

Author of *Life After Life*

# KATE ATKINSON

BEHIND *the* SCENES  
*at the* MUSEUM

‘Astounding’  
*Daily Mail*

‘Masterpiece’  
*The Times*

‘Enchanting’  
*Sunday Times*



## About the Book

Ruby Lennox was conceived grudgingly by Bunty and born while her father, George, was in the Dog and Hare in Doncaster telling a woman in an emerald dress and a D-cup that he wasn't married. Bunty had never wanted to marry George, but here she was, stuck with three little girls in a flat above the pet shop in an ancient street beneath York Minster.

Ruby tells the story of *The Family*, from the day at the end of the nineteenth century when a travelling photographer catches frail beautiful Alice and her children, like flowers in amber, to the startling, witty, and memorable events of Ruby's own life.

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About the Author  
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*Behind the Scenes  
at the Museum*

Kate Atkinson

*For Eve and Helen*

*With thanks to my friend Fiona Robertson  
for all her help*

## CHAPTER ONE

1951

### *Conception*

I EXIST! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall. The clock once belonged to my great-grandmother (a woman called Alice) and its tired chime counts me into the world. I'm begun on the first stroke and finished on the last when my father rolls off my mother and is plunged into a dreamless sleep, thanks to the five pints of John Smith's Best Bitter he has drunk in the Punch Bowl with his friends, Walter and Bernard Belling. At the moment at which I moved from nothingness into being my mother was pretending to be asleep - as she often does at such moments. My father, however, is made of stern stuff and he didn't let that put him off.

My father's name is George and he is a good ten years older than my mother, who is now snoring into the next pillow. My mother's name is Berenice but everyone has always called her Bunty.

'Bunty' doesn't seem like a very grown-up name to me - would I be better off with a mother with a different name? A plain Jane, a maternal Mary? Or something romantic, something that doesn't sound quite so much like a girl's comic - an Aurora, a Camille? Too late now. Bunty's name will be 'Mummy' for a few years yet, of course, but after a while there won't be a single maternal noun (mummy, mum, mam, ma, mama, mom, marmee) that seems

appropriate and I more or less give up calling her anything. Poor Bunty.

We live in a place called 'Above the Shop' which is not a strictly accurate description as both the kitchen and dining-room are on the same level as the Shop itself and the topography also includes the satellite area of the Back Yard. The Shop (a pet shop) is in one of the ancient streets that cower beneath the looming dominance of York Minster. In this street lived the first printers and the stained-glass craftsmen that filled the windows of the city with coloured light. The Ninth Legion Hispana that conquered the north marched up and down our street, the *via praetoria* of their great fort, before they disappeared into thin air. Guy Fawkes was born here, Dick Turpin was hung a few streets away and Robinson Crusoe, that other great hero, is also a native son of this city. Who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction?

These streets seethe with history; the building that our Shop occupies is centuries old and its walls tilt and its floors slope like a medieval funhouse. There has been a building on this spot since the Romans were here and needless to say it has its due portion of light-as-air occupants who wreath themselves around the fixtures and fittings and linger mournfully at our backs. Our ghosts are particularly thick on the staircases, of which there are many. They have much to gossip about. You can hear them if you listen hard, the splash of water from Viking oars, the Harrogate Tally-Ho rattling over the cobblestones, the pat and shuffle of ancient feet at an Assembly Rooms' ball and the *scratch-scratch* of the Reverend Sterne's quill.

As well as being a geographical location, 'Above the Shop' is also a self-contained, seething kingdom with its own primitive rules and two rival contenders for the crown – George and Bunty.

The conception has left Bunty feeling irritable, an emotion with which she's very comfortable, and only after



much tossing and turning does she succumb to a restless, dream-laden sleep. Given free choice from the catalogue offered by the empire of dreams on her first night as my mother, Bunty has chosen dustbins.

In the dustbin dream, she's struggling to move two heavy dustbins around the Back Yard. Now and then a vicious tug of wind plasters her hair across her eyes and mouth. She is growing wary of one dustbin in particular; she suspects it's beginning to develop a personality - a personality uncannily like that of George.

Suddenly, as she heaves hard at one of the bins, she loses control of it and it falls with a crash of galvanized metal - CCRASH KERKLUNCK! - spewing its contents over the concrete surface of the yard. Debris, mostly from the Shop, is sprawled everywhere - empty sacks of Wilson's biscuit mix, flattened packets of Trill, tins of Kit-e-Kat and Chappie that have been neatly stuffed with potato peelings and egg shells, not to mention the mysterious newspaper parcels that look as if they might contain severed babies' limbs. Despite the mess, the dreaming Bunty experiences a flush of pleasure when she sees how tidy her rubbish looks. As she bends down and starts picking it all up she becomes aware of something moving behind her. Oh no! Without even turning round she knows that it's the George dustbin, grown into a lumbering giant and now towering over her, about to suck her into its grimy metallic depths ...

