

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Birthday Party

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

Poppy's family is gathering to celebrate her eightieth birthday. Her children, grandchildren and even one great-grandchild are converging on her Sussex home. As she prepares to welcome them all, her mind goes back over her life - to her tough childhood in Yorkshire, to her mother, who scrimped and saved to bring her up decently, to her three husbands and to Alun, the great love of her life who was taken from her by the war. Yes, she has had a full life - a lot fuller than her family realises. As they toast their beloved matriarch, little do they know what an extraordinary and often shocking life she has led. . .

A warmly entertaining new novel from this greatly-loved bestselling author.

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About the Author

Also by Elvi Rhodes

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Acknowledgements

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1

POPPY AWAKENED RELUCTANTLY as the daylight, penetrating the too-thin curtains, hit her eyes. She turned her head towards the clock: 4.15 a.m. But then, she remembered, it was mid June; there was nothing one could do about dawn breaking at this uncivilized hour except buy thicker curtains. The trouble was, she knew from experience that she would be unable to fall asleep again, though she longed to do so with every bone and muscle in her body. She had had exactly four and a quarter hours sleep, and it was not enough with which to face the day.

When she had last looked at her radio clock it had shown eleven fifty. The clock had been a present from her ever-considerate daughter Beryl, and as far as Poppy was concerned it was a magic clock. It soothed her to sleep at night with the gentle music from Classic FM, then somehow, when it knew she was asleep, it switched itself off. She had never been awake to find out just when this happened. It was much the same thing as when she had sung lullabies to her babies, only ceasing to sing when she could see they were fast asleep. The clock had large illuminated figures which were intrusively bright in the darkness, but at least she didn't have to fumble among the litter on her bedside table looking for her glasses whenever she wanted to know the time.

She always wanted to know the time, as though she had to account for it, or be somewhere at a given hour, which was simply not true. She was free, should she so wish, to stay in bed every day until noon, though if she decided to do so even once, Edith Prince, who arrived promptly at eight

thirty three mornings a week to do the housework, would assume she was ill and would phone the doctor. I am not really free, Poppy thought. Most of all, she was not free from habit - a lifetime's habit of getting up at seven every morning.

She debated now, since she was awake, whether she would go along to the bathroom for a pee. But no, she decided; she would hang on. There was no point in starting another habit that would get her out of bed every morning, possibly for the rest of her life, at this unearthly hour.

She turned over, away from the light. It was not easy to turn because she was encumbered by a small pillow which her surgeon, Mr Barton-Foster, after her hip replacement a year ago, had told her she must place between her knees when she went to bed to prevent her crossing her legs, which was bad. She had not realized that she was an inveterate leg-crosser, and probably always had been, but Mr B.F., as he was affectionately known, had sussed it out in no time in the ten days she had spent in a rather posh hospital, courtesy of her good medical insurance.

On the whole, she thought as she heaved herself over while still trying to retain the pillow between her knees, and failing to do so, it was a good thing she slept alone: none of her husbands would have put up with a pillow between the knees. On the whole, it had not been a bad ten days, or at least not after the first two or three, when male nurses had given her bedpans, though they did it with complete detachment, chatting all the while. Wonderful food, a wide view of the Sussex Downs and the sea from her bed, a G and T before supper, lots of visitors bringing goodies - flowers, glossy magazines, toiletries and Belgian chocolates which, thankfully, a hip operation did not prevent her eating to her heart's content.

She pummelled her pillows into submission, pulled up the sheet around her shoulders, closed her eyes and determinedly invited sleep. It didn't come, of course. Sleep

is capricious. There she was, warm and reasonably comfortable, except for a few familiar aches here and there, everything conducive to sleep, yet it eluded her. If it had been the middle of the day, especially if she had been in boring company, she would have been clenching her jaws in an effort not to yawn her head off.

‘This will *not* do,’ she said after twenty futile minutes. ‘I am clearly not going to fall asleep, therefore I will concentrate on something else.’

She said the words out loud, as she often did, if only to assure herself that her voice was still there and had not faded away from lack of use. People living alone who were fortunate enough to have dogs or cats could use them as sounding boards, with at least the hope of a degree of response. Since Fred, her Yorkshire terrier, had gone to doggy heaven, she had not allowed herself to have another animal because, as she was old, it might outlive her and be as bereft as she had been after Fred’s death. So she talked to herself; sometimes she even answered herself.

