Happy Ever After

Adèle Geras

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Contents

About the Book

Once upon a time Megan, Alice and Bella shared the Tower Room. Theirs was an enchanted world, and the deep friendship that grew through the final year of school helped them to survuve betrayal, treachery, jealosy and a terrible act of violence.

Based on the fairytales of Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, this haunting trilogy explores out most turbulent emotions and speaks to our deepest memories.

This book includes:
The Tower Room,
Watching the Roses
Pictures of the Night

Happy Ever After

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This volume contains:

The Tower Room

Watching the Roses

Pictures of the Night

RHCP DIGITAL

The Tower Room

For Jean Ure who read it first

En la noche dichosa
En secreto, que nadie me veía
Ni yo miraba cosa,
Sin otra luz y guía
Sino la que en el corazón ardía.

Upon that lucky night
In secrecy, insructable to sight,
I went without discerning
And with no other light
Except for that which in my heart was burning.

From *Saint John of the Cross: Poems*
Translated by Roy Campbell

Up in the tower, nothing seemed real
Except the sky, and you, at night, calling.

from *Letter to Rapunzel* by Frances Wilson

ONCE UPON A time, the linoleum was green. I remember it clearly from my first day at Egerton Hall. I was not quite eleven then, and of a fanciful turn of mind, and I imagined it as a ribbon, streaming down the three storeys of Austen House, snaking all along the corridors and winding round the stairwell, slipping down over the stairs and along Study Passage until it met the brown linoleum that marked the beginning of School Corridor. Of course, it's not like a ribbon at all, and it isn't even properly green any more. All those shoes: regulation lace-ups, Sunday-best brown ankle-straps, the Staff's Cuban heels, muddy lacrosse boots, grass-stained tennis shoes and, more recently, Saturday night Sixth Form stilettos (officially forbidden but still worn) have left their mark. The lino is cracked, pocked and scuffed and looks pallid from the attentions of a thousand mops.

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London *April 6th 1962*

THERE it is: a beginning, and exactly the way a beginning ought to be. Once upon a time. I miss Bella and Alice. I miss the Tower Room, even though we're high up here as well. I am alone almost all the time, and these words are company. It's my eighteenth birthday today and I've hardly noticed it. I told you about it, of course, and tonight we will go to the pictures to celebrate, but there are no cards from Bella or Alice or any of my friends, and nothing from Dorothy. I will send them all this address today, just to let them know where we are. I want to be seen to be behaving responsibly. I can't decide what to do, what ought to happen now, but I feel that if I write the whole story down,

try and analyse it all in a way that even Dorothy would approve of, then everything will become clearer. I hope it does, and more than that, I hope that you read this one day, because in all this time, we've never spoken very much, or if we have, then they haven't been the right words.

*

I came to Egerton Hall for the first time in January 1955, just over seven years ago. My father had already left for Africa, and I used to enjoy imagining him in a jungle surrounded by heaps of bananas, with monkeys swinging from creeper to creeper round his head. We'd driven from the station in a taxi, my mother and I. It was five o'clock and snowing heavily. Fat flakes broke against the windscreen and drifted and blew outside the cab like ghosts. Up and up the drive we went, and as we turned into the gravel courtyard in front of Main School, I caught sight of a huge building, even darker than the dark sky, with rows and rows of lighted windows set into the black. Like topazes lying on black velvet, that's what I said then. What a peculiar child I must have been, but even now I can recall how comforting it was to see that yellow shining out in the night. The whole place looked magical to me, like a castle in a toy snowstorm, the kind you pick up and shake so that the flakes will fly about. What else can I remember? My mother's face, very pale, both of us trying hard not to cry, and Dorothy standing beside a polished table that seemed to stretch for miles and miles. Dorothy waiting to receive me.

I had been hearing about Dorothy since infancy. She was a friend of my parents and particularly of my mother's. I didn't know her age exactly, but she must have been in her late thirties when I first arrived at Egerton Hall. She had been our neighbour long ago, while my mother was pregnant with me and just after my birth. When my mother

had confessed to a craving for asparagus, Dorothy had provided it fresh from her carefully laid-out garden. Shortly after my birth, however, she had taken up her teaching post at Egerton Hall, and after that, my mother had spoken of entrusting me to her care.

'Dorothy will see you're properly educated,' she used to say, or, 'You'll be well looked after with Dorothy,' and now here she was, just as I'd seen her in my parents' photograph albums: small and grey-haired (had she always had grey hair, even in her twenties?) with startling light blue eyes, dressed in a suit of greenish tweed.

'Hello, Dorothy,' I said.

'Welcome to Egerton Hall,' she answered, almost but not quite smiling at me.

After my mother had gone, I tried imagining her in the fantasy jungle with my father, but it was hard. For a long time after that night, when I thought of her, I thought of her face in the taxi's back window, a small, ivory shape, disappearing into the snow and out of sight.