Somehow, I can't help feeling that this dream doesn't augur well for my future. I want a mother who dreams different dreams. Dreams of clouds like ice-cream, rainbows like sugar-crystal candy, suns like golden chariots being driven across the sky ... still, never mind, it's the beginning of a new era. It's the 3rd of May and later on today the King will perform the opening ceremony for the Festival of Britain and outside the window, a dawn chorus is heralding my own arrival.

This garden bird fanfare is soon joined by the squawking of the Parrot down in the Pet Shop below and then – DRRRRRRRR-RRRRIINGG!!! The bedside alarm goes off and Bunty wakes with a little shriek, slapping down the button on the clock. She lies quite still for a minute, listening to the house. The Dome of Discovery will soon be echoing to the exultant cries of joyful English people looking forward to the future but in our home it's silent apart from the occasional chirrup and twitter of birdsong. Even our ghosts are asleep, curled up in the corners and stretched out along the curtain rails.

The silence is broken by George suddenly snorting in his sleep. The snort arouses a primitive part of his brain and he flings out an arm, pinioning Bunty to the bed, and starts exploring whatever bit of flesh he has chanced to land on (a rather uninspiring part of midriff, but one which houses my very own, my personal, Dome of Discovery). Bunty manages to wriggle out from under George's arm – she's already had to endure sex once in the last twelve hours (me!) – more than once in a day would be unnatural. She heads for the bathroom where the harsh overhead light ricochets off the black-and-white tiles and the chrome fittings and hits Bunty's morning skin in the mirror, making ghastly pools and shadows. One minute she looks like a skull, the next like her own mother. She can't make up her mind which is worse.

She cleans her teeth with some vigour to dispatch the taste of George's tobacco-fumed moustache and then – in order to keep up appearances (an important concept for Bunty, although she's not exactly sure who it is that she's keeping them up for) – she paints on a shapely ruby-red smile and grins at the mirror, her lips retracted, to check for mis-hit lipstick on her teeth. Her mirrored self grins ghoulishly back, but in Bunty's 35mm daydreams she's transformed into a Vivien Leigh-like figure pirouetting in front of a cheval mirror.

Now she's ready to face her first day as my mother. Downstairs, step by creaking step she goes (in daydreamland a great curving plantation staircase – Bunty, I am discovering, spends a lot of time in the alternative world of her daydreams). She's being very quiet because she doesn't want anyone else to wake up yet – especially Gillian. Gillian's very demanding. She's my sister. She's nearly three years old and she's going to be very surprised when she finds out about me.

Bunty makes herself a cup of tea in the kitchen at the back of the Shop, relishing her few moments of morning solitude. In a minute, she'll take George up a cup of tea in bed – not from altruistic motives but to keep him out of her way that bit longer. My poor mother's very disappointed by marriage, it's failed to change her life in any way, except by making it worse. If I listen in on her airwaves I can hear an endless monologue on the drudgery of domestic life – *Why didn't anyone **tell** me what it would be like? The cooking! The cleaning! The work!* I wish she would stop this and start daydreaming again but on and on she goes – *And as for babies, well ... the broken nights, the power struggles ... the labour pains!* She addresses the front right burner of the cooker directly, her head wobbling from side to side, rather like the Parrot in the Shop beyond. *At least **that's** all over with ...* (Surprise!)

The kettle whistles and she pours the boiling water into a little brown teapot and leans idly against the cooker while she waits for it to brew, a small frown puckering her face as she tries to remember why on earth she married George in the first place.

George and Bunty met in 1944. He wasn't her first choice, that was Buck, an American sergeant (my grandmother had a similar struggle to get married during a war) but Buck had his foot blown off fooling around with a land mine ('Anything for a lark, these Yanks,' Bunty's brother Clifford remarked with distaste) and got shipped

back home to Kansas. Bunty spent some considerable time waiting for Buck to write and invite her to share his life in Kansas but she never heard from him again. So George got the woman. In the end, Bunty decided that George with two feet might be a better bet than Buck with one, but now she's not so sure. (Buck and Bunty! What a wonderful-sounding couple they would have made – I can almost see them.)

If Buck had taken Bunty to Kansas think how different all our lives would have been! Especially mine. In 1945 George's father died by falling under a tram on a daytrip to Leeds and George took over the family business – Pets. He married Bunty, thinking that she'd be a big help in the shop (because she'd once worked in one), unaware that Bunty had no intention of working after her marriage. This conflict will run and run.

