Bright Girls

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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One

The Arrival

There was no one to meet us at the station, which didn't surprise me. My only distinct memory of Auntie Jackie, along with various hints dropped by Dad, had convinced me that she wasn't a hundred per cent reliable.

Rachel and I stood on the forecourt with our luggage, in the evening sunshine, scanning the cars as they pulled in to collect or deposit passengers, our attention continually drawn away down the hill to the horizon and the blue wedge of sea. Living in Oxford, almost as far from a proper beach as you can get in Great Britain, we had only been to the coast on a handful of occasions, and the seaside still seemed something full of mystery and promise.

"Would you recognise her?" I asked, when the crowd of commuters had melted away and no one had come forward to claim us.

Rachel nodded. "Old people don't change that much," she said confidently. (Auntie Jackie is thirty-nine.)

After about five minutes, a man approached us. This often happens when I'm out with Rachel. "Are you all right, ladies? You're looking a bit lost." He was wearing an open-necked shirt, white trousers and flip-flops, revealing horribly craggy male toes. A pair of mirrored sunglasses, which replaced his eyes with blank discs of sky, made him look more unsavoury still.

"We're fine thanks. We're just waiting for a lift," said Rachel, giving more information than I felt was strictly necessary.

"You look familiar," he said to her, undeterred. "Are you off the telly?"

She laughed and shook her head. "'Fraid not."

"Oh well." He sauntered off, with the swinging arms and sucked-in stomach of a man who thinks he's being watched.

"Creep," muttered Rachel.

"Did you see his feet?" We both shuddered.

A minute or so passed. "We could phone, I suppose,"

said Rachel, who was generally reluctant to waste her credit on practical matters. "Only my battery's a bit low." She had been firing off texts almost constantly since we'd got on the train at Victoria, so this was hardly news.

From the chaos of her bag she produced a piece of paper on which Dad had written Auntie Jackie's address and phone number, and passed it across to me. My phone was, of course, topped up and fully charged for just this sort of eventuality because I am the Sensible One.

I thumbed in the number and it rang and rang unanswered. "She must be on her way."

We sat at the bus stop to wait, our feet propped on our suitcases, determined not to waste the last of the day's sunshine. Although it was after six it was still warm and Rachel rolled her skirt up as far as it could go and still be called a skirt – to soak up the maximum amount of dangerous UVB.

We'd set off from home before lunch and I was surprised how tired I was, considering that I'd been sitting down almost all day on one train or another. I suppose it was that two-hour interlude in London, lugging my suitcase the length of Oxford Street while Rachel was bargain hunting in the summer sales. Her case was one of those zippy new ones on wheels – an eighteenth-

birthday present which she'd considered thoroughly uninspiring at the time, but was rather pleased with now that she'd seen my struggles. Mine was an ancient family heirloom which obviously predated the invention of the wheel, as it had to be carried everywhere – all twenty kilos of it. I was seriously considering ditching it at the end of the summer and posting my clothes back home in Jiffy bags. That's if we ever got home of course.

"Oh, this is ridiculous. Let's get a cab," said Rachel. A bank of bright cloud had boiled up over the rooftops, throwing our bench into the shade, so there was no point in further sunbathing. "You've got the money, haven't you?"

Dad had handed me a bundle of notes as we said our goodbyes on the station platform that morning. I resisted the temptation to count them straightaway, in case it looked grasping. "I'm giving it to you to look after because Rachel would spend it before you were halfway to Brighton," he said. She had overheard this and protested, so he'd relented and given her fifty quid of her own, which she had blown in Topshop at Oxford Circus.

"What if she turns up and we're not here?" I asked. I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot.

"Well, it's her fault for being so late."

She set off at a brisk pace towards the taxi rank, wheeling her case, while I staggered behind. The driver sprang out of the car and almost fell up the kerb in his haste to help her put the bags in the boot.

"Where to, ladies?" he asked.

