



VINTAGE

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**SACRED COUNTRY**  
ROSE TREMAIN

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## About the Book

At the age of six, Mary Ward, the child of a poor farming family in Suffolk, has a revelation: she isn't Mary, she's a boy. So begins Mary's heroic struggle to change gender, while around her others also strive to find a place of safety and fulfilment in a savage and confusing world.

## About the Author

Rose Tremain's bestselling novels have been published in thirty countries and have won many awards and accolades, including the Orange Prize (*The Road Home*), the Whitbread Novel of the Year (*Music & Silence*) and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (*Sacred Country*); *Trespass* was a Richard & Judy Book Club pick and *Restoration* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and made into an award-winning film. Rose Tremain was made a CBE in 2007 and was Chancellor of the University of East Anglia from 2013 to 2016. Rose lives in Norfolk with the biographer, Richard Holmes. She is the mother of one daughter, Eleanor and has two grandchildren, Archie and Martha.

[www.rosetremain.co.uk](http://www.rosetremain.co.uk)

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For Children

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To the memory  
of Bernie Schweid



ROSE TREMAIN

# Sacred Country

With an Introduction by Peter Tatchell

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

I live without inhabiting  
Myself-in such a wise that I  
Am dying that I do not die

- St John of the Cross  
(Tr. ROY CAMPBELL)

'Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems".'

- 'Hamlet' Act I, Scene ii

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow

- 'The Hollow Men'  
T. S. ELIOT

## Introduction

When *Sacred Country* was first published in 1992, it passed me by. Well, not quite. I passed *it* by. I read about its publication and applauded what was, in those days, a rare groundbreaking illumination of transgender life, via a main character no less. This was, however, in the heyday of OutRage!, the LGBT direct-action group that was challenging the homophobia, biphobia and transphobia of the British Establishment. We did dramatic, spectacular protests every couple of weeks and were arrested almost as often. It was non-stop and, for me, full-time activism. I barely had time to eat or sleep, let alone read books – not even really groundbreaking ones like *Sacred Country*.

It has been a great pleasure to rediscover and finally read it decades later. And how moving and relevant it still is. Indeed, perhaps even more relevant than ever, in this era when trans issues are finally crossing over into the mainstream, with Caitlyn Jenner featuring on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, Jack Monroe becoming a celebrity cookery writer, Paris Lees achieving status as a media commentator and Channel 4's *My Transsexual Summer* proving such a ratings success.

The novel begins in February 1952 in the village of Swaithey in Suffolk – a sleepy backwater still steeped in tradition. Six-year-old Mary Ward, the child of an impoverished farming family, imagines sharing her special secret with her pet guinea fowl, Marguerite: 'I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I'm a boy.' This realisation is the beginning of Mary's arduous, epic striving to become Martin.

Amid the setbacks, including rejection by her own father, Sonny, and neglect by her emotionally fragile and

unstable mother, Estelle, there is a touching moment of satisfaction and happiness when Mary/Martin fondly recalls, with discreet pride, being called 'lad' by a boating attendant at the Serpentine. His use of the word lad 'stabbed me with pleasure,' she/he recounted. Stabbed with pleasure? It is a fierce, jolting phrase that evokes an image of painful joy, which is, perhaps, a harsh but true signifier of Mary/Martin's bittersweet personal odyssey.

Traversing three decades, this book is a story of the search for identity and fulfilment, on many different levels and in many different ways, as told through the life of Mary/Martin and from the sometimes contrary and contradictory first-person viewpoints of other characters. It involves several interweaving personal stories of nuanced, layered complexity, which we discover gradually through the slow-burn revelation of their lives as we turn the pages. *Sacred Country* tells not only Mary's journey to become Martin, but a similar searching and self-discovery by all the book's characters for something or someone - occasionally successful, mostly not.

Serious but not without humour and irony, Rose Tremain lightens the narrative with funny, quirky moments, helped by, or because, Swaithey has more than its fair share of oddballs and eccentrics. Many of them, not just Mary, end up facing disappointment or fleeing the village, or both. Mary's father, a stern patriarch, wants his son Timothy to take over the farm, but Timothy deserts the land to become a preacher, while Mary's mother retreats to the security of a mental institution. Walter leaves the family butcher's shop to start a new life in Nashville as a country singer. Gilbert, the gay dentist, runs off to London.