There was no doubt in her mind as to what she would concentrate on. The day after tomorrow would be her eightieth birthday, for which Beryl – who else? – had arranged a family party to be held here. Everyone, it seemed, had accepted, except possibly Joe, who would come if he could. The possibility of Joe’s absence was a disappointment to Poppy, since her American grandson was the person she would most like to see. Still, it couldn’t be helped. He hadn’t said a definite no, and she would live in hope.

All three of her children would be there with their spouses – or, in Richard’s case, his partner. She was not sure Graham could be described as a spouse, though the two of them had lived together for some time, as happily as any married couple – her grandchildren, with or without their lovers, and even one great-grandchild, Daisy, who was four months old.

She looked forward to seeing Daisy. She hadn't seen her since her baptism, when she had been tiny, somewhat wrinkled and red with furious anger at what was going on. In retaliation for having water poured over her head she had been sick over the vicar's rather nice vestments.

Beryl and Rodney would be the advance party, arriving today from Bath in their caravan, which Beryl had pointed out would be useful because, as well as carrying some of the baked meats they were bringing with them, it would also sleep four.

I am not, at this moment, Poppy decided, burying her head further into the pillow as if to drive out the thought, going to try to work out where everyone will sleep. She had driven herself mad about that in the last week. I shall leave it to Beryl. In any case, they were mostly Beryl's brood, or their appendages, since Mervyn, Maria and Georgia were to stay at the Splendide. My daughter did well for herself, marrying Mervyn Levenson, Poppy thought.

It had all been quite swift. Maria had saved up enough money to pay her fare to New York, where she would stay for a month with a well-heeled American girlfriend she had met at university. There, within the first week, she had sat next to Mervyn at a dinner party. From that moment, according to what the friend let slip at a later date, she had pursued, captivated and snared Mervyn within the month, with only a day or two to spare before returning to England wearing a splendid engagement ring of sapphires and diamonds. She had stayed in England just long enough to shop for a wedding dress and pack her bags before flying back to New York.

Yes, her elder daughter had done well for herself – at least materially. Certainly better in that way than her sister, who had trained as a nurse, then married a teacher and was still nursing part time to make ends meet. Possibly, though, Beryl was the happier of the two. It was not easy to tell with Maria; she had a harder shell.

I do not want this celebration, Poppy thought suddenly. She was not one for birthdays, never had been, and what was so special about one's eightieth, except, perhaps, the fact that one had survived long enough to reach it? But Beryl had been the driving force in organizing it - and 'driving' was the right word, since she had succeeded in getting Maria and her family to come to England, and it was a long time since they had done so.

Possibly, Poppy thought, they had accepted because they had felt a degree of guilt. They needn't have done. Mervyn was a fashionable, clever dentist with a busy practice and Maria had thriving beauty salons. It was not easy for either of them to take time off, and even less for it to coincide with a particular date. It was more convenient for her to visit New York which, truth to tell, she preferred to do.

All the same, this party was apparently what her family wanted. She had not always done what her family wanted, perhaps she hadn't even always done what was best for them, so on her eightieth birthday she would. She would be compliant, co-operative and very, very good.

Somehow, after that firm resolve, she must have fallen asleep, because when she next looked at the clock it was seven thirty and the sun was streaming into the room. She sat up at once, flung off the duvet and swung herself round onto the edge of the bed in the manner of those who have gone through the hip business. Legs held straight and together, cutting an elegant arc through the air. These days she could get into the front seat of a car as elegantly as the Queen.

She was good at getting up; one minute fast asleep, the next open-eyed and conscious, ready to go. She was always curious about what the day might bring, and was usually resolved to spend it well and do at least several of the things that were crying out to be done. Letters to write, purchases to be made, clothes to take to the dry-cleaners, weeds to be eradicated. The fact that she seldom achieved

even half this programme didn't deter her from making a fresh one each morning.

It hadn't been like that when she was a girl. Her mother had almost had to drag her out of bed, and that pattern had followed with her own children, especially when they were teenagers. Richard had been the worst. He would have stayed in bed until teatime if she'd let him, and at weekends he'd grumbled when she wouldn't allow it.

