The Bell House

Ruth Hamilton

ONE

Madeleine Horrocks was renowned for two things.

Her parents ran a pair of businesses judged by locals a 'queer combination' and Madeleine herself was far too pretty and outspoken for a good Catholic girl with a grammar school scholarship under her belt. She took little notice of people's opinions, was usually sunny, especially when arguing with an adult, and she made no bones about her ambitions. She was going to be a famous actress, or a famous writer, or a famous something-or-other. The something-or-other changed with the wind and she wasn't particular as long as the word 'famous' could be woven into her personal tapestry.

Amy Bradshaw, as dark as Madeleine was fair, was a total contrast to her special friend. Quiet by nature, made quieter by parents who had had no business producing a child so late in life, Amy was a dependable sort. She, too, had won a scholarship to the Catholic grammar school and she would be accompanying Madeleine on two buses, one into Bolton, the other up Deane Road to the convent of St Anne's, where, under the rather less than gentle guidance of Cross and Passion nuns, she would be educated towards teaching, law or some other respectable profession.

It was the last day of school. The two friends stood side by side outside the gates of the Holy Martyrs' Infant and Junior School, each of them blinking back a few tears.

'It's a bit like dying,' said Amy, 'as if that part of us has passed on. In July 1951, we stopped being the people we were.'

Madeleine, too, was upset, though she hid it well, as was her wont. 'Well, I'm not ready for my dad yet, are you?'

'No,' replied Amy, 'but what I mean is, we die in bits. Chunks. We can never go back in there, because Amy Bradshaw and Madeleine Horrocks are not on the register any more.' She glanced sideways at her companion. 'On our notes at the doctor's, there is a space at the top called "date of death".'

'Start worrying when they fill it in,' said Maddy. 'We're only eleven.' Not for the first time, she added, 'Amy, you read too much of what your mother tells you to read.'

'Jinny Anderson died when she was twelve,' replied Amy. 'Mam was there when they filled that space in. She said it was like looking into hell, because nothing can be worse than a child dying of cancer. Even the doctor cried.'

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Maddy shook her head, causing blond curls to tumble into her eyes. She swept them back with a careless movement. 'Your mother and my dad have very sad jobs. She sees people sick and my dad sees them dead - and we have to make the best of things. That's what my mother says, anyway.'

Maddy's mother, the local hairdresser, saw and heard a great deal. In fact, between the four of them, the Bradshaw and Horrocks parents knew just about everything connected to their village. John Horrocks was the undertaker, his wife was the local stylist, while Amy's mother and father worked for the doctor and the post office respectively.

The two girls turned their back on infancy and walked away from the school gates. They passed St Faith's, the local Church of England, and noticed the boy. He was there every day at this time. Perched on top of the ancient stone wall, he sat for hours on end, his heels beating a rhythm against the sandstone blocks. Even darker than Amy, he wore an air of mystery, because his family had come from abroad and the circumstances which had brought his parents and grandmother to England were unusual, to put it mildly.

'What about his shoes?' Amy asked. 'My mother would kill me if I did that. He must spoil them.'

Maddy shrugged. 'Well, he's lucky to be alive. They escaped from somewhere just before the war started. I suppose they're not bothered about shoes. Anyway, my mother says they have loads of money.'

Amy slowed down and placed her hand on Maddy's arm. 'Stop a minute. They're not Germans, are they?'

'Polish. Warsaw, I think,' replied Maddy. 'And Jewish.'

Amy sighed. 'They killed Jesus, didn't they?'

Madeleine, an avid reader herself, had formed her own views on that subject. 'The Romans had a lot to do with it. And Rome is where the pope is, so even Catholics aren't all that clean. Anyway, Jesus had to die. My dad said it was written into His contract.' She frowned. In religious education, she and her classmates had been taught about free will, that special God-given treasure visited upon mankind and only upon mankind. If Pontius Pilate and Herod had decided not to kill Jesus, then what might have happened? And if Jesus had really been sent by the Father to die, wouldn't that have involved the influence of God to a point where free will became meaningless?

'Maddy?'

'What?'

'The Jews are condemned to wander the face of the earth,' whispered Amy. 'It's in the Bible.' Amy's parents were devout Catholics. With their own hearts hardened against

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the Jews, they had instilled in their daughter the belief that Catholicism was the only route to heaven. 'They can never be forgiven.'

'Don't be silly.' Maddy marched on. She owned her thoughts, yet the language in which she might express herself often evaded her. Sometimes, though, she lost patience with Amy. Amy listened too much, took notice of everything she was told, had been forced by her family into a straitjacket within a religion that was already rigid. He was just a boy; a boy who talked posh, but just another young male person. Before she reached his place on the wall, Maddy crossed the road and Amy caught up with her. 'Sorry,' breathed Amy, 'but it's just that they say at home-'

'Oh, stop it.' Maddy placed her heavy school satchel on the ground. 'The Jews have got their own homeland. And that boy's family escaped from the Nazis just before the war started. Hitler killed millions of Jews - and other people as well. So, was Hitler right?'

Amy shook her head.

'Then there's your answer. The lad over there lost uncles and aunties - my mother said so. She said his mam and dad feel guilty because they never got gassed. They are alive, Amy, but only by the skin of their teeth. According to Mrs Shuttleworth, another ten days and they would have been goners. But they got to London and the dad worked translating stuff for the War Office. Now they're here and you can please yourself, but I am going to make friends with him during the holidays.' Even for Madeleine Horrocks, this had been a long speech. She picked up her bag. She should walk across there now, right this minute, but Mother was expecting her home.

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