The tea's brewed. Bunty stirs the spoon round the insides of the little brown teapot and pours herself a cup. My first ever cup of tea. She sits down at the kitchen table and starts daydreaming again, moving beyond her disappointment over Kansas and her ham-tea wedding to George to a place where a flimsy veil moves in a summery breeze and behind the veil is Bunty dressed in gauzy white organza with an eighteen-inch waist and a different nose. The man at her side is unbelievably handsome, remarkably like Gary Cooper, while Bunty herself bears a passing resemblance to Celia Johnson. A huge cloud of orange-blossom threatens to engulf them as they clasp and kiss passionately – then suddenly, an unwelcome note of reality interrupts our reverie, somebody's pulling at Bunty's dressing-gown and whining in a not very pleasant fashion.

Here she is! Here's my sister! Climbing up on Bunty, all arms and soft legs and sweet bedtime smells, crawling her way up the Eiger of Bunty's body and pressing her sleepy face into Bunty's chilly neck. Bunty unclenches the little

fists that have fastened on to her hair, and deposits Gillian back on the floor.

‘Get down,’ Bunty says grimly. ‘Mummy’s thinking.’ (Although what Mummy’s actually doing is wondering what it would be like if her entire family was wiped out and she could start again.) Poor Gillian!

Gillian refuses to be ignored for long – she’s not that kind of child – and hardly have we had our first sip of tea before we have to attend to Gillian’s needs. For breakfast, Bunty cooks porridge, makes toast and boils eggs. George can’t stand porridge and likes bacon and sausage and fried bread but Bunty’s stomach is a little queasy this morning (I’m privy to all kinds of inside information). ‘So if he wants it he can get it himself,’ she mutters, doling out a bowlful of (rather lumpy) porridge for Gillian. Then she fills a second bowl for herself – she thinks she might manage a bit of porridge – and then a third bowl. Who can that be for? Goldilocks? Not for me surely? No, indeed not – for here’s a surprise – I have another sister! This is good news, even though she looks a little on the melancholic side. She’s already washed and dressed in her school uniform and even her hair – cut in a straight, rather unbecoming bob – is brushed. She is just five years old and her name is Patricia. Her plain little face has a somewhat dismal air as she regards the porridge in her bowl. This is because she hates porridge. Gillian is gobbling hers down like the greedy duck in her Ladybird book *The Greedy Duck*. ‘I don’t like porridge,’ Patricia ventures to Bunty. This is the first time she’s tried this direct approach over the porridge, usually she just turns it over and over with a spoon until it’s too late to eat it.

‘Pardon me?’ Bunty says, the words dropping like icicles on the linoleum of the kitchen floor (our mother’s not really a morning person).

‘I don’t like porridge,’ Patricia says, looking more doubtful now.

As fast as a snake, Bunty hisses back, 'Well *I* don't like children, so that's too bad for you, isn't it?' She's joking, of course. Isn't she?

And why do I have this strange feeling, as if my shadow's stitched to my back, almost as if there's someone else in here with me? Am I being haunted by my own embryonic ghost?

'Mind the shop, Bunt!' (Bunt? This is even worse.)

And then he's gone. Just like that! Bunty fumes to herself - *He might at least ask. 'Would you mind, Bunty, minding the shop for me.' And of course I would mind, very much. But I'd still have to do it, wouldn't I? 'Mind' - why was it called 'minding'? What kind of a mind did you need for standing behind a shop counter?*

Bunty doesn't like the promiscuity of behind-the-counter contact. She feels that she's not really selling dog food and kittens and the occasional budgerigar, but that she's selling herself. At least, she thinks, when she worked for Mr Simon ('Modelia - Ladies' Quality Fashions') it was sensible things they were selling, dresses and corsets and hats. What was sensible about a budgerigar? And, what's more, having to be polite to everyone all the time wasn't *normal*. (George, on the other hand, is born to it, chatting away, making the same remark about the weather twenty times in one morning, scraping and grovelling and smiling and then ripping off his mask as soon as he comes backstage. The children of shopkeepers - me and Chekhov, for example - are scarred by having witnessed their parents humiliate themselves in this distressing way.)

Bunty decides that she's going to have to say something to George, point out that she's a wife and mother, not a shop assistant. And another thing, where does he go all the time? He's always 'slipping out', off on mysterious errands. There are going to be some changes if Bunty has her way. She sits behind the counter clicking her number nine

needles as if she's a tricoteuse at George's guillotine when she should be knitting my future – tiny little things, lacy shawls and matinée jackets with pink ribbons threaded through them. Magic red bootees to see me on my journey. The Shop Cat – a fat, brindled tabby that spends its days squatting malevolently on the counter – jumps up on her lap and she swiftly knocks it to the floor. Sometimes Bunty feels as if the whole world is trying to climb on her body.

'Shop!' George returns. The budgerigars rise up and flutter in their cages.

Shop! Why 'Shop!'? George and Bunty always say this when they come in at the Shop door – but it's supposed to be what the customer says, not the shopkeeper. Are they addressing the shop in the vocative case ('O Shop!') or naming it in the nominative? Reassuring it of its existence? Reassuring themselves of its existence? Pretending to be a customer? But why pretend to be the thing you hate? 'Shop!' I fear, like the thing it signifies, will remain an eternal, existential mystery.