She wriggled her feet into her slippers, not easily because her feet were always swollen first thing in the morning, and put on her summer dressing gown. She had dressing gowns for every season of the year because people gave them to her. Perhaps they thought them a suitable present for a lady getting on in years. 'Robes' Maria called them, which had a touch of splendour to it. This was a silky, floral affair with large, tawny chrysanthemums on a black background. She hoped she wouldn't be given any more on this birthday.

She toddled along to the bathroom, though not yet for her shower. That she would take when she'd had a cup of English Breakfast tea, a slice of wholemeal toast spread with Fortnum & Mason apricot preserve, and done *The Times* Two crossword. The fact that there was a great deal to do this morning was no reason to miss out on the crossword. At one time she had done the real *Times* crossword, not the easier one hidden away at the back with the sports news. She could no longer do that; perhaps it was a sign that she was getting old. Of course she never admitted to not doing it. 'Oh, yes,' she would say, 'I finish *The Times* crossword every day.' It was not entirely a lie, except to herself.

Minutes later she was seated at the kitchen table, toast in one hand, pen in the other, tea cooling in its mug while she attacked the crossword. 'Shine wetly', seven letters. That was easy. 'Talent; bent for', eight letters. Aptitude, of course. Talent seemed easy these days, she thought. Anyone could do anything, and not just one thing, either. You could be a concert pianist and sail around the world

single-handed in your spare time. You could be an Olympic athlete, and at the same time a well-known interior designer. Everyone could write books, or at least a book, except those who were too busy. 'I've always thought I could write a book,' they'd say, 'if only I had the time.' She had yet to hear anyone say, 'I've always thought I could be an opera singer if only I had the time.' So perhaps there were still a few things left which needed a special talent?

That was the thing about crosswords. The words set one's thoughts moving. And I will have to move more than my thoughts, she admonished herself. Edith would arrive quite soon, and later so would Beryl and Rodney, parking their caravan on the side lawn at the back.

Caravans were so middle-aged, but then, at fifty-three, so was Beryl. Though really my younger daughter has been middle-aged since she was about twelve, Poppy thought. She and Rodney were well matched, they had each chosen well and they were - she searched for the right word - happy would do, but contented was better. Well adjusted. She could not imagine either of them abandoning themselves to the heights of delirious passion, not even in the conception of their three children. Time, place, date of birth - which would include prospective weather at the season of the year - and financial obligations would all have been sensibly discussed. Beryl was nothing if not sensible. But also kind, Poppy reminded herself. So very kind. Today they would leave their home in Bath at the hour they'd previously decided on, and arrive here exactly three hours later. It would all go according to plan.

How come I have such an organized daughter? Poppy asked herself.

But then Beryl, and for that matter Maria, must have taken after their father. Edward would never have made all that lovely lolly had he not known what he was doing and where he was going. Her first husband's talent, and a most useful one at that, had been for making money.

What a pity he had not lived long enough to enjoy it, Poppy thought with a swift, affectionate memory of Edward. And how terribly unfortunate that his death had been so undignified, since he was easily the most dignified of her husbands. He had been sitting on the lavatory in his own house when a stray bomb jettisoned from a returning plane had badly damaged the house next door, and the blast had affected part of Edward's house. He had been hit by a small but lethal piece of flying debris. Caught with his pants down.

Poppy was out of the bathroom, drying her hair in the bedroom, when she heard Edith's arrival. She switched off the hairdryer and called out.

'I'll be down shortly, Edith.'

'Right ho, Mrs Marsh,' Edith shouted back.

Edith Prince had been coming to her for almost ten years. She had been recently widowed at the time and had, and still did, let it be known that, but for her husband's demise, there was no way she would be doing some other woman's housework.

'Henry would never have let me,' she said. 'He cherished me. A prince by name and a prince by nature, my Henry was.'

Poppy had quickly learned to let Edith believe she was doing her a favour by coming, and that her employer, in spite of paying quite good wages plus several small perks, was the recipient. Poppy didn't mind. It worked well, and anyway, what would she have done without Edith? She hated housework. Fortunately, through three marriages she had never had to do much.

Poppy herself had been widowed for the third time well before Edith came to work for her, and Edith mourned and sometimes shed a few tears for both of them. Poppy never liked to confess that, in her case, it was superfluous. Gregory Marsh had walked out two years before news had reached her of his death in an accident. Or rather, he had

taken a plane, and the local barmaid, and fled to Australia, taking his wife's pearls and a pair of diamond earrings with him. Poppy had been especially sorry about the pearls; they had been rather fine ones, given to her by Edward. The earrings she had bought herself and seldom wore. She should have sold them, or given them to one of her daughters, so in a way it served her right.