I never saw her or my father ever again. They died that spring on a trip upriver, and Dorothy adopted me legally. It was a very straightforward matter. She was already my guardian while my parents were abroad. I can hardly remember my sadness now, but the feeling I had of being completely alone in the world was very strong. No brothers, no sisters, no aunts or cousins, only Dorothy, and no home apart from a small room at Egerton Hall. Everything I possessed was capable of being packed into my school trunk. For a while after my parents died, I used to dream at night of places in Africa and Asia that I had lived in with them when I was a very young child. I dreamed so much that what I actually remembered about each place became blurred and misty and all the different scenery ran together in my mind, and soon all that was left to me was an unfocussed image of somewhere full of

sunshine and blue water and very green trees heavy with purple, scarlet, crimson and vermilion flowers.

'Welcome, child,' Dorothy said to me, that first night. 'As soon as you're ready, we'll walk across to Junior House and find your dormitory. I want you to regard Egerton Hall as your home as well as your school.'

Which of course it was, until a few weeks ago.

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IT'S difficult to know how far back to go. I think I shall start just before the beginning of last term, the last day of the Christmas holidays, and if I have to refer to things that happened further back than that, then I can do it as I go along.

'Be sure that what you write, that *everything* you write, is relevant, germane to the issue.' Oh, I can hear you saying it, Miss Doolittle, and I'll try. I will try.

*

THE Christmas holidays were nearly over. I liked Egerton Hall with no one in it. Of course, I missed Bella and Alice, missed the laughter and the noise and even quite looked forward to lessons, but there was something especially quiet and more than a little eerie about a building that was accustomed to being full of people and loud with voices, and that found itself, all of a sudden, empty. It seemed to me sometimes as I walked along the corridors in the holidays listening to the squeak of my own shoes, that everything was holding its breath, waiting for something. Desks looked at me as I passed, lockers in the cloakroom hung open expecting shoes, pianos in the practice rooms hummed quietly under closed lids, and curtains hung at windows, looking out. I decided to go and have a look at the Tower Room before everyone arrived. I hadn't been up

there since getting back from my visit to Alice's house where I always spent a part of the holidays.

The Tower Room was the highest room of all, right at the top of Austen House, and the only room with three beds in it. It had sloping ceilings and a large window that looked down over the front drive and the fountain in front of Main School. From it you could see past the sweep of lawn that stretched to the lacrosse pitches, and beyond those, to the trees. Even more important, from the Tower Room window you could get an uninterrupted view of the sky and, living there, I became a sky-watcher in the same way that other people become bird-watchers. It didn't matter to me what the weather was like. I loved the massed, bruise-coloured clouds of a storm, and the little cotton-wool puffs of early spring. I admired the high blue dome of summer and the low grey ceiling of rainy November. Best of all, I liked the way the light left the sky after a day full of sunshine: bleeding out of it slowly before the darkness came.

Bella, Alice and I regarded the Tower Room as ours.

'But Sixth Formers have never shared a three-room before,' Miss Herbert, the Housemistress of Austen House, had said when we'd been to see her at the end of the Fifth Form. 'You'll all be House Prefects next term, you know. Besides, you've had the Tower Room for a year and perhaps there are others who would like it. I'm sure you'd all get used to single rooms . . . and anyway, your A-levels will be coming up soon . . . hours of private study . . .' On and on she had gone, but we (mostly Bella, it was true) had wheedled, cajoled, and persuaded, pointing out how the rest of the House could be accommodated in single, double, and four-bed rooms, saying that everyone knew ours was the only threesome, etc. etc. In the end, Miss Herbert had given in. She was a thin, dark woman with her hair bobbed ('Just as it must have been in the Twenties,' Bella used to sigh. 'Desperately unfashionable!') and she had the face of a well-bred and quite pretty horse. Her clothes tended

towards the brown, and her shoes Bella regarded as unspeakable: thick-heeled, high-laced clodhoppers. Still, she had long fingers which Alice said were aristocratic-looking and I admired her exquisite jewellery – a magnificent amethyst brooch pinned to her tweedy lapel, and a half-hoop of opals the size of small peas on the fourth finger of her right hand.

'It's not bad luck for her,' Alice had said when she saw it. 'Her birthday's in October, so it's her birthstone.' Alice is the sort of person who knows about such things. Miss Herbert taught Latin and I liked to think, during weary translations from Cicero, about who it was who had placed the opals on her hand. Perhaps it had been intended as an engagement ring, and Miss Herbert's fiancé had been tragically killed during the Second World War, and since that day Miss Herbert had stopped thinking about men at all, but had devoted herself instead to looking after the girls of Austen House.

'You can tell from her ornaments and things that she has taste,' Alice used to say. 'I'd love to see her house. It must be very elegant and refined. Not a bit like Miss Doolittle's.' Miss Doolittle was Assistant Housemistress. She taught English and lived in a room of spectacular chaos. She looked like nothing so much as the figurehead on a galleon: golden-haired, with slightly protruding eyes and an enormous swelling bosom that curved in front of her as she walked. She favoured tight dresses of mauve crepe with draperies about the hips and high-heeled shoes of black patent leather.