But now we are freed from our enslavement to the counter (Bunty has just sold the Shop Cat, but she doesn't mention this to George. Poor cat.) and we can go and discover the world beyond the Shop. First we have to go through the ritual of dressing Gillian so that she'll be able to survive in the alien atmosphere outside the Shop. Bunty doesn't trust the month of May so Gillian has her liberty bodice securely strapped to her still cherub-new skin. Then a petticoat, a thick red woollen jersey knitted by Bunty's never-idle fingers, followed by a Royal Stewart kilt and long white cotton socks which cut her fat little legs in half. Finally she puts on her pale powder-puff-blue coat with the white velvet collar and a little white woollen bonnet tied with ribbons that slice into her double chin. I, on the other hand, am free-floating, naked and unadorned. No mittens and bonnets for me yet, just the warm, obliging innards of

Bunty's unconscious body, which is still unaware of the precious package it's carrying.

No-porridge Patricia has already been hurried up the road to school by George a couple of hours ago and is at this moment standing in the playground drinking her little bottle of milk and going through the four-times table in her head (she's very keen) and wondering why no-one ever asks her to join in their skipping games. Only five and already an outcast! Three-fifths of the family are now walking along Blake Street towards Museum Gardens, or rather Bunty walks, I float and Gillian rides her brand new Tri-ang tricycle which she has insisted on riding. Bunty feels there's something indulgent about parks, something wasteful – holes in existence filled with nothing but air and light and birds. Surely these are spaces that should be occupied by something useful, like housework?

Housework must be done. On the other hand, children are supposed to play in parks – Bunty has read the childcare section in her *Everything Within* book ('Bringing up Baby') that says so – therefore, some reluctant time has to be given over to fresh air so she pays a precious sixpence at the gate of the Museum Gardens and guarantees that our fresh air will be exclusive.

My first day! All the trees in Museum Gardens are in new leaf and high above Bunty's head the sky is solid blue; if she reached out her hand (which she won't) she could touch it. Fluffy white clouds like lambs pile into each other. We are in quattroceto heaven. Swooping, tweeting birds dance excitedly above our heads, their tiny flight muscles at full throttle – miniature angels of the Annunciation, avian Gabriels, come to shout my arrival! Alleluia!

Not that Bunty notices. She's watching Gillian, who's riding round every twist and turn in the path, following some magic tantra all of her own. I'm worried that Gillian might get trapped amongst the flower beds. Beyond the park railing a broad calm river can be glimpsed and ahead



of us lie the pale fretworked ruins of St Mary's Abbey. A peacock screeches and launches itself off its perch on the Bar Walls and down onto the grass at our feet. Brave new world that has such creatures in it!

Two men, who we will call Bert and Alf, are employed cutting grass in the park. At the sight of Gillian they pause in their work and, resting on their huge mower for a minute, regard her progress with unalloyed pleasure. Bert and Alf fought in the same regiment in the war, danced to the music of Al Bowlly at the same dances, chased women (women very like Bunty) together and now they're cutting grass together. They feel there might be a certain injustice in the way their lives have turned out, but somehow the sight of Gillian reconciles them to such things. (Bonny and blithe and good and gay, for Gillian was indeed born on the Sabbath day and still had some of these qualities in 1951. Unfortunately she soon lost them.) Clean and new as a pin or an unwrapped bar of soap she represents everything they fought the war for – our Gillian, the promise of the future. (Not much of a future as it turned out, as she gets run over by a pale blue Hillman Husky in 1959 but how are any of us to know this? As a family we are genetically predisposed towards having accidents – being run over and blown up are the two most common.)

Bunty (our mother, the flower of English womanhood) is irritated by the attention of Bert and Alf. (Does she actually possess any other emotion?) *Why don't they just cut the bloody grass*, she thinks, disguising her thoughts with a bright, artificial smile.

Time to go! Bunty has had enough of all this idleness and we need to go shopping in other people's shops. She prepares for a scene with Gillian, for scene with Gillian there will surely be. She manages to extricate her from the flower beds and get her on the straight path of life, but Gillian, who doesn't know she's wasting valuable time, continues pedalling slowly, stopping to admire flowers, pick

up stones, ask questions. Bunty maintains a Madonna-like expression of serenity and silence for as long as she can before her impatience suddenly boils over and she yanks the handlebars of the tricycle to hurry it along. This has the disastrous effect of tipping Gillian onto the ground, where she lands in a neat little blue-and-white heap, sucking her breath in and screaming at the same time. I am dismayed – will I have to learn how to do this?

Bunty hauls Gillian to her feet, pretending not to notice that her tender palms and knees are grazed. (Bunty's attitude to pain, or indeed, emotion of any kind, is to behave as if it sprang from a personality disorder.) Bunty, only too well aware that we are being observed by Bert and Alf, puts on her don't-be-a-fusspot smile and whispers in Gillian's ear that she'll get some sweets if she stops crying. Gillian immediately rams her fist into her mouth. Will she be a good sister? Is this a good mother?