No, she had not minded the jewellery, or even Gregory, as such. She had been bored with him for quite some time before he flew away, and the idea of divorce had been flitting through her mind. It was the fact that *he* had left *her* which rankled. She was not used to things happening that way round.

She dressed now in a pair of well-cut black trousers and a long-sleeved T-shirt, combed through her hair, applied lipstick, a spot of eye shadow and the mascara without which she would not dream of facing the day. As she went down the stairs a shower of envelopes shot through the letterbox. She gathered them up and joined Edith in the kitchen.

'You get a lot of post,' Edith remarked, 'though it's nothing to what you'll get on the day.'

Poppy cleared a space on the kitchen table and started to open the post. Even though none of it looked important, she would have preferred to do it on her own, but she always spent a little time with Edith immediately after her arrival and it would look unfriendly not to do so. Added to which, Edith took a keen interest in who the post was from, no matter that she might not know the senders.

'I've put the coffee on,' Edith said. 'It's a bit early, but I thought you might be ready for it.'

There was nothing of interest in the post. One or two bills, the usual catalogues and charity appeals, and the once-a-fortnight envelope that told her, even before she opened it, that she was in line to win a quarter of a million pounds. Now *that* would be a nice birthday present! There was an

early birthday card from Maisie Carstairs. Every year they sent each other birthday and Christmas cards, though it was years since they had met in the flesh. Only once, in fact, since that ill-fated Mediterranean cruise Poppy had taken on a sudden whim. Ill-fated because it was there she had met Gregory Marsh, and under indigo-blue, starry skies, with the moonlight on the water and three powerful cocktails inside her, he had wooed and won her.

It had been Poppy's first and last cruise; she didn't take to the life, and though it was by no means Gregory's first, it was also his last, since he had found what he was looking for, the prize for which he had invested his meagre means: a well-to-do widow of fifty-one. She was his senior by quite a few years, but one couldn't have everything, and she was well-preserved, generous and amusing.

Yes, Poppy thought, reading Maisie's card, I have not seen her since she attended my wedding at Akersfield Registry Office. And would that she had never met her at all, for Maisie's vicarious interest in the love affair had done a great deal to drive it forward.

She tossed Maisie's card aside. It was the last she would hear from her until Christmas.

'So who's coming today?' Edith asked.

'Only Beryl and Rodney today,' Poppy said. 'Maria and her husband are flying into Heathrow tomorrow. I'm not sure what time they'll be here. Georgia will be with them, but even his own mother isn't sure about Joe. Joe is a law unto himself.'

'They are at that age,' Edith said indulgently.

She speaks as though he's a wayward sixteen-year-old, Poppy thought, even though he is twenty-four. But I will be disappointed if he doesn't come. She knew it was wrong, but among her children and grandchildren Joe was her favourite. Always had been. He was the only one who seemed to have anything of her in him. Not so much physically, though he had her dark eyes and fair

complexion, but because there was something of her temperament there. That might or might not be a good thing, of course.

'I thought you might be nipping off to the hairdresser's this morning,' Edith said.

'Tomorrow,' Poppy told her. 'I had lowlights and a cut ten days ago, so it's not too bad. I sometimes wonder what colour my hair really is! I haven't seen the original for years.'

'Those beigey streaks suit you,' Edith said, 'and I like it short, the way you have it now.' She would say nothing about the red stripes intermingled with the rest. They were not quite the thing for a woman of Mrs Marsh's age. Her Henry would not have approved if she'd had her hair tinted. In fact, it had only just started to go grey when he'd died, though now it was as white as the driven snow, and she kept it that way for his sake.

'Short is a lot less trouble,' Poppy said.

'Will Mervyn and Maria get the train from Heathrow?' Edith asked. She was interested in the minutiae of other people's lives.

'I wouldn't think so. Too complicated. No, they'll get a car.'

'That'll cost a packet,' Edith said.

'Mervyn can afford it,' Poppy replied. 'Being a dentist in New York puts him high in the money.' And ensured, of course, that he and his family saved a fortune on their near-perfect teeth. She must visit New York again before too long and get hers attended to. Mervyn was quite generous that way. He would not do it for free - that would be against his principles - but he would give her a hefty discount. And with his skill and up-to-the-minute knowledge he would preserve her ageing teeth a little longer. The day she had to part with her teeth she would possibly depart from life.