'You can tell how plump she is,' Alice said once. 'Have you ever heard the deafening noise of her nylons rubbing together as she walks?' We collapsed into giggles on the candlewick counterpanes of the Tower Room.

I looked around at the empty white walls cleared of pinups, the white painted chairs, chests-of-drawers, cupboards, and the beige squares of carpet material

pretending to be warm, comforting rugs beside each of the beds.

At the end of the Fifth Form, Miss Herbert had said:

‘Of course, if you have the Tower Room as Sixth Formers, I shall trust you not to abuse the privilege.’

Bella had looked innocent, Alice really didn’t know what she was talking about, and I answered for all of us:

‘We’ll be very sensible about talking late and so forth. Really we will.’

So it was settled. The Tower Room had been ours for two years and one term, and the three of us were still in it.

‘The really good thing about this place,’ Bella used to say, leaning too far out of the window, ‘is the view. And the fact that it’s up so many stairs that no member of staff is going to be bothered coming up here, are they?’

‘Hope not, for your sake,’ Alice answered. ‘Do you truly like those horrible cigarettes or do you only pretend?’

Bella stopped leaning out of the window and turned to laugh at Alice.

‘Oh, I love them, Alice . . . You’re such a goody-goody at heart.’

‘I’m not a goody-goody at all. I just don’t like the smell. It’s awful. The taste’s horrid as well. I had one at a dance once and I was practically sick.’

‘Just make sure you don’t get caught,’ I said. ‘I don’t trust some of those Third Formers out there.’

‘They’d never dare tell on me, would they?’ Bella’s eyes looked very dark in her face. ‘And anyway, I’m careful as anything.’ And she was careful, in a reckless sort of way. She’d found a wonderful hiding-place for her cigarettes and matches under the floorboards of one of the cupboards, hidden by about a foot of tangled games equipment: shorts, boots, balls, racquets and lacrosse sticks. No one would ever look there, and (I supposed) one cigarette smoked after lights out every few days couldn’t really be considered wicked.

‘There are girls out there of our age,’ Bella said once, waving her hand in the general direction of the outside world, ‘who are married with children. We are not kids any more. We are almost eighteen years old. That’s grown-up.’

‘I’d hate to be married at eighteen,’ Alice said, wrinkling her nose.

Bella laughed. ‘And we all know why that is, don’t we, eh?’

Alice’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Don’t be so beastly, Bella. I told you and Megan all that in deadly secret. You don’t have to tease me about it. I can’t help it.’

Alice’s deadly secret (one the three of us had discussed long and vigorously under the sloping ceilings of the Tower Room) was that, as she put it, she was not ‘all that keen on kissing boys’. She admitted to us that she had never yet met one boy who made her heart beat faster, and she used to listen with wide eyes while others (well, mostly Bella, in all honesty) regaled her with tales of open-mouthed kissing, fumblings with brassières in the back seats of various cars, and once, some nervous fingers on an upper thigh, above a stocking-top.

‘I promise you,’ Bella said, ‘nearly fainting wasn’t in it. I can’t tell you how delicious it felt. Waves of warmth sort of rushing over you.’

Alice was unimpressed. She told me one day when Bella was in the bath: ‘I think she makes up half that stuff just to annoy me. I think she gets most of it out of books. Remember *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* last year? How she carried it round covered in brown paper? It was all she ever talked about. I could never get into it myself.’

I agreed with Alice about *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* but Bella and I had agreed between the two of us that Alice was definitely afraid of sex.

‘I regard it as my mission in life to find Alice a boy she *will* be excited by,’ Bella used to say, and I’d answer:

‘How, stuck away in Egerton Hall with three hundred girls and an almost completely female staff?’

‘Love will find a way,’ Bella would mutter mysteriously.

‘You sound like a book,’ I’d say, and laugh.

I remembered that conversation now as I walked over to the window. The beginning of January, and no snow. The sky was whitish-grey and there was no colour anywhere. The whole landscape had taken on the appearance of a photograph. There were two magpies on the chimneys of Eliot House, and my heart lifted. Two for joy. I was superstitious about these birds which seem, in their colouring and shape, almost too dramatic to be quite real. Their cry is like the noise of a mechanical toy, and one magpie, so they say, brings sorrow. If I ever saw a solitary magpie, I would scan the heavens for a long time looking for another, and if I couldn’t find one, I would salute the bird and say: ‘Magpie, magpie, where is your mate?’ to ward off harm. Many birds liked Egerton Hall, and so did I. It was built in the shape of an E with one extra prong, or a comb with four evenly-spaced teeth. I knew its history backwards. In the eighteenth century, an enterprising and newly-rich Egerton had built the hall in acres of expensively landscaped garden, and it is to be hoped that whoever had laid out the plan was not turning in his grave over the lacrosse pitches, tennis courts, netball courts, open-air swimming pool and other such monstrosities that had been added much later. There was still the terrace, and the fountain in the middle of the courtyard with its statue of nymphs and seasnakes intermingled so that you couldn’t really tell where the ladies ended and their fishy friends began. There were still lawns and a kitchen garden, and there was the San, where we were sent when we were ill. A house had been built for the younger girls near what we called ‘The Rim of the Known World’.