Bunty walks from the park with her head held high, dragging Gillian with one hand and the tricycle with the other. Bert and Alf return silently to their mowing. A slight breeze ruffles the new leaves on the trees and discovers a discarded morning newspaper on a bench. A front-page photograph of the Skylon tower flutters in a beckoning way – like a city of the future, a science-fiction Oz. It's of no great interest to me – I'm squirming around uneasily in a wash of vicious chemicals just released by Bunty as a result of the tricycle tantrum.

'Well, now, darlin', what can I get you?' The butcher's voice bellows around the shop. 'Nice bit of red meat, eh?' He winks salaciously at my mother, who pretends to be deaf, but everyone else in the shop titters with laughter. Walter's customers like him, he behaves as a butcher in an Ealing comedy might behave, a bluff parody of himself in his stained blue and white apron and straw boater. He's a Cockney and this alone represents something dangerous

and unknown for those of us in the spiritual heartland of Yorkshire. In Bunty's private animal lexicon (all men are beasts) he is a pig, with his smooth, shiny skin, stretched tightly over his buttery, plump flesh. Bunty, at the head of the queue, asks for a bit of steak and kidney in her most neutral tone of voice, but nonetheless the butcher guffaws as if she's said something highly *risqué*.

'Somefin' to get the ol' man goin', eh?' he roars. Bunty dips down to fiddle with Gillian's shoelace so that no-one can see the embarrassment flaring in her cheeks.

'For you, gorgeous, anyfin',' Walter leers at her and then suddenly, unnervingly, he draws a huge knife from somewhere and begins to sharpen it without his eyes ever leaving Bunty. She remains bobbed down next to Gillian for as long as possible, having a pretend conversation with her, smiling and nodding, as if what Gillian had to say was of extraordinary interest. (Whereas, of course, she never took any notice of anything any of us said – unless it was rude.)

The butcher begins to whistle the Toreador song from *Carmen* very loudly and makes a dramatic performance out of weighing a heavy, slippery kidney in his hand. 'You should be on the stage, Walter,' a voice from the back of the shop declares and the rest of Walter's customers murmur in agreement. Bunty, now vertical again, has a disturbing thought – the kidney, now being tossed from one hand to the other by Walter, bears an odd resemblance to a pair of testicles. (Not that 'testicles' is a word she's very familiar with, of course, she belongs to a generation of women which was not very *au fait* with the correct anatomical vocabulary.)

Walter slaps the kidney down on the slab and slices it, wielding his knife with astonishing dexterity. His admiring audience give a collective sigh.

If she had her way, Bunty would go to a different butcher, but Walter's shop is near ours and not only is he therefore a fellow shopkeeper, he is also a friend of George,

although little more than an acquaintance of Bunty. She likes the word 'acquaintance', it sounds posh and doesn't have all the time-consuming consequences of friendship. Acquaintance or not, Walter is hard to keep at arm's length, as Bunty has learnt to her cost on the couple of occasions he has cornered her behind the sausage-machine in the back of his shop. George and Walter do each other 'favours' – Walter is doing one now, in full view of the shop, performing a sleight-of-hand with the steak that will give Bunty far more than she's due on her ration coupon. Walter also has a reputation as a ladies' man so Bunty isn't at all happy about George keeping company with him. George says that kind of thing's disgusting, but Bunty suspects that he doesn't think it's disgusting at all. She prefers George's other shopkeeping friend, Bernard Belling, who has a plumbing supplies business and, unlike Walter, doesn't conduct innuendo-laced conversations in public.

Bunty takes the soft paper package of meat, avoiding Walter's gaze and smiling stiffly instead at the inside cavity of a dead sheep behind Walter's left shoulder. She walks out, saying nothing, but inside a silent Scarlett rages, tossing her head indignantly and swirling her skirts as she flounces out of the butcher's shop, damning him to hell.

After Walter we go to Richardson's the bakers, and buy a large floury-white loaf but no cakes because Bunty believes shop-bought cakes are a sign of sluttish housewifery. Then we go to Hannon's for apples, spring cabbage and potatoes, on to Borders' for coffee, cheese and butter which the man behind the counter takes from a tub and pats into shape. By this time I think we are all a little weary and Bunty has to nag Gillian into pedalling up Gillygate and along Clarence Street towards our final port of call. Gillian has gone a funny lobster colour and looks as if she wishes she had never asked to bring the tricycle. She has to pedal furiously to keep up with Bunty, who's getting very annoyed (I can tell).

At last we reach Lowther Street and the squashed terraced house where Nell lives. Nell is my grandmother, Bunty's mother, Alice's daughter. Her entire life is defined by her relationship to other people -

Mother to: Clifford, Babs, Bunty, Betty, Ted.