"Cliff Street," I said, consulting Dad's scrap of paper again, wondering how far away it was, and how much of that precious £100 it would cost.

"Here on holiday, are we?" he said over his shoulder as he swung out into the traffic. Rachel and I exchanged significant looks.

"Not exactly," she replied. We were both remembering Dad's instructions: *Don't tell anyone in Oxford where you're going, and don't tell anyone in Brighton why you're there. You don't need to lie. Just be vague.*

"Oh, I don't mind lying," Rachel had volunteered cheerfully. "That's the fun bit."

TWO



The Neighbours

The inside of the cab smelled strongly of pine air-freshener, and the radio was tuned to drive-time on one of those easy-listening stations that refuse to play eighties music because it's too modern. I meant to pay attention to the route so I'd know how to find my way around, but after a right and a left I lost concentration because a thought had just struck me. If there was no one at Auntie Jackie's to answer the phone, then presumably there would be no one there to answer the doorbell either. This complication didn't seem to have occurred to Rachel, who was sitting back, admiring the view, thoroughly at ease in her favourite form of transport.

29 Cliff Street was a tall, terraced house with railings

outside and a basement window below the level of the pavement. Once white, it was now streaked with grey – not unlike a cliff in fact. There was a general air of shabbiness about the street, which made me feel quite sad. While I produced a ten-pound note from the mugger-proof zip pocket of my trousers, the driver unloaded the cases and carried them up to the front door – a piece of chivalry worth every penny of his 50p tip.

As I'd predicted, there was no one at home. A Post-it note had been stuck over the doorbell. BROKEN, PLEASE KNOCK it said in ink so faded that it suggested a long-standing problem. Rachel rapped forcefully on the knocker, and when this produced no results, shouted, "Hello?" through the letter box, snapping one of her fingernails as the flap sprang back, which didn't improve her mood. "If only we didn't have these stupid cases, we could go back into town and sit in a café," she said, nursing her squared-off nail. She gave the knocker a last, defiant rap and the whole thing came off in her hand. "Oh, great."

As if in response to this disturbance, the front door of the neighbouring house opened and an elderly woman appeared on the step. She was wearing a flowery dress and an inside out cardigan, and holding a tray of flapjacks

which, for some mysterious reason, she tipped into the paper recycling box beside her. As she straightened up with some effort, she caught sight of us over the dividing wall. "Hello? Are you looking for Janice?" she said. Then, before we could correct her, added, "She went out in the car about an hour ago. She was going to get some shopping and then pick up some visitors at the station."

"Well, we are the visitors," said Rachel. "She didn't turn up so we got a taxi. But there's no one in."

The woman peered over the wall at our cases. "Oh. Did you knock loudly? Charlie might be in – he sleeps during the day."

Rachel and I exchanged looks. This was the first we'd heard of any "Charlie".

"We shouted through the letter box and everything," I said.

"Oh dear, well, you can't wait out on the doorstep. Come in here and have a cup of tea until Janice gets back."

If I wasn't such a polite person, and so desperate for a drink, I would have said no thanks, but the old woman had already turned back into the house so there was nothing for it but to follow, carrying our bags down the steps on to the pavement again and back up through next door's gate.

I could sense Rachel beginning to simmer. Unless she had a cast-iron excuse on her eventual return, Auntie Jackie was likely to get an earful.

Our hostess was waiting in the long hallway, beckoning us down a flight of stairs to the basement. "Leave your cases by the front door," she sang out before hobbling ahead on feet so swollen it looked as though someone had filled her tights up with sand. "I'll get my grandson to carry them round for you later."

She was already filling an aluminium kettle from a rubber-snouted tap when we came into the room, which was exactly like a mock-up of a 1950s kitchen from a museum of domestic life. There was a free-standing stove and an enamel round-cornered fridge the colour of very old teeth. Beneath our feet the brown and orange checked lino rose and fell in a series of ripples, crackling slightly where we trod. A Welsh dresser looked ready to collapse under the weight of mountains of crockery, teapots, china ornaments, candlesticks, figurines, polished stones and bits of driftwood. From among this collection the old lady selected a porcelain urn, and ignoring the rising shriek of the kettle, measured out four teaspoons of black dust into a teapot.