After that, there was the forest.

‘Jolly clever of old Egerton to put his house here,’ Bella had said, long ago. ‘Think how useful for nature ramblers, botany freaks, mushroom collectors, etc.’

‘It’s romantic,’ said Alice, thinking of *Babes in the Wood, Robin and Marian* and other well-known tales of that kind.

‘It’s not a frightfully foresty forest, though, is it? More like a large wood. And a bit too near civilization to be wild or anything,’ I said.

Bella had snorted loudly. ‘I don’t call Egerton Parva civilization and I’m not altogether sure that Coleston counts either, for all that it’s a town and a famous eighteenth-century watering place or whatever.’

Foresty or not, I thought, looking at the tops of black branches just visible behind the Chapel, there have been stories. I suppose it’s natural for children to make things up. Once there was a rumour about an escaped lunatic hiding in there, then there was the time when Josephine Graham ran away and wasn’t found for ages . . . There had been a very strong ‘the forest has got her’ gang at work then, but in the end she was discovered behind the bar at the pub in Egerton Magna. Still, whichever way you look at it, there’s something strange about trees, and especially so many trees together. They do so often seem as though they are nearly alive, and it’s easy to imagine that they are about to move, or have only just stopped moving, or even (like in the story of Daphne who was forced to turn herself into a bay tree to avoid Apollo’s lustful embraces) that the bark is a covering for some kind of body.

The nineteenth-century Egerton sisters, Phoebe and Louisa, inspired by Miss Buss and Miss Beale of Cheltenham Ladies College, and Miss Lawrence of Roedean School, decided an educational establishment was just the ticket, and proceeded to organize one the moment their father was safely dead. They had no tiresome husbands to put down feet in the way nineteenth-century husbands were wont to do, and so they had a grand time remodelling

Egerton Hall. Apart from defacing the grounds with various sporting facilities, they built a chapel (all white marble and Victorian stained glass) and had the stables converted into an art studio, decorated with Art Nouveau tiles of lilies in bronze and eaude-nil and murky pinks and mauves. They installed a science laboratory, and called each ‘wing’ of the original building a House, naming them after famous lady writers: Eliot, Austen, Brontë, Browning. Each House has a long passage called Study Passage where the prefects’ studies are to be found, three floors of bedrooms and bathrooms in assorted shapes and sizes, a Junior Common Room (J.C.R.) complete with gramophone, small fiction library, and copies of the *Daily Telegraph, Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*, and a Senior Common Room (S.C.R.) for senior girls who are not prefects. The younger girls do their prep. in the J.P.R. (Junior Preparation Room) with a prefect to supervise them, but Fifth and Sixth Formers are left to their own devices in the S.C.R. A great deal of toasting of crumpets by the gas fire goes on, and much reading of novels and writing of letters. Each House also has its own dining room and kitchen. Miss Herbert has three well-appointed rooms to herself: a drawing room, a study, and a bedroom. Miss Doolittle has a drawing room and a bedroom. Then there’s Matron’s Room, like a cross between a hospital and a nursery in an old-fashioned children’s book, full of cupboards packed with Virol, bandages, iodine, Friars’ Balsam, packets of sanitary towels, an impressive array of pills and potions, and a phalanx of fearsome silver instruments of a medical nature.

The Egerton sisters had clearly been of the opinion that luxury was wasted on the young, and so the girls’ rooms are uniformly spartan. We have candlewick counterpanes in shades of pink, blue, yellow or lilac, and curtains with a flower pattern made almost invisible by countless washes, and that’s that. Everything else is added by whoever’s living in the room: posters, books, photographs of parents,

or pets, or (later) boyfriends, and ornaments of all descriptions. There are crazes for things. I remember an especially disgusting statuette of a cat I had, which was supposed to turn blue when it rained and pink when it was fine. Everybody had one at this particular time except (typically) Alice.

'I can see what the weather's like just by looking out of the window,' she'd said. 'And besides, they're hideous, those things.'

She wrinkled her nose. It was remarks like that, made in the calmest and gentlest of voices, that gave Alice a reputation for taste and refinement and earned her the nickname of 'Princess Alice'.

'That,' Bella used to remark, 'and the fact that you live in the palace next door.'

'It's not a palace!' Alice always rose to the bait. 'Only a biggish house. And I don't call five miles away next door, either.'

'Biggish!' Bella would roll about and clutch her sides. 'Fifteen bedrooms: biggish! Listen to her!'