But it isn't all bad for Mary in Swaithey. Although she suffers the hurt of being disowned by many people around her, she is supported by a sympathetic Scottish teacher, her grandfather, who is a fan of Bob Dylan, and a carpenter who believes in reincarnation and wonders whether Mary's

dysphoria might be connected to a previous life. It's not as if she is totally alone, and that no one cares about her and the hurdles she faces.

In time and geography, the story spans remote and repressive rural England in the Fifties, London's Swinging Sixties, and the Country and Western capital of Nashville, USA, in the Seventies. Being peppered with topical references to contemporary people and events grounds the storyline in time and place; all the better to relate to the characters and the ins and outs of their lives. The book opens with the death of King George VI in 1952 and is scattered with fleeting references to the English football captain, Bobby Moore, assorted familiar news stories, pop groups, department stores, and much more. It is a careful evocation of an era that older readers will recall and that younger ones may find perplexing.

*Sacred Country* deservedly won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1992 and, two years later, the Prix Femina étranger. Apart from its undoubted literary merits, the book was ahead of its time in terms of a compassionate, non-sensationalist reflection of the trials and tribulations often faced by people who realise they are not the gender they were told they were. Without sentimentality or a tragic ending, it reflects, through the central protagonist and other characters, the often hurtful but ultimately successful personal struggles of most trans people to make sense of their true gender, find self-acceptance and achieve at least a degree of fulfilment - despite all the obstacles en route. Mary/Martin's striving is waylaid by the many prejudices and pitfalls that are familiar to almost every trans person. During the same period as the book, the former *Vogue* model and 1960s transgender pioneer, April Ashley, was fighting a very public battle for recognition and rights. It is a battle that is still being fought today by trans men and women.

One of the virtues of *Sacred Country* is that the trans story is not the single overwhelming facet. It is just there, matter-of-factly in the pages, inviting us to accept it as another aspect of the diversity of human existence. Rose Tremain narrates a trans journey, from female to male, and in the process humanises a still-often-misunderstood gender identity; reaching readers who may not be reachable by trans campaigners. There is no anti-trans murder and no trans suicide in this novel. Though such fates befall transgender people disproportionately in a still-ignorant, fearful and prejudiced world, and particularly did so back in the 1950s and '60s when transphobia was far worse than it is today, tragedy was never the universal trans experience. Some people coped. They got through, undefeated. *Sacred Country* reveals the tale of one such ordinary, everyday trans person. Not a remote and privileged celebrity. Just an average Mary who becomes Martin.

Is this the definitive trans story? Of course not. No such single, all-embracing story can possibly exist because there are so many diverse transgender experiences. Although *Sacred Country* embodies only a few fragments of trans life, this does not diminish the insights, power, relevance and lessons of what it highlights in fictional form. Being trans is still a challenge. Leaving aside intolerant attitudes, the typical regime of hormones plus surgery is liberating, but not easy. It can take a physical and emotional toll, staggered over many years of treatment. Speaking of the pain after his first gender-reassignment surgery, a bilateral mastectomy, Martin recalls: 'I remember how, in the past, I had imagined pain was my ally. I had imagined that if I suffered enough, I would become a man, of my body's own accord.'

Martin has more than his fair share of suffering, including heartbreaking disappointment in love. 'The woman I wanted was Pearl. I wanted to be Pearl's universe.'

For her, I would have re-made myself as often and as completely as she demanded. She could have gone on inventing me until death parted us,' Martin avowed, still bleeding from his breast-removal scars. But that is not the emotional end. 'It isn't finished and never can be, really,' he later tells his grandfather.

One way you could read this book is as a metaphor for a rapidly changing post-imperial Britain: the decline of the old order, with its cosy certainties, and the rise of new, unexpected and previously ignored, derided and suppressed identities. A transition from a monocultural to multicultural country, with all the upheavals, setbacks, confusions, triumphs and disappointments that personal and social change so frequently involves.

Rose Tremain writes a story that, while it is not the same as mine, is one that I, as a gay man and dissenting critic of the status quo, can relate to. It is the narrative of an outsider in a society of defined expectations and narrow-minded conformism. Mary/Martin faces rejection by much of Swaithey, with its small-village mentality, but still manages to chart a course - with ups and downs - to live as the person he truly is: a man.

