

A BIT OF EARTH

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BLOOMSBURY

I

AN ORGAN WOULD BE too loud for a child's funeral. As the pianist played *Morningtown Ride* the coffin was carried out, tiny and horribly small. He was a slight boy. Couldn't have made it past three stone.

*Maybe it is raining
Where our train shall ride,
All the little travellers are warm and snug inside.
Rocking, rolling, riding . . .*

Or never warm and never snug ever again. There were flower arrangements of a yellow digger and the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* with a watch that had now stopped for ever. The sun streamed through the stained glass, casting lozenges of light in sweetie-wrapper colours across the flagstones.

Susannah woke, clawing at the pillow, finding that here it was sunshine and day. She lurched out of bed and across the landing to Felix's bedroom. He was asleep. The sunshine couldn't penetrate the curtains she had made for his room.

They had thermal as well as black-out linings, for Susannah was a worrier. She gently sat down on the end of his bed, and picked up Marmalade, his toy cat. Felix woke.

'Hello Mummy. Is it morning?'

'Just about. You can stay in bed for a while longer if you like.' She hugged him and wondered, yet again, why he always smelled faintly of mice. 'I'm going to make your Ready Brek. I'll call you. We don't want to be late.'

Susannah and Felix were never late for nursery. They took a short cut across the university and the botanical garden, often walking that far with Daddy, whose name was Guy. He was Professor Guy Misselthwaite, head of Botany, a department that was really only a side shoot of Biology and numbered just one and a half staff, himself and Jeanette, the secretary.

Quarter to eleven. They would probably be playing outside on the bikes and trikes by now. Susannah tried to blink away the images of her dream. Perhaps she had stayed too long in Victorian Literature. She wheeled her trolley of books to be re-shelved into the Gothic Architecture section. Felix would be fine. Felix was safe. He was probably playing in the sandpit, or on the climbing frame or, most likely, making friends with some woodlice or gazing in awe at the woolly caterpillars that had colonised the tree next to the nursery playground.

Professor Judy Lovage (History of Art), neat in her customary colours of a Siamese cat, smiled a 'good morning' as Susannah shelved the last of the books and pushed the trolley back towards the lifts.

Susannah Misselthwaite, part-time university library assistant, wife of Professor Guy Misselthwaite, and mother of

Felix (aged four and a half) sometimes forgot that she was an MA herself. She was mostly very content. Her morning was nearly over. She decided to catch the bus into town that afternoon. Felix needed some plain white polo shirts (five would be a good idea) before he started school. No point taking the car. It would be quicker and easier by bus.

Susannah had sometimes wished that she was one of those feckless mothers, like the ones in books or films. Perhaps she should try to be like the mother in *Hideous Kinky* and give Felix a nomadic childhood of heat and dust, unsuitable friends and adult company. Then she thought of threadbare monkeys cruelly forced to perform, and of snake charmers. She had once seen a French documentary about a snake charmer. He went into the Sahara and dug snakes from their holes. She hadn't really thought about it until then; hadn't imagined that snakes who were charmed had once been wild.

Susannah didn't realise that her international background already gave her a low-level but enduring glamour in the queue outside the nursery.

'Susannah,' they said, 'oh, she's half-Swedish.'

'I thought it was German.'

'No, but her family live in Germany.'

'She speaks five languages.'

'And Felix is learning most of them.'

The chorus shrugged and gave half-smiles at yet another instance of their own maternal inadequacy.

Felix's nursery session finished at 3 p.m. Some mummies would arrive early and stand outside juggling fractious

babies or swaying from one Birkenstock to the other. Susannah would be one of these (minus the baby and sometimes the Birkenstocks). Then there were the 'on time' ones who always arrived exactly as the doors opened. There was also the late late crowd, who either sprinted in apologising every day, or most often sauntered in, unaware of the possible shame and anxiety caused to their offspring, who were left alone on the story mat or hiding under the climbing frame. Susannah would never have been one of these late ones. She thought that she had detected an edge, a barb, in the nursery ladies' voices.

'Oh, I expect Mummy's just caught in a traffic jam, again . . .'

'Don't worry, Bethany, Daddy's probably just in a long queue at the supermarket, like last week . . .'

Felix had once burst into tears at a book read on *Tweenies*. A little boy's mummy is late and he imagines she has gone to buy another boy or been eaten by a crocodile. She would never, ever, put Felix through that.

What if one day the nursery ladies said something like 'Daddy's in the pub' or 'Mummy prefers being at the gym to being with you'? But she could see that they just wanted to get the sand swept up, and get home to make their own children's tea.

There were stern warnings issued in writing when children were enrolled. If you were twenty minutes late they would telephone the emergency contacts you had given. If those people weren't available, the duty officer at Social Services would be informed, and if you still hadn't arrived after half an hour, your child would be handed over to the authorities. Would they really do that? Surely one of

them would just take the uncollected child home with them. She hadn't discussed this possibility with any of the other mothers. After all, who would be more than twenty minutes late with their emergency contacts uncontactable? And who but Susannah, Library Lady, Uber-Organised Person Extraordinaire, would have bothered to read this small print anyway?