'It's not my fault,' said Alice. 'It's where I was born. And you don't live in a hovel either, so there, Bella Lavanne!'

'Keep your hair on,' Bella smiled. 'You're a very nice, kind princess and we don't care at all how rich and grand you are. We forgive you.'

'I'm not grand!' Alice would start to wail again, and I'd end up throwing a cushion at her.

I sat in the Tower Room and wished that the holidays were over and that it was tomorrow already, and then they'd be back. During the time I'd spent staying with Alice, gales had blown away much of the roof of Austen House, and now there was scaffolding around most of the brickwork that faced over the main courtyard. This cat's-cradle of metal pipes came right up to the window of the Tower Room, and in places there were planks balanced between one bar and another, so that the men (who were, it

seems, replacing the whole roof bit by bit) could walk about comfortably.

Dorothy had said: ‘Of course, it will take the whole term to complete the work.’

‘Surely not!’ I answered. ‘There must be a whole crowd of them, isn’t there?’

‘Yes, of course, but they can only work after you girls are safely in lessons and, naturally, they have to finish before it gets dark. We don’t want any nonsense about the men looking at the girls in their bedrooms. As it is, Miss Herbert will have to warn all of you to be particularly vigilant about putting away your pyjamas in pyjama cases, or neatly under the pillow, and not leaving your belongings lying about your rooms.’

Stockings drying on a towel hung over the towel rail, a few hair rollers left out on the chest-of-drawers, fluffy slippers peeping out from under the bed: I imagined these things driving the poor workmen into frenzies of unrequited lust, so that they plummeted off the scaffolding and down to the gravel below. Bella would be sure to try and talk to them. Alice would be nervous . . . they’d be so rough. It would all be immensely interesting.

I went to look out of the window, and there, suddenly, was Dorothy, looking up at the Tower Room. It’s freezing, I thought, but still, I’d better, just the same. I opened the window.

‘Hello, Dorothy!’ I called.

‘Hello, dear,’ said Dorothy, craning her neck. ‘You look extremely . . . medieval.’

‘I’m jolly cold.’

‘Then close the window and come down. We’ll have some tea. I’ve a piece of news you may find interesting.’

Dorothy smiled and waved and strode off towards Brontë House, where she had a small flat, being not only Head of Science, but also a kind of caretaker as well. As always, it seemed to me that, Cheshire-cat-like, a faint

impression of her smile hung in the air after she had gone. I shook my head to get some sense into it. As I closed the window, I noticed that my hair, which I wear in one long plait down my back, was wet at the ends from brushing against the windowsill.

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London *April 9th 1962*

We were lucky to find this place. It's a bed-sitting room near Gloucester Road tube station. It's very high up, on the fourth floor, but I, at least, am used to that after the Tower Room. We've tried to make it as nice as possible, but, as you often tell me, we haven't got much money to spend on posters and things and I didn't have a chance to bring much with me. A letter came today from Miss Herbert. She must have asked Bella or Alice for the address and written at once. She says:

> 'I would ask you to consider most seriously, Megan, what you are in danger of losing. All the efforts of the last seven years (yours and your teachers') will come to nothing if you persist in the path you have chosen. At least keep the work going in case you do return to Egerton Hall. You know, of course, that there have been voices raised in favour of your expulsion, but Miss Donnelly, Miss Doolittle, Miss Clarke and I have carried the day, I think, and should you decide to come back, I'm sure it could be arranged.'

I have brought my books. I read them all the time when I'm not writing, and not doing my shift at the coffee bar. I can't believe my friends and I ever thought that being able to work for a few miserable pounds a week was glamorous. I think I was very spoiled at Egerton Hall, even in the

matter of views from the windows. Here, there are red-brick semis in every direction as far as the eye can see, and the people look like insects, so far below me that I cannot make out their faces at all. The sky at night is a kind of mucky gold because of all the street lights, and during the day it resembles old dishwater, but perhaps that's only my mood. There are some sunny days, from time to time.

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In Dorothy's room, I drank my tea in silence. Silence was one of the things I'd had to get used to since my parents had died. Dorothy only spoke when it was necessary to do so, and then as economically as possible. I filled in the time that hung between one sentence and another by looking at the room and at Dorothy in it. There was something cool about her. I decided that it wasn't just the pale blue walls of her sitting-room, nor the bone china teacups that were so white they seemed luminous, like ice. It was Dorothy herself who made everywhere she went less warm. It was hard to know her age, and she never referred to it, but the iron-grey helmet of hair had remained unchanged for as long as I could remember, and above the fireplace there was a photograph of her in a gown and mortar board at her degree ceremony, which showed the same pale eyes and the same sharp features that I had known most of my life. There was only one picture in the room: a view of mountains capped with snow, and even the armchairs had straight backs. Good posture was something Dorothy believed in, along with economy of speech, hard work, early rising and prose. She had never said so directly, but I knew Dorothy felt there was something soft and squashy and not quite correct about poetry, because it often dealt with feelings and emotions and these were squashy, soft and not quite correct either. Or perhaps it was only my poetry she didn't approve of . . . she'd never have dared to

speak out against Keats or Byron or Shelley. That would have been Philistine. Still, I knew Dorothy's opinion of 'adolescent scribblings'.