'Where everyone's going to sleep, I can't imagine!' Edith said.

'I'm not sure, either,' Poppy admitted.

What actually exercised her mind was whether or not she would give up her bedroom to Fiona and David. Presumably they would bring the baby in a carrycot? It would mean relinquishing her wondrously comfortable large bed with its Swedish mattress which had cost a small fortune, and sleeping on a narrow, rocklike put-you-up in a tiny bedroom. Was this the kind of thing one should be doing aged eighty. She would like to think her family would not allow this sacrifice, but she was by no means sure.

‘In fact,’ she said, ‘Maria and her husband have booked in at the Splendide – and Georgia, too, of course.’

‘Very posh,’ Edith said, ‘though I like somewhere more homely myself. There are some quite nice bed-and-breakfast places.’

Can I see my elder daughter in a B & B, Poppy asked herself? No, I cannot! But how about if I were to move into such a place for the next four nights? I could leave them all to it and sleep comfortably in peace. Reluctantly, she relinquished the idea. No way could she walk out on them and, by the same token, no way could she *not* give up her bed to Fiona and David.

‘I’ll sleep in the little room,’ she informed Edith. ‘Will you make up the bed for me and see that I have a lamp?’ No way, either, would she not have a bedside lamp. Given the state of the mattress in that room, she would probably lie awake reading deep into the night.

‘That doesn’t seem right to me,’ Edith said. ‘If you’ll allow me to say so, Mrs Marsh, you’re no spring chicken. We need our sleep when we get older.’

Poppy sighed.

‘I know. But I can’t expect Fiona and David to sleep anywhere other than in my room. There’s the baby to think of, you see.’

‘Well, yes,’ Edith admitted, ‘there is that. Babies need their sleep, too, bless ‘em!’

But everyone sees to it that babies get their sleep. They are bathed, dressed, fed, tucked up warm and dry in a pram, perhaps, and pushed around the park. Totally without responsibility. What utter bliss. What a pity one couldn't remember being a baby oneself. The older she became, the further back she could recall things, but never quite that far. What, in fact, *was* her earliest memory?

2

I WAS SITTING on top of a stone wall. Not sitting on my own, I was too small for that, but my mother had lifted me up and was holding me there, her arms around me while I leaned back against her shoulder, quite safe. I knew she wouldn't let me go. The surface of the wall was rough and the stone prodded into my legs through my cotton dress, but I didn't mind. Seated as I was, with my head close to my mother's, I saw the same view as she did. That was a nice change from mainly seeing people's legs.

From the wall where I was sitting a steep, grassy hill ran down to a narrow valley at the bottom, and then climbed up again, just as steeply, on the other opposite side.

'Please! I want to go down the hill,' I begged.

'You can't do that, Poppy love,' my mother said. 'It's far too steep for a little girl of two.'

'I would hold your hand,' I promised.

'In any case,' she said, 'it's not allowed. Even I am not allowed. No-one is. There's a notice there.' She pointed it out to me. 'You can't read it yet but it says, "Trespassers Will be Prosecuted".'

I laughed at that.

'What's funny?' my mother asked.

'What you said: funny words.' I loved the sound of words, even when I had no idea what they meant.

'I suppose they are,' she agreed. 'What they mean is that if we go down this hill someone might come along and be very cross with us, and that's because, as you very well know, the trains run down at the bottom. It wouldn't be safe.'

'I want to see the train,' I said.

'I know you do, Poppy,' she always spoke to me patiently, 'and so do I. That's why we've come here, isn't it?'

'Where *is* the train?' I was by no means patient.

'If you watch over there' – she let go of me for a second with one arm to point out the way – 'quite soon you'll see the signal, and then the train will come.'

My mother was always right. In any case, I knew what would happen because this wasn't the first time we'd come to watch for the train; we did it quite often, and always in the afternoon. Sure enough, not many minutes later there was the click of the signal and then, in the distance, what I had been waiting for.

'Smoke!' I cried. 'Smoke!'

'Steam, not smoke,' my mother corrected me. 'And now here comes the train.'