This is the account of a life that begins as ordinary, even pedestrian. Then, by dint of Mary's self-awareness of a gender 'mistake', it reaches out to become something that transcends the everyday anticipations of her countryside backwater and beyond; confounding the doubters and antagonists.

Peter Tatchell, 2017

# Part One



## CHAPTER ONE

# 1952

### The Two-Minute Silence

On February 15th 1952 at two o'clock in the afternoon, the nation fell silent for two minutes in honour of the dead King. It was the day of his burial.

Traffic halted. Telephones did not ring. Along the radio airwaves came only hushed white noise. In the street markets, the selling of nylons paused. In the Ritz, the serving of luncheon was temporarily suspended. The waiters stood to attention with napkins folded over their arms.

To some, caught on a stationary bus, at a loom gone suddenly still, or at a brass band rehearsal momentarily soundless, the silence was heavy with eternity. Many people wept and they wept not merely for the King but for themselves and for England: for the long, ghastly passing of time.

On the Suffolk farms, a light wet snow began to fall like salt.

The Ward family stood in a field close together. Sonny Ward had not known - because the minute hand had fallen off his watch - at what precise moment to begin the silence. His wife, Estelle, hadn't wanted them to stand round like this out in the grey cold. She'd suggested they stay indoors with a fire to cheer them and the wireless to tell them what to do, but Sonny had said no, they should be out under the sky, to give their prayers an easier route upwards. He said the people of England owed it to the wretched King to

Speak out for him so that at least he wouldn't stammer in Heaven.

So there they were, gathered round in a potato field: Sonny and Estelle, their daughter, Mary, and their little son, Tim. Pathetic, Sonny thought they looked, pathetic and poor. And the suspicion that his family's silence was not properly synchronised with that of the nation as a whole annoyed Sonny for a long time afterwards. He'd asked his neighbour, Ernie Loomis, to tell him when to begin it, but Loomis had forgotten. Sonny had wondered whether there wouldn't be some sign - a piece of sky writing or a siren from Lowestoft - to give him the order, but none came, so when the hour hand of his watch covered the two, he put down his hoe and said: 'Right. We'll have the silence now.'

They began it.

The salt snow fell on their shoulders.

It was a silence within a silence already there, but nobody except Mary knew that its memory would last a lifetime.

Mary Ward was six years old. She had small feet and hands and a flat, round face that reminded her mother of a sunflower. Her straight brown hair was held back from her forehead by a tortoiseshell slide. She wore round glasses to correct her faulty vision. The arms of these spectacles pinched the backs of her ears. On the day of the silence she was wearing a tweed coat too short for her, purple mittens, wellingtons and a woollen head scarf patterned with windmills and blue Dutchmen. Her father, glancing at her blinking vacantly in the sleet, thought her a sad sight.

She had been told to think about King George and pray for him. All she could remember of the King was his head, cut off at the neck on the twopenny stamp, so she started to pray for the stamp, but these prayers got dull and flew away and she turned her head this way and that, wondering if she wasn't going to see, at the edge of her

hopeless vision, her pet guineafowl, Marguerite, pecking her dainty way over the ploughed earth.

Estelle, that very morning, had inadvertently sewn a hunk of her thick black hair to some parachute silk with her sewing machine. She had screamed when she saw what she'd done. It was grotesque. It was like a crime against herself. And though now, in the silence, Estelle made herself be quiet, she could still hear her voice screaming somewhere far away. Her head was bowed, but she saw Sonny look up, first at Mary and then at her. And so instead of seeing the dead King lying smart in his naval uniform, she saw herself as she was at that precise moment, big in the flat landscape, beautiful in spite of her hacked hair, a mystery, a woman falling and falling through time and the fall endless and icy. She put her palms together, seeking calm. 'At teatime,' she whispered, 'I shall do that new recipe for flapjacks.' She believed her whispering was soundless, but it was not. Estelle's mind often had difficulty distinguishing between thoughts and words said aloud.

Sonny banged his worn flat cap against his thigh. He began to cough. 'Shut you up, Estelle!' he said through the cough. 'Or else we'll have to start the silence again.'

Estelle put her hands against her lips and closed her eyes. When Sonny's cough subsided, he looked down at Tim. Tim, his treasure. Timmy, his boy. The child had sat down on a furrow and was trying to unlace his little boots. Sonny watched as one boot was tugged off, pulling with it a grey sock and revealing Timmy's foot. To Sonny, the soft foot looked boneless. Tim stuck it into the mud, throwing the boot away like a toy.