'They are usually,' she had said once, 'a morass of sentiment, and couched in words that are of the most violent purple imaginable.'

I didn't argue. One didn't lightly bandy words with Dorothy. I had been fourteen at the time, and I vowed then and there never to show Dorothy another poem of mine, not ever.

She was clearly in no hurry to break the silence. I thought about words, and came to the conclusion that that was why I liked them so much: because Dorothy was so stingy with them. Azure . . . translucent . . . iridescent . . . viola . . . antique . . . they're like jewels, I thought, all different colours. I liked taking them all out and arranging them this way and that, and putting them in lines and making patterns with them . . . ineffable . . . scarlet . . . peonies . . . wine . . . leaf. . . . aponica . . . gardenia . . . camellia.

'Are you,' said Dorothy, 'feeling confident about the examinations?'

I put my cup down, feeling irritated suddenly by her maddening behaviour. No one else would invite you to hear an interesting piece of news and then not tell you . . . but the rituals had to be re-enacted over and over again.

'Yes, I think so,' I replied. 'Of course, I shall have to revise all next week.'

'Of course.'

'But I think I've got it mostly under control.'

'Excellent.' Dorothy continued taking small bites from an apparently never-ending biscuit, and said at last:

'I have a somewhat unusual item of news. I only heard finally today . . .' she paused, and looked at me. 'I have found a replacement for Miss Bristow.' Her eyes shone and a small, enigmatic smile touched the corners of her mouth.

‘That’s good,’ I said. ‘You must be very relieved.’

Privately I thought: why is Dorothy finding a new laboratory assistant so exciting? Miss Bristow had left suddenly last term, no one quite knew why, although naturally there had been rumours. There were always rumours.

‘A young man called Simon Findlay is arriving tomorrow to help us out. Only a temporary appointment, I’m afraid, as I believe he has other plans for next term, but still, it will be a help to me.’

Dorothy leaned forward to put her cup back on the tray. Young probably means thirty-five, I reflected, but it was best to be sure.

‘How old is Mr Findlay, exactly?’ I asked.

‘He’s twenty-two,’ said Dorothy. ‘I do hope some of our more frivolous girls can be persuaded to curb any silliness.’

I took a biscuit from the plate. I could hardly ask how handsome he was. Dorothy would definitely class that as ‘silliness’. In any case, I thought, I hardly ever go near the labs, and so will probably see very little of him. I decided to stop thinking about him, although of course Dorothy was right, and there was almost bound to be ‘silliness’. In her magic kingdom of silver instruments, glass beakers, and phials of unnaturally blue and red and yellow crystals, where white light shone down on luminous and non-luminous flames of Bunsen burners, where everything was capable of measurement, analysis and description, such things as the feelings of one person for another were out-of-place and incomprehensible. The younger girls were often ‘keen on’ one of the prefects, although so far I had escaped such adoration. Bella and Alice had their share of admirers, though, who brought them bars of chocolate after they’d been out with their parents, sent them sloppy cards for their birthdays and watched them hungrily in chapel, on the games field or in the dining hall.

‘There’s nothing sexual about it,’ said Bella once, last year, in the cloakroom, of all places. Bella was the expert on such matters. ‘It’s simply that everyone needs someone to love and admire and these kids pick the nearest and most glamorous creature they can. If it can’t be Elvis or somebody, it’s got to be someone near at hand.’

Alice smiled. ‘Are you saying you’re glamorous, then?’

‘The most glamorous thing you’ve ever seen,’ said Bella, and started to do a belly dance in her netball shorts and gym shoes.

‘Bella, they’re waiting for you on the court,’ Miss Robbins called out, and that was the end of that conversation. I recalled it now and thought: this new young scientist chap will probably fall for Bella. Or perhaps he’s engaged.

‘I’m sure most of us,’ I said, ‘have too much work to do to trouble our heads with young men.’

Ten out of ten! That was precisely the sentence Dorothy had been waiting for. She rewarded me with one of her rare and beautiful smiles and rose to her feet.

‘Good girl, Megan,’ she said. ‘He is a very talented young scientist, far too talented for such a relatively menial position. I wonder whether I might not entrust him with some teaching . . . only the lower forms, of course . . .’ Her voice slid away into silence and she became lost in her thoughts for a moment. Then she gave an uncharacteristic laugh, almost as though what she’d been thinking about had embarrassed her. It seemed to me that she was blushing, but perhaps she was only feeling warm. She stood up and went over to the window.