First there was the big engine with the chimney on top with white steam pouring from it, filling the sky, and then the long carriages. The engine was the same colour as the grassy hill, only darker, and the front of it was black. The carriages were yellow. I knew all my colours by now, and a few letters. 'She's a bright child,' people used to say. There were three large letters on the engine, written in gold and shining brightly in the afternoon sun.

'G - N - R,' my mother said. 'Great Northern Railway.'

We always counted the carriages. One, two, three, sometimes as many as six. They had windows all along the sides, and there were men who all looked alike crowded around the windows.

'Wave to the soldiers,' my mother instructed.

I waved my hand and she fluttered a white handkerchief.

'See,' she cried. 'They're waving back to us!'

Very soon the train passed out of sight, disappearing into a hole in the hillside, leaving only a cloud of steam curling around the entrance to show that it had been there.

‘All the trains live in the hole,’ I said, ‘and all the soldiers live in the hole.’

My mother laughed.

‘No, Poppy darling, the train comes out on the other side of the hole, which is called a tunnel. The men are going home from the war in France. It’s quite disgraceful. All these months after the war ended and there are thousands not yet back in England. There was nearly a mutiny about it in the army.’ She sounded very angry.

‘Mutiny?’ I asked. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I liked the sound of that word, too. Trespassers, prosecuted, mutiny.

‘Mutiny,’ I repeated. ‘What’s mutiny?’

‘It’s what you do when I tell you to pick up your toys and you won’t.’

‘Naughty,’ I said.

‘But sometimes necessary. Except for little girls,’ she added. ‘Come along then. Time to go home for tea.’ She held me firmly by the waist and lifted me through the air in a wide arc from the top of the wall to the ground so that I could pretend I was flying like a bird.

It was a long walk home and the sun was hot. Our house was at the top of a hill, the very last house before the road ended at the farm. When I was a small girl I thought every road, every street was a hill, I suppose because many of them were and my legs were short. As I grew older the roads didn’t seem hills at all. On this particular afternoon I was hot and weary so, deciding I would go no further, I let go of my mother’s hand and sat down on the pavement.

‘Poppy, what are you doing?’ my mother said. ‘Stand up at once. You’ll get your dress all dirty.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Poppy is tired.’

‘Mother is tired, too. Come along. Get up and take my hand. It’s not far now.’

I shook my head.

‘Carry me,’ I demanded.

‘Oh no, Poppy, you’re much too heavy.’ She didn’t sound cross, she just sounded sad. ‘And on top of everything else.’

‘Now this *is* mutiny,’ she said. Nevertheless, she stooped down, lifted me up and carried me the rest of the way home. She walked quite slowly, and when we reached the top of the hill the lady next door was just leaving her house.

‘Why, Harriet,’ she said – Harriet was what other people called my mother. ‘You look quite worn out. You shouldn’t be carrying Poppy; she’s big enough to walk.’

‘I know, Mrs Harris,’ my mother said, ‘but you try telling her that.’ Her voice sounded funny.

‘Why, I do believe you’re crying,’ Mrs Harris said. ‘That’s not like you. Now I’ll come in the house with you, I’ll put the kettle on and make you a nice cup of tea. As for you, Poppy, you can get down this minute and walk up the path on your own two feet.’

I did as I was told. In the house, Mrs Harris set the kettle to boil on the fire and my mother sat down at the table and burst into tears.

‘There, look what you’ve done,’ Mrs Harris said in a stern voice. ‘You’ve made your mother cry. What a naughty girl you are.’

My mother raised her head and wiped her eyes with the handkerchief with which she had waved to the soldiers. ‘It’s not Poppy,’ she said. ‘It’s just everything. I get so tired of waiting, and he never comes. Nearly three years since he had his last leave, and the war’s well over. I sometimes wonder whether he’ll ever come home.’

‘Of course he will, love. Don’t you fret. One of these days, very soon, you’ll look out of the window and see him walking up that path,’ Mrs Harris reassured her. ‘And you be a good girl and do as you’re told,’ she said to me. ‘You’ve got to look after your mother until your Daddy comes home.’

I didn’t like Mrs Harris and I was quite sure she didn’t like me. Even when you’re small you can tell who likes you and

who doesn't.

I knew who Daddy was. He was the man in the photograph on the sideboard. He wore a jacket with lots of buttons and a funny cap on his head. Mother said it was his uniform and that he was a soldier fighting for his king and country. 'And for you and me,' she added.