"You must have one of my flapjacks," she said, prising

the lid off a biscuit tin which proved to contain nothing but a pile of used envelopes. She looked at them, mystified, for a second or two before laying the tin aside with a shrug. "How about a ham sandwich?" she said brightly.

"No, thank you. Just tea would be lovely," said Rachel, gesturing urgently towards the billows of steam pouring from the still-wailing kettle.

The old lady dived for the hob and snapped the gas off, and the room fell silent again. When she had tipped what was left of the boiling water on to the tea leaves, she wrenched open the fridge door and produced a sliced loaf and various cellophane packages, and began buttering bread, very fast, deaf to our protests.

Her task done, she turned back to us, beaming, holding a plate of limp sandwiches cut into eight triangles, the white bread still bearing the dimpled impression of her fingers. "There we are." She looked at us expectantly.

"Thank you," I said, helping myself to the least mauled of the triangles, and glaring at Rachel until she followed suit. The ham tasted slightly fishy. Perhaps it wasn't ham, I decided. Perhaps it was some form of beige, pressed fish. I ate two of the sandwiches, while Rachel nibbled

delicately at the crust of her first one, and wondered how many we could leave on the plate without giving offence. I knew Rachel had no intention of sharing the obligation fifty-fifty: she tended to have sudden crippling attacks of vegetarianism on these occasions. The tea, at least, tasted recognisable, even if it was served in bone china cups so tiny they must have come from a teddy bears' picnic.

"I wonder if we ought to have left a note on Auntie Jackie's front door," Rachel was saying, using this as an excuse to lay down her sandwich. "She won't know we're here."

"Oh, yes. Perhaps we'd better go and see if she's back," the old lady agreed, as the two of us leapt to our feet. "It's been lovely to meet you," she said to me as we made our way along the corridor, and added confidentially, "I know your mother, you know." And I now realised what had been dawning on me, oh so slowly, all the time I had been in the house: she was completely and utterly mad.

As we reached the front door, it was pushed open by a guy of about nineteen who was holding a bicycle which he had evidently just carried up the steps. He had curly hair and thin oblong glasses and was dripping with sweat. We stood aside to let him pass into the house. He

propped his bike against the wall and wiped his forehead on the edge of his T-shirt.

"Hello, dear," said the old woman. "This is my grandson, Adam," she explained. "These girls have come to visit Janice."

"Jackie," said Adam, not loudly enough for her to hear. He gave us an apologetic look.

"I said you'd carry their cases round for them later."

"Oh, there's no need," said Rachel quickly. "We can manage. We've carried them halfway across London already."

Well, I did, I thought. *You wheeled yours.*

"It's no trouble," said Adam.

"If we could just have a piece of paper, we could leave a note to say where we are," said Rachel, fishing in her bag for a biro.

"Why don't you just borrow the spare key," said Adam, selecting one from a row of hooks on the wall beside him. Rachel and I looked at each other.

"Do we have a key to Janice's?" his grandmother said. "I didn't know we had a key."

"She gave it to us because Charlie kept locking himself out."

The old woman looked blank. "Who's Charlie?"

This bewildering exchange was interrupted by the *whoop*

of a siren which grew to a crescendo and then stopped as a police car pulled up at the kerb, lights flashing. The passenger door opened and a woman in a strappy sundress clambered out, showing rather a lot of leg. Her chunky calves were laced almost to the knee into high, cork-heeled espadrilles. She had long plum-coloured hair plaited into dozens of thin braids and gathered up into a sprouting ponytail high on her head. A pair of heavy chandelier earrings dragged at her earlobes. She flew up the steps towards us, blethering apologies.

Auntie Jackie.