'Tim!' hissed Mary. 'Don't be bad!'

'Shut you up, girl!' said Sonny.

'I can't hear any silence at all,' said Estelle.

'Begin it again,' ordered Sonny.

So Mary thought, how many minutes is it going to be? Will it get dark with us still standing here?

And then the idea of them waiting there in the field, the snow little by little settling on them and whitening them over, gave Mary a strange feeling of exaltation, as if something were about to happen to her that had never happened to anybody in the history of Suffolk or the world.

She tried another prayer for the King, but the words blew away like paper. She wiped the sleet from her glasses with the back of her mittened hand. She stared at her family, took them in, one, two, three of them, quiet at last but not as still as they were meant to be, not still like the plumed men guarding the King's coffin, not still like bulrushes in a lake. And then, hearing the familiar screech of her guineafowl coming from near the farmhouse, she thought, I have some news for you, Marguerite, I have a secret to tell you, dear, and this is it: I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I'm a boy.

This was how and when it began, the long journey of Mary Ward.

It began in an unsynchronised silence the duration of which no one could determine, for just as Sonny hadn't known when to begin it, so he couldn't tell when to end it. He just let his family stand out there in the sleet, waiting, and the waiting felt like a long time.

## The Beautiful Baby Contest

In April that year, Sonny lost eleven lambs to freezing weather. Anger always made him deaf. The more angry he grew, the louder he shouted.

Part of his left ear had been shot off in the war. He'd seen a small piece of himself floating away on the waters of the Rhine. What remained was a branching bit of cartilage, like soft coral. In his deaf rages, Sonny would gouge at the coral with his thumb, making blood run down his neck.

Sonny took the frozen lambs to his neighbour, Ernie Loomis, to be butchered and stored in his cold room. On Sonny's farm nothing was allowed to go to waste. And he couldn't bear the way Estelle was becoming careless with things in the house, so absent-minded about everything that sometimes she forgot what she was holding in her hands. He wanted to hit her when this happened, hit her head to wake her thoughts up. That day when she'd sewn her hair to the piece of silk, he'd made her unpick the seam, stitch by stitch with a razor blade, until all the hair was out.

In a silver frame on the kitchen mantelpiece Estelle kept a photograph of her mother. She had been a piano teacher. The photograph showed her as she'd been in 1935, a year before her sudden death in a glider. She had belonged to the Women's League of Health and Beauty and this was how she remained in Estelle's mind - healthy, with her hair wavy and gleaming, beautiful with a gentle smile. 'Glider, you know,' Estelle had once told Mary in the whispery voice she used when she talked about her mother, 'are also, in fact, very beautiful things.' And it was suggested to Mary, even after she began wearing her glasses, that she had some of Grandma Livia's looks. 'I think,' Estelle would murmur, 'that you will grow up to be quite like her.'

Mary was fond of the photograph of her grandmother. She looked quiet and peaceful and Mary was fairly sure she hadn't said thoughts out loud. And when she thought about her death in the glider, she didn't imagine it crashing into a wood or plummeting down onto a village; she dreamed of it just drifting away into a white sky, at first a speck, white on white, then merging into the sky, dissolving and gone. But she had never been able to imagine herself growing up to be like Grandma Livia. She knew she would not become beautiful or join the Women's League, whatever a Women's League might be. And after the day of the two-minute silence, she knew she would not even be a woman. She

didn't tell her mother this and naturally she didn't tell her father because since the age of three she had told him nothing at all. She didn't even tell Miss McRae, her teacher. She decided it was a secret. She just whispered it once to Marguerite and Marguerite opened her beak and screeched.

After the death of the lambs, some warm weather came. In May, the community of Swaithey held its annual fête in a field outside the village, well shaded by a line of chestnut trees. These fêtes always had as their main attraction a competition of some sort: Best Flower Arrangement, Child's Most Original Fancy Dress, Largest Vegetable, Most Obedient Dog, Most Talented Waltzer and Quickstepper. Prizes were generous: a dozen bottles of stout, a year's subscription to *Radio Fun* or *Flix*, a sack of coal. This year there was to be a competition to find Swaithey's Most Beautiful Baby. Entry coupons were three-pence, the prize unknown.