As she reached the stop she saw a bus pulling away. Never mind. It wouldn't matter. She had plenty of time. She could get right round the shops and be back in time to collect Felix. She sat down on one of the mean little flip-down seats, the only person waiting. Perhaps it was worth missing the bus so as not to have to stand in a crowd of students. Professor Lovage was walking towards her, smiling and swinging her bag in a girlish, carefree way. Susannah smiled too.

'Off into town?' Professor Lovage asked.

'I just need the last few things for Felix starting school, some white polo shirts.'

'A big step,' said Professor Lovage. 'Is he looking forward to it?'

'I'm not sure. He doesn't seem to have much sense of time, so I don't think he holds the idea in his head much. But some of the children he knows from nursery will be going.'

'I'm sure he'll be all right then. Good luck with the shopping.'

'Thank you.'

Professor Lovage walked on, thinking that she should

really go into town too. There were a lot of things she needed to do, birthdays coming up and so on. But the thought of her garden in summer was just too tempting. She would rather expend her energies there. The watering and tying back and hoeing, and sitting on her little bench, seemed much more important than shopping.

Susannah stared up the road. Still no sign of a bus. Students were starting to gather and bunch up at the stop. When it finally came it would be crowded after all.

'Oh look, a backhoe loader!' she told herself as one passed. It might take her a long time to break the habit of commenting on all the heavy plant and construction vehicles she saw. Felix was now old enough not only to name them all accurately himself, but to be unimpressed by all but the most enormous or unusual. Here at the university, with its constant expansion and improvements, even giant wheel loaders were two a penny.

She quietly wished that there was another little boy, a brother for Felix, to continue the hobby with. Or a little sister. But no more babies had arrived, and she and Guy would have found any kind of treatment too intrusive. They no longer talked about it.

A car of astonishing beauty pulled up, an Alfa Romeo Spider in a metallic Mediterranean blue. The driver was Julius East, Head of Spanish.

'Where are you off to, Susannah?'

'Just shopping in the city.'

'Fancy a ride?'

She paused, too polite to accept eagerly, too polite to refuse.

'I'm sure my bus will be along soon . . .'

'You prefer a bus to this?' He smiled at her slowly, knowing that she would accept. She stood there on the pavement, unsure, whilst he got out and came round to open the passenger door. It was a long time since anyone had done that for her.

'In you get.'

'Thank you.'

The seats were made of the softest leather that Susannah had ever felt. She supposed that there was some glossy brochure/car-showroom name for that colour. 'Tan' sounded too pedestrian. And what kind of animal had it once been? Susannah worried that she might mark the seats somehow. So lucky she hadn't been wearing jeans. What if the rivets had ripped them? But she supposed that people who drove cars like this must sometimes wear trousers with rivets too.

The seats were so low that she felt as though she were sitting on the road.

'Relax,' he said. 'You have your knees all pulled up. You're hugging them as though you're a schoolgirl. Perhaps you are. You do look so young, Susannah. Too young to be married to a professor of botany.'

'Oh, I'm really very old,' said Susannah. But she stretched out her legs. 'This is a beautiful car.'

'It's new. If you have time, we'll just take a detour, then you'll see what it's really like.'

Her hair was whipped back and then forwards again into her eyes. It might be turned to string by the time they arrived. She pushed it behind her ears again and again.

'In there,' he indicated the glove compartment with a slight thrust of his chin, 'there's a scarf you can borrow.' She

wouldn't have been surprised if he kept a pair of gloves there too. The thought of gloves in a glove compartment pleased her, and she smiled. The scarf was a long thin rectangle of heavy white silk. She placed it over her hair and knotted it at the nape of her neck, wondering who it belonged to. Perhaps he just kept it there for whichever woman (or more likely, pretty student) he happened to pick up. She could feel his eyes on her legs. She placed her bag primly on her knees.

They were in the forest now. She wondered when they would turn back.

'I have to get some polo shirts for Felix. He's starting school soon.'

'You will have time on your hands.'

She looked down at her hands, as though she might see time growing there, some sort of silky golden fur. Or perhaps it would be thyme, with pretty little stems coiling around her fingers. But her hands were unchanged, slim, neat and pink. She had a French manicure. The idea of having your nails painted so that they looked like nails pleased her as well.

She looked out of the window – fields, ponies, more trees, and hedgerows gorgeous with butterflies, betony, ragwort, chamomile, and sun spurge. They zoomed past cow parsnip and earthnut pea, so much prettier than their names. The sky was much brighter out here.

'The sky is bluer out here, don't you think?' she said, gazing upwards. There were three aeroplanes leaving wonderful paths across the sky. 'Once when Felix saw some of those vapour trails he said, "Mummy, the clouds are lining up!"'

He smiled. She could tell that he was smiling, but she didn't look across, she just kept looking up. And that was why Susannah didn't see the deer, or know that he was going to swerve to avoid it. She never knew what had happened.