Of course, I don't remember every single thing that happened that day, or exactly what everyone said, but I *do* remember sitting on the wall, watching the train, and the soldiers waving. When I told my mother about it she filled in the rest, about being carried up the hill and Mrs Harris and so on.

'Mrs Harris was quite a kind lady, actually,' she said. 'It was just that she didn't know how to talk to children because she'd never had any. She wasn't prepared for a little mutineer like you.'

'I just longed for your dad,' she told me. 'All the time. Of course, you'd never seen him, and what you don't know you don't miss.'

For that matter, she said, she hadn't seen much of him herself. She had met him at a party in October 1916. The world was full of parties of a sort: young men leaving and having a last fling before they went back to the war; younger men, recently called up, making the most of what was left to them before they were sent overseas. Hugh was eighteen and handsome in his immaculate new uniform. My mother was the same age. They married in no time at all, and three months later he was in France, helping to fill the vast black hole left by hundreds of thousands of men who had been killed on the Somme that summer.

My father did come back not many weeks after that afternoon when I saw my mother cry for him. I expect she had a telegram and I expect she told me, but I don't remember any of that. All I do recall is that one day there was a knock on the door, my mother ran to open it and there was this tall man standing there. My mother shrieked,

ran into his arms and then burst into tears, and he put his arms around her. It seemed quite a long time before either of them noticed me, and it was my mother who did.

‘This is your daughter, Poppy,’ she said proudly. ‘Poppy, this is your daddy. Are you going to give him a big kiss?’

He picked me up and lifted me quite high – he was very strong – and started to kiss me. I didn’t like it at all; his face was all prickly. I wriggled away from him and put my arms out to my mother to lift me down, which she did.

‘Poppy isn’t used to men,’ she said.

‘I’m pleased to hear that,’ my father replied.

I didn’t really need my father and I couldn’t see why my mother did, either. We had each other. We had our outings to the park, to the shops and to the railway embankment. She bathed me, cooked me nice dinners and baked little cakes for my tea. She helped me draw pictures, read stories to me and taught me letters and numbers, and she continued to do that after my father’s return.

‘She’s too young for all that,’ he objected.

It was one of the few things on which my mother contradicted him.

‘No, she’s not,’ she said. ‘No-one is ever too young to learn. And she’s a clever little girl; she needs to use her mind.’

My father didn’t think little girls had minds, except to be awkward, which my mother afterwards told me I was.

‘You weren’t very nice to him,’ she said. ‘You turned away when he came near you and yelled if he tried to pick you up. It was no homecoming for a man who’d been in the trenches.’

The worst thing for me was that he slept in my mother’s bed, which had always been *our* bed, mine and hers. Of course, I had my cot, but whatever time of the night or early morning I awoke and crept into her bed, I was sure of a welcome. Sometimes, if I wasn’t well, I would sleep in the

big bed from the beginning and we'd spend the whole night together.

All that changed from the very first night my father returned. He made it quite plain that he didn't want me in the bedroom, let alone in the bed, and he made my mother move my cot into the spare room. If I turned up at the side of the bed during the night he would send me back to my room, no matter what my mother said. Only very occasionally, when he was ready to get up anyway, would he give in to my mother's plea and let me in. But it wasn't the same. For a start it had a funny smell.

The worst time of all was that terrible morning when I left my cot and walked into the big bedroom to find my father lying on top of my mother and bouncing on her. He was a big man and I could hardly see my mother underneath him. She was giving little cries and I thought he was killing her. I screamed and screamed.

I can't remember what happened next. I know he went out and stayed out all day, which pleased me. It didn't please my mother, but she wouldn't talk to me about it, either then or later.

I don't remember the next few months very clearly. It was Christmas, and then it was very cold and I got chilblains - or perhaps that was another time. I got chilblains every year in the winter.

'Don't sit so near the fire,' my mother would say. 'It makes them worse.'

It was June and it was my third birthday; we had jelly and custard for tea, and my mother baked a cake in the shape of a flower. I was given a box of wax crayons and a colouring book.

The months went by, and all the time I knew my father didn't like me. I could never please him. He didn't even like my name.

'What sort of a name is Poppy?' he grumbled. 'It's a stupid name.'

'I think it's a nice name,' my mother said.

'I think it's the best name in the whole world,' I added. We were both being quite courageous because it was not a good idea to defy my father.