Estelle's faulty imagination was tantalised by the idea of an unknown prize. The word 'unknown' seemed to promise something of value: a visit to the Tower of London, a Jacqmar scarf, a meeting with Mr Churchill. She had no baby to enter, yet she refused to let this precious unknown elude her altogether. She bought an entry coupon and took it to her friend, Irene Simmonds.

Irene lived alone with her illegitimate baby, Pearl. The father had been Irish and worked 'in the print' in Dublin. 'He tasted of the dye,' Irene had told Estelle, but the taste quickly faded and was gone and no word, printed or otherwise, came out of Dublin in answer to Irene's letters. She was a practical woman. She had an ample smile and a plump body and a heart of mud. For a long time, she dreamed of the Irish printer but her dreams never showed. All that showed was her devotion to Pearl.

When Estelle came with the threepenny coupon, Irene was feeding Pearl. Her white breasts were larger than the

baby's head. They could have nourished a tribe. Pearl's little life was lived in a sweet, milky oblivion.

Estelle sat down with Irene and put the entry ticket on the kitchen table. 'The unknown,' she said, 'is always likely to be better.'

Irene filled out the coupon, in the careful handwriting she'd perfected to try to win the printer's devotion: *Entrant: Pearl Simmonds, Born April the 22nd, 1951.* While she did this, Estelle took Pearl on her lap and looked at her, trying to imagine herself as a judge of Swaithey's Most Beautiful Baby. Pearl's hair was as pale as lemonade. Her eyes were large and blue and liquid. Her mouth was fine like Irene's, with the same sweetness to it. 'You must win, cherub,' Estelle instructed Pearl, 'our hopes are on you.'

Sonny refused to go to the fête. He had no money to spare on trifles, no time to waste on fancy dress of any kind.

Estelle went in the pony cart with Mary and Tim. It was a hot day, a record for May, the wireless said. The lanes were snowy with Damsel's Lace. Mary wore a new dress made from a remnant and hand-smocked by Estelle. In the pony cart she began to detest the feel of the smocking against her chest and kept clawing at it.

They stopped at Irene's cottage. Pearl was sleeping in a wicker basket, wrapped in her white christening shawl. They laid the basket on some sacks that smelled of barley. After a bit, Pearl began to snore. Mary had never heard anyone snore except her father, let alone a baby.

'Why is she?' Mary asked Irene.

'Oh,' said Irene, 'she's always been a snorer, right from the off.'

Mary knelt down in the cart and looked at Pearl. The snoring entranced her so, it took her mind off the smocking.

The Beautiful Baby Contest was to be held in a large green tent, ex-army. The mothers would line up on hard

chairs and hold their babies aloft as the judges passed. From thirty-six entrants, five would be selected for a second round. There would be one winner and four consolation prizes. All the way there in the cart, Estelle thought about the word 'consolation' and how she didn't like it at all. Things which promised to console never did any such thing.

The afternoon grew hotter and hotter, as if all of June and July were being crammed into this single day. At the tombola Estelle won a chocolate cake which began to melt, so she told Mary and Tim to eat it. There was no breeze to make the home-made bunting flutter.

Towards two o'clock, Irene took Pearl to the shade of the chestnuts to give her a drink of rosehip syrup and to change her nappy. Mary asked to go with her. The heat and the smocking had made her chest itch so much she had scratched it raw and now little circles of blood were visible among the silky stitches. She wanted to show Irene these blood beads. Being with Irene was, for Mary, like being inside some kind of shelter that you'd made yourself. It was quiet. Nobody shouted.

Irene examined the blood on the smocking. She undid Mary's dress and bathed the scratches with the damp rags she carried for cleaning up Pearl.

'There's hours of work in smocking, Mary,' Irene said.

'I know,' said Mary.

They said nothing more. Irene fastened the dress again, kneeling by Mary on the cool grass. She held her shoulders and looked at her. Mary's glasses were dirty and misted up, her thin hair lay damp round her head like a cap. Irene understood that she was refusing to cry. 'Right,' she said, 'now we have to get Pearl ready to be beautiful.'

She handed Mary a clean square of white towelling and Mary laid it carefully on the grass. She smoothed it down before she folded it. Irene took off Pearl's wet nappy and laid Pearl on the clean folded square. She took out of her



bag a tin of talcum and powdered Pearl's bottom until the shiny flesh was velvety and dry. Mary watched. There was something about Pearl that mesmerised her. It was as if Pearl were a lantern slide and Mary sitting on a chair in the dark. Mary took off her glasses. Without them, it seemed to her that there were two Pearls, or almost two, lying in the chestnut shade, and Mary heard herself say a thought aloud, like her mother did. 'If there were two,' she said to Irene, 'then there would be one for you and one for me.'

