there, but—'

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'But what?' said Subo, lighting the mini-spliff, inhaling and blowing the smoke out of the window.

'If only I could stay with my dad like a normal person – if I knew who he was, that is. I still can't get my head around the fact no one will even talk to me about him, and I'm meant to pretend it's normal.'

Subo shrugged. 'I don't understand why you can't ask Ruth about it, I thought you were close to her. Surely you can at least ask her *why* you don't have a relationship with your own father?'

'I do. I did. We're not as close as we were but we still talk on the phone, and I get on better with Ruth than I do my mum.'

'Then why didn't you ask her?'

'Because it's my family, there are things, entire subjects and people, that we aren't allowed to talk about. Number one – he who shall not be named. I bottled it, I was too scared to bring him up when I was on the spot, I'm rubbish on the phone.'

'Then write her a letter. That way you can set the agenda and she can't talk over you or make you feel guilty, so you end up not saying what you want to.'

It was an idea. Prue took the spliff from Subo.

'What would I write?'

'Er… Dear Ruth, you know how we're not allowed to acknowledge the existence of my biological father? Well, now that my grandmother is dead and we can clearly see my mum is madder than a box of frogs, do you think I can find out who he is? And by the way, I'm going to stay with Subo in London rather than come to Narnia, or wherever it is you live.'

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'If only it were that easy,' said Prue.

'What is this place called anyway?'

'The isle of Noost.'

'Never heard of it,' said Subo, taking the spliff back and waving the smoke out the window with her hands.

'No one has. It's in Shetland.'

'Scotland?'

'It's not even Scotland. It's miles away, floating in the sea in between Scotland and Norway.'

'Norway?! What the fuck!'

'Barely anyone lives there.'

'Sounds boring.'

'It's not even on the main island where most people live. Noost is another smaller island all by itself – that's where Ruth lives. I'd have to get to Aberdeen, take a ferry overnight to Shetland, then get another ferry to Noost. Narnia probably has better links.'

Subo stubbed the mini-spliff out on the ledge and Prue shut the window. They would only risk smoking short little stubbies to avoid getting caught. They moved the chair away from the door, put the hatstand back and flopped down on the double bed they shared.

'You can't go there,' said Subo after a long pause both had spent contemplating summer without the other. 'What will I do without my wingman?'

'You mean your pet nerd.'

'You make me seem like I have hidden depths.'

'I help you with your homework.'

'It's not all one-way. When I met you, you were still wearing virgin socks Do you remember those god-awful white knee-highs with patterns made of holes?'

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'God, I know. Tragic.'

'I practically saved you from years of bullying.'

'What would I do without you?'

There was a knock at the bedroom door and they both leapt off the bed. Prue kicked the tray back under the bed as Subo span around trying to find the deodorant.

'I can smell it, you know,' Subo's mother hissed through the door. 'If your father catches you, he'll skin you alive. Prudence – I expected more from you.'

Subo doubled over laughing in silence as Prue winced. She couldn't stand disappointing people's mothers and she hated being told off, full stop.

Later that evening they spent several hours drafting various letters to send to Ruth. It was past midnight when they eventually agreed on the final version.

Dear Ruth,

I thought it best to write as I feel more able to express my feelings on paper than I can on the phone. I hope you understand that this is a difficult subject for me to bring up with you so please try not to be angry with me. I only ask because for years now I have been aware that my father must be out there somewhere, but I have never been allowed to talk about him as it would have upset Nana and Mum. But I am sixteen now, technically an adult, and I realise that this might be difficult, and I have also considered that the man who is my father may not want to talk to me, but I have to know who he is, even if it turns out he doesn't want to know me. I think it might be best if I stay in London this summer at

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Subo's house and see if I can find out who he is. If you know anything or have a name or an old address, or any information that could help me find him, then I would be really grateful if you would tell me. You must know something.

Yours,

Prue

PS: Please try not to be angry with me.

Prue started sweating as she sealed the envelope and still couldn't believe she was really going to send it. The next morning, as she was having doubts, Subo marched her to the red letterbox at the end of the road and, without warning, snatched the letter from her clammy hands and posted it. As soon as it dropped Prue felt sick, but perhaps this was what had to happen for things to change.

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