Daughter to: Alice.

Step-daughter to: Rachel.

Sister to: Ada (dead), Lawrence (presumed dead), Tom, Albert (dead), Lillian (as good as dead).

Wife to: Frank (dead).

Grandmother to: Adrian, Daisy, Rose, Patricia, Gillian, Ewan, Hope, Tim and now ... ME! Bunty's stomach rumbles like thunder in my ear - it's nearly lunch time, but she can't face the idea of eating anything. My new grandmother gives Gillian a glass of bright orange Kia-ora and to us she gives arrowroot biscuits and Camp coffee which she boils up with sterilized milk in a pan. Bunty feels like throwing up. The smell of sawdust and rotting flesh seems to have been carried on her skin from the butcher's shop.

'All right, Mother?' Bunty asks without waiting for an answer. Nell is small and sort of two-dimensional. For kith and kin, she's not very impressive.

Bunty notices a fly crawling towards the arrowroot biscuits. Very stealthily, Bunty picks up the fly swatter that my grandmother always has handy and skilfully bats the fly out of existence. A second ago that fly was alive and well, now it's dead. Yesterday I didn't exist, now I do. Isn't life amazing?

Bunty's presence is getting on Nell's nerves and she shifts restlessly in the depths of her armchair wondering when we're going to go so she can listen to the wireless in peace. Bunty is experiencing a wave of nausea due to my unexpected arrival and Gillian has drunk up her Kia-ora and is taking her revenge on the world. She's playing with her grandmother's button box and chooses a button, a pink-glass, flower-shaped one (see [\*Footnote \(i\)\*](#)) and, carefully

and deliberately, swallows it. It's the nearest thing she can get to the sweets our forgetful mother promised in the Museum Gardens.

\* \* \*

'Bloody Parrot!' George holds his bitten finger up for inspection. Bunty tut-tuts indifferently. (Injury, as I said, is not really her forte.) She's up to her elbows in suet and flour and her stomach is heaving again. She watches George in disgust as he picks up one of the fairy cakes we've spent half the afternoon making, and swallows it in one bite, without even looking at it.

The afternoon has been a bit of a disappointment. We went shopping again but only for some dun-coloured wool from a shop kept by a timid old woman who made me appreciative of Walter's shopkeeping-as-performance technique. I hoped we might visit a florist and celebrate my arrival with flowers, a garland or two, a bouquet of joy and roses, but no. I keep forgetting that no-one knows about me.

We went and picked up Patricia from school, but that wasn't very interesting either and her day seemed rather boring, viz:

'What did you do today?'

'Nothing.' (Said with a shrug of the shoulders.)

'What did you have for dinner?'

'Can't remember.' (Shrugs again.)

'Did you play with any friends today?'

'No.'

'Don't shrug like that all the time, Patricia!'

Bunty chops up the blood-glazed kidney, the idea of testicles never far from her mind. She hates cooking, it's too much like being nice to people. Here she goes again - *I spend my entire life cooking, I'm a **slave** to housework -*

***chained*** to the cooker ... all those meals, day after day, and what happens to them? They get eaten, that's what, without a word of thanks! Sometimes when Bunty's standing at the cooker her heart starts knocking inside her chest and she feels as if the top of her head's going to come off and a cyclone is going to rip out of her brain and tear up everything around her. (Just as well she didn't go to Kansas.) She doesn't understand why she feels like this (Go ask Alice - see [Footnote \(i\)](#) again) but it's beginning to happen now, which is why when George wanders back into the kitchen, takes another fairy cake, and announces that he has to go out and 'see a man about a dog' (even tapping his nose as he does so - more and more I'm beginning to feel that we're all trapped in some dire black-and-white film here), Bunty turns a contorted, murderous face on him and lifts the knife as if she's considering stabbing him. Is a torch being put to the great city of Atlanta?

'I have some business to do,' George says hurriedly, and Bunty thinks the better of things and stabs the steak instead.

'For heaven's sake, what's wrong with you, what do you think I'm doing - meeting another woman for a riotous night on the tiles?' (A clever question, of course, as this is exactly what my father-of-a-day is going to do.) Will Civil War rage in the kitchen? Will Atlanta burn? I wait with bated breath.

No, it's saved for another day. Phew, as Bunty's brother Ted would say if he was here; but he isn't, he's in the Merchant Navy and is being tossed on the South China Seas at this moment. Bunty loses interest in the skirmish and returns her attention to her steak and kidney pudding.

Well, my first day is nearly over, thank goodness. It's been a very tiring day for some of us, me and Bunty in particular. George isn't home yet but Bunty, Gillian and Patricia are fast asleep. Bunty is in dreamland again, dreaming of

Walter, who's fumbling with her buttons with hands of pork and kneading her flesh with fingers that look like sausages. Gillian is snoring in her sleep, in the middle of a Sisyphean nightmare where she must pedal endlessly uphill on her tricycle. Patricia is deep in sleep, her pale face drawn and her panda clutched to her chest. The spectral wraiths wander at will making puny efforts to create domestic disorder - souring the milk and sprinkling dust on the shelves.