'Two what, Mary?'

But Mary stopped. She attached her glasses to her ears. 'Oh,' she said, 'I don't know what I meant. I expect I was thinking about the cake Mother won, because you didn't eat any.'

'It's hot,' said Irene, fastening the safety pin of Pearl's nappy. 'It's going to be sweltering in that tent.'

The mothers crowded in. There were far more mothers than chairs, so some had to stand, faint from the burning afternoon and the weight of the babies. The judges' opening remarks could hardly be heard above the crying. Lady Elliot from Swaithey Hall, neat in her Jacquar scarf, said she had never seen such a crowd of pretty tots. She said: 'Now I and my fellow judges are going to pass among you and on our second passing we will give out rosettes to the final five.'

There was laughter at the idea of the rosettes. The babies were hushed by this sudden ripple of noise. Estelle, with Mary and Tim, stood by one of the tent flaps, praying for a breeze and for the unknown to arrive in Irene's lap. Mary had her eyes closed. She felt a sudden sorrowful fury. She didn't want there to be a contest after all.

The judges barely looked at Pearl. They walked on with just a glance and the only thing that came to Irene waiting patiently on her chair was a waft of French perfume as Lady Elliot passed.

The competition was won by a Mrs Nora Flynn. The unknown became a trug and trowel, and Mrs Nora Flynn laid her baby, Sally Mahonia, in the trug, like a prize cabbage.

On the way home in the cart, Irene seemed as content as if the day had never been. Timmy was silent, pale from an afternoon like a dream, tugged here and there and seeing nothing but shimmer. Estelle said bitterly that a trug and trowel could not be classified as 'unknown' and she drove the pony at a slow, disappointed pace.

Mary said: 'I didn't clap when that Sally Mahonia won. I didn't clap at all.' And then, tired out from scratching her chest and eating cake and wanting Pearl to be recognised as the Most Beautiful Baby in Swaithey, she fell asleep in Irene's lap.

Pearl, unvisited by any thoughts, slept near her on the barley sacks, softly snoring.

Mary:

I can remember way back, almost to when I was born.

I can remember lying in my parents' bed, jammed between them. It was an iron bed with a sag in the middle. They put me into the sag and gravity made them fall towards me, wedging me in.

Our land was full of stones. As soon as I could walk, I was given a bucket with a picture of a starfish on it and told to pick stones out of the earth. My father would walk ahead with a big pail that was soon so heavy he could barely carry it. I think he thought about stones all the time and he tried to make me think about them all the time. I was supposed to take my starfish bucket with me wherever I went and have my mind on the stones.

I can remember getting lost in a flat field. It was winter and the dark came round me and hid me from everything and swallowed up my voice. The only thing I could see was my bucket, which had a little gleam on it, and the only thing I could hear was the wind in the firs. I began to walk towards the wind, calling to my father. I walked right into the trees. They sighed and sighed. I put my arms round one of the scratchy fir trunks and stayed there, waiting. I thought Jesus might come through the wood holding up a lantern.

My parents came and found me with torches. My mother was sobbing. My father picked me up and wrapped me inside his old coat that smelled of seed. He said: 'Mary, why didn't you stay where you were?' I said: 'My bucket is lost on the field.' My father said: 'Never mind about the bucket. You're the one.'

But when I was three, I was no longer the one. Tim was born and my father kept saying the arrival of Timmy was a miracle. I asked my mother whether I had been a miracle and she said: 'Oh, men are like that, especially farmers. Pay no heed.'

But after Timmy came, everything changed. My mother and father used to put him between them in their sagging bed and fall towards him. When I saw this, I warned them I would kick Timmy to death; I said I would put his pod through the mangle. So my father began to think me evil. I'd go and tell him things and he'd say: 'Don't talk to me, Mary. Don't you talk to me.' So I stopped talking to him at all. When we went stone picking together, we would go up and down the furrows, up and down, up and down, with each of our minds locked away from the other.

My vision began to be faulty soon after Timmy was born. I would see light bouncing at the corner of my eye. Distant things like birds became invisible. People would separate and become two of themselves.