‘I know I can rely on you.’ She pulled the curtains across. ‘How very early the dark comes down at this time of year, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, it does.’ I stood up too. ‘I should go now, Dorothy. I’d like to go and see Miss van der Leyden. I’m sure she must have arrived by now.’

‘By all means, dear,’ said Dorothy. ‘I have some work to do before supper. I shall see you at half past six.’

Miss van der Leyden still lived in her little room right at the top of Junior House. I could have gone straight up the stairs, but I never did. Every time I visited her, I made a point of walking through the dormitories. Blue and Green, Violet and Rose were the biggest, and as I strode along the narrow strip of appropriately coloured carpet, I glanced in at the quiet cubicles and remembered all the sounds: the giggles and whispers, the squeaks and crashes, and often, especially on the first night of term, the sounds of homesickness – muffled sobs and sniffs and the padding of slippered feet from those who had undertaken the task of cheering people up. I couldn’t remember crying much. I paused at the cubicle nearest the door in Violet which used to be Bella’s, went in and sat on the bed. I tried to look into the mirror that stood on the chest-of-drawers, but had to bend my head right down.

‘I can’t ever have been this little,’ I said aloud, and my voice rang through the empty space, and the mauve curtain that formed a kind of flimsy front door for the cubicle stirred slightly.

Bella had been as nosey then as she was now. I remembered the conversation perfectly. It was more of an interrogation than a conversation, but I hadn’t minded. Bella was so beautiful. I had stared and stared at her, and thought: her hair is so black, it’s almost blue . . . and her skin . . .

‘Hello,’ Bella had said. ‘Come in. Isn’t this a funny place? I haven’t really got used to it yet, even though I’ve been here for a term already. It isn’t a bit like I imagined. Have you read the *Malory Towers* books? I have. They’re super. I’d hoped we’d have midnight feasts and things, but we didn’t last term. I’m Isabella Lavanne, but you can call me Bella. What’s your name?’

‘Megan Thomas.’

‘Why have you only come in January? Everybody else came in September. Oh, except for someone called Alice Gregson. She’s new this term, too. I think she’s in the cubie next to yours. Yours is over there. Look!’

‘Cubie?’ I was lost already.

‘Short for cubicle,’ said Bella, ‘which is what this teeny-weeny little bit of space with wooden partitions all around it is called.’

Bella had evidently forgotten all about her question. Why had I only come to Egerton Hall in January? I really had no idea at all. Perhaps it was something to do with my eleventh birthday. Maybe you could only come in the term during which you had your birthday. I would ask my mother in my first letter home. I thought with pleasure of my red zip-up writing case, complete with a little book of stamps. There was a compartment for the air-letter cards I had to use to write to my parents, but I couldn’t imagine who I was going to write to on the pad of azure Basildon Bond. Bella interrupted my daydream.

‘Where do you live?’

‘I live here.’

‘No, silly. I mean where do you live in the holidays?’

‘Here.’

This had silenced Bella for about five seconds, but then she’d said:

‘Why?’

My parents were still alive then. I said:

‘Because my father works abroad, and my mother’s gone to be with him, and there aren’t many schools where they are . . .’

‘Who will look after you?’

‘My guardian.’

‘What’s a guardian?’

‘Someone who looks after you when your parents aren’t there. My guardian is the Chemistry teacher in the Upper

School. She's called Miss Dorothy Marshall.'

'My mother's dead.' Bella put a picture in a leather frame on the chest-of-drawers next to a china pig decorated with pink flowers. 'That's her.'

'She was very pretty.'

'Yes, she was. My stepmother's quite pretty, too, but not as pretty as my mother. My mother wanted me so much, and then she died while she was having me.'

'That's sad.' I had had trouble keeping back the tears that sprang to my eyes.

'I don't feel especially sad about it. What I mean is, it was ages and ages ago, so please don't cry.'

Bella was taking handfuls of clothes from her trunk and pushing them into the drawers. 'Actually, I think it's rather romantic. Like something in a story. Have you got any brothers or sisters?'

'No,' I said. 'Have you?'

'No, but I wish I did have. Sometimes I think I should make up a brother and pretend to have him. I don't see how they'd find out, do you? Shall we do that? Yes, let's . . . Go on, it'll be our secret.'

I laughed into the silence, recalling the Danny episode. Bella had invented a brother so plausibly that everyone believed her for ages, and it was only when Miss Baker, the Housemistress of Junior House, had asked Bella's father how his son was that the story fell to pieces.

I left Violet and went upstairs to Blue and Green. Walking through them, I thought of Mack, who had been Matron then. Miss van der Leyden had only been Under Matron, second-in-command in those days to Miss McLaren, who was an elderly, thin, sandy-beige person with 'a shortbread look about her' as Alice had once put it, and an iron will. Mack would stride through the dorms on sheet-changing days calling out: 'Top to bottom and bottom away!' which sounded vaguely nautical, like 'Avast the mizzen mast!' or whatever it was that sailors shouted from

the rigging. Miss van der Leyden would clump along behind her, reminding us to change our knicker linings, and collecting all the laundry bags to put in the big wicker basket outside on the landing. I thought: I wonder if the Juniors still wear knicker linings or if they call them knickers now? Maybe those heavy-duty navy bloomers we all wore over our ordinary white knickers are a thing of the past . . . and do the poor little Juniors still have to wear those horrible, scratchy, knee-length socks made of wool?