I'm wide awake too, turning somersaults and floating in the ocean of Bunty. I tap my tiny naked heels together three times and think, there's no place like home.

Next morning George is in an uncharacteristically good mood (his night on the tiles - with Walter - was satisfying) and he prods my sleeping mother awake.

'How'd you like breakfast in bed, Bunt?' Bunty grunts. 'How about a bit of sausage? Black pudding?' Bunty moans, which George takes to mean 'yes' and he saunters off down to the kitchen while Bunty has to run to the bathroom. For a second she thinks she sees Scarlett smiling in the bathroom mirror in full Technicolor, but the image disappears as she vomits. Leaning her hot, prickling forehead against the cold tiles, a terrible idea forms in Bunty's head - she's pregnant! (Poor Bunty - throwing up every single morning at every pregnancy. No wonder she was always telling us that she was sick of us.) She sits abruptly down on the toilet and mouths a silent Munch-like scream - it can't be (Yes, yes, yes, Bunty's going to have a baby! Me!). She throws the nearest thing (a red shoe) at the mirror and it breaks into a million splintery pieces.

I'm hanging like a pink-glass button by a thread. Help. Where are my sisters? (Asleep.) My father? (Cooking breakfast.) Where's my mother?

Still, never mind - the sun is high in the sky and it's going to be a beautiful day again. The crowds will be flocking into



the Exhibition Halls and the Dome of Discovery, craning their necks at Skylon and the shimmering emerald city of tomorrow. The future is like a cupboard full of light and all you have to do is find the key that opens the door. Bluebirds fly overhead, singing. What a wonderful world!

## *Footnote (i) – Country Idyll*

THE PHOTOGRAPH IS in a silver frame, padded with red velvet with an oval of glass in the middle from behind which my great-grandmother regards the world with an ambiguous expression.

She stands very straight, one wedding-ringed hand resting on the back of a *chaise-longue*. In the background is a typical studio backdrop of the time, in which a hazy Mediterranean landscape of hills drops away from the *trompe-l'œil* balustraded staircase which occupies the foreground. My great-grandmother's hair is parted in the middle and worn in a crown of plaits around her head. Her high-necked, satin dress has a bodice that looks as trimmed and stuffed as a cushion. She wears a small locket at her throat and her lips are half-open in a way that suggests she's waiting for something to happen. Her head is tilted slightly backwards but she is staring straight at the camera (or the photographer). In the photograph her eyes look dark and the expression in them is unfathomable. She seems to be on the point of saying something, although what it could be I can't possibly imagine.

I had never seen this photograph before. Bunty produced it one day as if by magic. Her Uncle Tom had just died in the nursing-home and she had been to collect his few belongings, all of which fitted into a cardboard box. From the box, she took the photograph and when I asked who it was she told me it was her grandmother, my great-grandmother.

‘She changed a lot, didn’t she?’ I said, tracing the outline of my great-grandmother’s face on the glass. ‘She’s ugly and fat in that photograph you’ve got – the one taken in the back yard at Lowther Street with all the family.’

This was a photograph Bunty had with ‘1914, Lowther Street’ written on the back in watery-blue ink and it shows my great-grandmother with her whole family gathered around her. She sits, big and square, in the middle of a wooden bench and on one side of her sits Nell (Bunty’s mother), and on the other is Lillian (Nell’s sister). Standing behind them is Tom and squatting on the ground at Rachel’s feet is the youngest brother, Albert. The sun is shining and there are flowers growing on the wall behind them.

‘Oh, no,’ Bunty said dismissively. ‘The woman in the Lowther Street photograph is Rachel – their stepmother, not their *real* mother. She was a cousin, or something.’

The woman in her padded frame – the real mother, the true bride – gazes out inscrutably across time. ‘What was she called?’

Bunty had to think for a second. ‘Alice,’ she pronounced finally. ‘Alice Barker.’

My newly discovered great-grandmother, it appears, died giving birth to Nell, shortly after which my feckless great-grandfather married Rachel (the unreal mother, the false bride). Bunty had a vague, handed-down memory that Rachel came to look after the children and act as a poorly-paid housekeeper. ‘Six children without a mother,’ she explained in her death-of-Bambi’s-mother voice. ‘He had to marry someone.’

‘Why didn’t you ever tell me this before?’

‘I forgot,’ Bunty said defiantly.