'Your father gets cross because he can't find work,' my mother explained to me later when we were alone together. 'He wants to earn money to look after you and me. We thought when the war was over it would be easier for everyone, but that's not true.'

A little while later my mother announced that she was to go out to work doing housework five mornings a week for a lady who was well-off. The lady had agreed that I could go with my mother because I wasn't old enough to go to school.

'You will have to behave well,' my mother warned me. 'She is a very particular lady. But you can take your colouring book with you.'

I went with her every morning, but unfortunately it didn't last because in the second week I knocked over a vase of flowers, broke the vase and spilled the water all over the floor.

'I'm sorry,' the lady told my mother, 'I'm afraid you'll have to come on your own from now on.'

This meant that I had to stay with my father, which he didn't like - he said I got on his nerves - and nor did I.

One day he said, 'I'm going out. Your mother will be back in less than an hour. There's a note for her on the table.' He had put the note in an envelope and stuck the flap down.

I was quite happy on my own. I could read now - my mother had taught me - and I had a book called *Little Frolics* which was all about a family of children who had lovely times, going on picnics, roundabouts and to the fair.

Eventually my mother came home, took off her coat and said, 'Where's Daddy?'

'Out,' I said. 'There's a note.'

I never saw my father again, and I learned later that neither did my mother. I didn't mind; in fact, I was pleased. It was much better with just my mother and me and, with the self-centredness of an only child, I thought it would be better for her, too.

But all this was more than seventy years ago. I don't know how I remember it, but I do.

3

ON THE DOT of eleven, passing through the hall to go upstairs, Poppy looked out of the window and saw the caravan, with Beryl driving, turn into the drive. Beryl, small of stature so that she was almost hidden behind the wheel, made the awkward turn into the drive with great skill and confidence and almost no decrease of speed. Poppy watched with admiration. She herself was a dashing but erratic driver and not good at parking. Her daughter was one of those women who, had she been in the army during war, would be driving a tank through the desert or an ambulance under fire across the battlefield. And she would have got there on time.

But were Beryl's skills a mite heavy for a nurse? Perhaps not. It had been her own experience, when in hospital, that those nurses who were the size of midgets, or vertically challenged as she must now remember to say, were the ones who could fling you around as if you were a bag of feathers.

She went out to greet them and Beryl wound down the window.

'Hi, Mummy,' she said in a cheerful voice. 'Are you all right? I'll just drive down to the side garden and park out of sight.'

'I'm fine, darling. I'll follow you.'

Rodney, seated beside his wife, gave Poppy a smile and a wave. He never had much to say, probably because he didn't often get the chance. As a school teacher, Poppy thought, he must wield authority in other parts of his life. But Beryl was not a small child.

Poppy followed the caravan round to the back of the house where Beryl, with a few deft movements, parked it exactly where she wanted it, on the gravelled area of the side garden, then jumped down with ease. Rodney followed at a more leisurely pace.

'Is Jeremy not with you?' Poppy asked. 'I thought he would be. The vacation has started, hasn't it?'

'Oh, yes,' Beryl replied. 'He'll be here tomorrow. And I'm afraid he's bringing a friend. I hope you don't mind. I told him he should ring up first and ask you.'

'That's perfectly all right,' Poppy said. 'He'll be very welcome.'

'A "she", not a "he",' Beryl said.

'His new girlfriend,' Rodney volunteered.

'Oh. I didn't know he had a new girlfriend. What happened to Carol?'

'Who knows?' Rodney said. 'But Megan is nice. She's also at LSE in the same year. She's reading Politics and Russian.'

'Good heavens!' Poppy said. 'She must be awfully clever.' She had never thought of Jeremy choosing a brainbox. His girlfriends, even from his school days, had, without exception, been pretty and on the dumb side.

'She is clever,' Beryl said. She sounded less than enthusiastic. Perhaps this one was serious, and Beryl was a mother hen who liked to keep her chicks under her wing.

'They're at a conference in Swindon today,' Rodney explained. 'Something to do with the Labour Party.'

So that was it! A clever girl who was also, presumably, a member of the Labour Party, or why would she be attending a conference? That would certainly be too much for Beryl. Beryl was a true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool Tory; a prop and stay of her local party, and in her time a stalwart of the Young Conservatives. Poppy gave her daughter an enquiring look.

'Oh, I know what you're thinking, Mummy,' Beryl said. 'And you're right. I never wanted Jeremy to go to the London