'What I want more than anything else in the world,' Bella used to say in those days of Liberty bodices and elastic suspenders for keeping the dreaded socks up, 'is a roll-on and some stockings. We can wear them on Sundays when we're in the Upper School. I shall have American Tan stockings, and a lace brassière.'

Bella had been the first to wear roll-ons and stockings and now she's the first to wear tights . . . always racing ahead, Bella was, rushing into things. Unlike Alice, who never saw any good reason for change, and was nearly fifteen before she went into stockings, and then only did so because of Bella's constant nagging.

At last, I reached Miss van der Leyden's door and knocked.

'*Ah, ma petite fleur!*' cried Miss van der Leyden as soon as the door was open, and hobbled over to enfold me in her arms. I closed my eyes and let the fragrance of mint, face powder and rose-geranium toilet water wash over me. Miss van der Leyden's smell was the smell of childhood, of safety, of home. For the first time that day, I felt warm. I sank down into a small armchair beside the gas fire and looked around at this room which I liked almost better than any other at Egerton Hall.

'I love your room,' I said. 'There's so much to look at. I love all the photos, and knicknacks and bits of wool, and the cushions and the lovely china with blue pictures on it. . . . h, I love it all.'

‘It is, how do you say, “a filthy mess”,’ said Miss van der Leyden, ‘but it is my home.’

‘Really? Do you think of it as home? What about Belgium?’

‘No, no, *chérie*, I have told you many times before. From there I am . . . what is it you say? Exiled.’

‘But you don’t have to be. No one exiled you, did they? No one said you couldn’t live there, did they? You could go back, couldn’t you?’

‘But there is nothing to go back for. I have been here so long.’

‘What about your family, though? Don’t you miss them?’

‘Well, I still see them, of course. I visit. But they all have lives, concerns of their own. Also, I am not a relation of whom one would boast, *n’est-ce pas*? Like you girls say: the ugly mug!’ Miss van der Leyden’s laughter filled the small room.

It was undeniable. Miss van der Leyden is the ugliest person I have ever met. Long years ago we had all called her ‘Quasimodo’ and speculated late into the night about the causes of such ugliness. Celia Hammond, who read spy stories, thought she was a foreign agent. Mary Gillis thought she was a witch, and at first no one could look her straight in the eye. The fact that she was Belgian and spoke English with a strange accent did not help. But it didn’t take long for us to grasp the main fact about Miss van der Leyden. She loved us. We were her children. Oh, the other staff were dutiful and caring and conscientious all right, but Miss van der Leyden loved us. Mack would slap the plaster on a cut knee, and Miss van der Leyden would hug us and cuddle us and give us a surreptitious sweet. If you were sick in the night, she would sit with you and sing to you and hold your head over the basin and clean you up beautifully afterwards. If you were homesick, she would take you up to her room and show you photographs of Belgium and tell you stories about her childhood, about her

grandmother teaching her to make lace, oh, about all kinds of things. She was a mother to us and better than a mother: completely uncritical and undemanding. Provided you kept your cubicle tidy, that was good enough for her.

I said: 'Do you remember how you taught us knitting?'

'Agony!' said Miss van der Leyden. 'That is what it was. Oh, I was in despair sometimes with you. How clumsy you were! And how dirty the wool became . . . and how you could never count properly and above all how you did not grasp the – how do you say – the principles of knitting.'

'But you had Alice, didn't you?'

'La petite princesse! The little angel! Now she . . . she was dainty, and careful and so neat. Do you remember how she used to embroider those traycloths printed with flowers?'

'She still does embroidery and tapestry and knitting. Most people think she's mad.'

'Mad? Because she is not jumping to the Elvis music and sitting in cafés her whole life? Ah no, she is not mad at all. She is above all that.'

'But what's she going to do when she leaves?' I asked. 'She can't sit in a room and embroider all day. She's going to have to go into the world, isn't she?'

'So are you all, *cherie*,' said Miss van der Leyden. 'So are you all. You will have a cup of coffee?'

'No, thanks. I've just had tea with Dorothy.'

'I will have coffee alone, then.'

As she busied herself with cups and jugs and spoons, I began to think about Alice.

Of all the people I have ever met, it is Alice who always seems to me vulnerable. The very first time I saw her she was crying. It was our first night in Egerton Hall, and after lights out I soon became aware of sniffing and weeping from the cubicle (cubie) next door. That's the other new girl, I thought first, and then: why aren't I crying? I felt strange, and I think also a little sad, but I was somehow