The forgotten Alice stared straight ahead. Carefully, I removed the photograph from its frame and more of her artificial sepia world was revealed – a large parlour-palm in a brass pot and a thick curtain draped across a corner of

the set. On the back of the photograph, in printed copperplate, it says *J.P. Armand. Travelling Photographer.* And in faded pencil underneath, the date – *20th June, 1888.*

‘Twentieth of June, 1888,’ I told Bunty, who snatched the photograph back again and scrutinized it carefully.

‘You would never have noticed, would you? The way she’s standing behind that couch hides it.’

‘What? Noticed what? Hides what?’

‘My mother was born in 1888. On July the thirtieth. Alice is eight months pregnant in this photograph. With my mother, Nell.’

Does that account for that impenetrable gaze? Can she feel her own death coming, sniffing around her sepia skirts, stroking her sepia hair? Bunty was still inspecting the photograph. ‘She looks just like you,’ she said, her tone accusing, as if the lost Alice and I were fellow members of a conspiracy, intent on stirring up trouble.

I want to rescue this lost woman from what’s going to happen to her (time). Dive into the picture, pluck her out –

*Picture the scene –*

A hundred years ago. The door of a country cottage stands open on a very hot day in summer. In the yard outside, two small boys are kicking and wrestling in the dust while a pretty girl of about nine years old, older than the boys, sits on a stool by the back door, apparently oblivious to the noise her brothers are making. This is Ada. Her long, pale gold hair falls in a mass of curls and is held back from her face by a ribbon which is limp with the heat. Around her feet a few chickens scratch aimlessly. She is crooning to a doll lying cradled in her arms and her face has assumed an expression of maternal piety rarely seen outside the Nativity. A farm dog sleeps in the shadow of a barn across the yard, and a black cat sits on a wooden plough lapping up the blistering heat and occasionally washing itself in a random, lazy way. Beyond the fence are fields, some with

cows, some with sheep. Some empty. On the south side of the cottage a garden has been dug out of the unpromising chalky soil and rows of undersized cabbages and carrots can be seen, wilting in the dry earth. By the door of the cottage, marigolds and cornflowers droop in the bleaching glare of the sun.

The whole effect is as if someone had taken an idyllic rural scene and set it slightly off-key – the sun is too hot, the light too bright, the fields too arid, the animals too thin. The cottage, although charmingly pastoral from the outside, has a suspicious gingerbread and walking-stick candy air about it. Who knows what's inside?

Suddenly, without modifying her Madonna-like expression in any way, the girl picks up a stone and throws it at her brothers, hitting the younger, Tom, on the head. They jump apart in a state of genuine shock and run yelling into the field, united in mutual disgust at their sister's behaviour. Ada remains impassive, returning her gaze to the doll-baby. The sun stands at midday, white-hot with anger. In the kitchen of the cottage a woman is making bread, slamming down the dough onto a wooden table, picking it up, slamming it down again, picking it up, slamming it down. A child of, as yet, indeterminate sex is sitting underneath the table, hitting wooden blocks with a wooden hammer. (So it's probably a boy.) It has the same angelic curls as its eldest sister.

The woman, flushed with the heat from the kitchen range, pauses every now and then to straighten her back and run her hand across her forehead. She kneads the small of her back with her fists. She has a toothache. Her belly, swollen with the next child, keeps getting in the way of the breadmaking.

This woman is Alice. This woman is my great-grandmother. This woman is lost in time. This woman has beautiful fair hair that is scraped and pinned into a sweaty bun. This woman has had enough. This woman is about to

slip out of her life. One of those curious genetic whispers across time dictates that in moments of stress we will all (Nell, Bunt, my sisters, me) brush our hands across our foreheads in exactly the same way that Alice has just done. A smudge of flour powders her nose.

Alice is thirty-one years old and pregnant with her seventh child (she has already lost one – William, Ada's twin, dead of some unknown fever at three months). Alice came from York originally. Her mother, Sophia, had married a man much older than herself and her father was delighted at the good match she had made, especially as her elder sister, Hannah, had caused a shameful scandal by running away with a man who had been court-martialled out of the navy. At the time his daughters' fortunes couldn't have seemed more different – one living amongst wealth and privilege, the other in dishonour and poverty. Sophia's husband's money had come from buying and selling railway land, vast profits made quickly and, as it turned out (before he hung himself), fraudulently. So while Alice had been born in a gracious house on Micklegate, with a sunlit nursery and more servants than were necessary, by the time she was fourteen the family's fortunes had tumbled and the family's name was disgraced. Alice had been the only child, doted on by her mother, but Sophia never recovered from the scandal of her husband's death, her mind wandered and she ended up taking so much laudanum that she accidentally killed herself.

Poor Alice, brought up to play the piano and look pretty, was an orphan and – worse – a schoolteacher by the time she was eighteen, with nothing to her name except her mother's clock and a silver locket that her grandfather had given her when she was born.

She was twenty-one when she met her husband. She had been in the village of Rosedale almost a year, having taken the position of head teacher at the local school. It was a small rural school with one other teacher and a big wood-