I tried to tell my mother how peculiar everything was becoming. She was going through a phase of needing to touch surfaces all the time. Her favourite surface was the wheel of the sewing machine and her long, white thumb would go round and round it, like something trapped. When I told her about people becoming two of themselves, she put her hand fiercely over my mouth. 'Ssh!' she said. '*Don't*. I'm superstitious.'

So it was my teacher, Miss McRae at the village school, who discovered my faulty vision. She told my mother: 'Mary cannot see the blackboard, Mrs Ward.' Which was true. The blackboard was like a waterfall to me.

I went with my mother on a bus from Swaithey to Leiston to see an oculist. The bus had to make an extra stop to let some ducks cross the road. I ran to the driver's window so that I could see the ducks, but all I could see were five blobs creeping along like caterpillars.

A week later I got my glasses. Timmy laughed at me with them on, so I hit his ear. I hoped I'd hit him so hard his vision would go faulty too. 'How are they, then?' asked my father crossly, holding Timmy.

'They are a miracle,' I said.

Miss McRae looked like a person made of bark.

Her back was as straight and as thin as a comb. Her nose was fierce. Her long hands were hard and freckled.

Every child in that school was afraid of Miss McRae when they first saw her. They thought, if they went near her, they'd be scratched. But when she spoke, her Scottish voice brought a feeling of peace into the room and everyone was quiet. She began every day with a story of something she'd done when she was a girl, as if she knew she looked to us like a person who had never been a child. The first words I heard her say were: 'When I was a lass, I lived in a lighthouse.' And after that I liked Miss McRae

and began to tell her some of the things I refused to tell my father.

That summer, sometime after the Beautiful Baby Contest, Miss McRae said to us: 'Now, class, on Monday, I want you each to bring something to school. I want you to bring in something that is important or precious to you, or just something pretty that you like. And then I want you to tell me and the other children *why* you like it or why it is precious to you. It can be anything you like. No one need be afraid of looking silly. All you have to remember is to be able to say why you've chosen it.'

On the way home from school, I began to think about what I would take as my precious thing. When I'd been born, my mother had given me a silver chain with a silver and glass locket on it. Inside the locket was a piece of Grandmother Livia's hair and my mother had said recently that I should treasure this locket for always and that, if I ever wore it, I should touch it every ten minutes to make certain it was still round my neck. I used to look at it sometimes. It made me wonder what Grandma Livia had been wearing round her neck when she got into the glider. I thought it was the kind of thing Miss McRae would like and I could hear her say approvingly: 'What a pretty wee thing, Mary.' But it wasn't really precious to me. And if a thing isn't precious to you then it isn't and that's it; it won't become precious suddenly between Friday and Monday.

When I got home from school, I looked around my room. I thought I might find something precious I'd forgotten about. But there was hardly anything in my room: just my bed, which had come out of a cottage hospital sale, and a table with a lamp on it and a huge old wardrobe, in which I kept my sweet tin and my spelling book and my boots. The tin had a picture of a Swiss chalet on it. It contained at that time two ounces of sherbert lemons and three Macintoshes toffees. I got it out and put a sherbert lemon into my mouth. I thought the little burst of sherbert might wake me

up to the preciousness of something, but it didn't and then I had this thought: no one has ever told me where Grandma Livia was *going* in that glider. Was she just going to Ipswich or was she going to the Tyrrhenian Sea?

By Sunday evening, after looking in my mother's sewing basket and in her button box and in all the crannies of the house where an important thing might have hidden itself and finding nothing, I decided that I couldn't go to school the next day. I would walk a long way from our farm. I would find a hayfield coming to its second cropping and I would sit in it and think about my coming life as a boy. I would examine myself for signs. Or I might climb a tree and stay there out of reach of everyone and everything, including all the stones in the soil.

For my mid-day dinner, my mother made me pickle sandwiches and a thermos of lemon squash. In the winter, the thermos had tea in it and the taste of the tea lingered over into the summer and came into the lemon squash, tepid and strange.

At the bottom of our lane, instead of turning left towards Swaithey and school, I turned right and began to run. I kept running until I was beyond the fields that were ours and then I stopped under a signpost and sat down. It was very hot there, even in that early morning sun. I drank some of my lemon squash. And then after about five minutes I got up and began tearing back the way I had come. I had remembered my precious thing.

I was late for the class. I had had some trouble on the way with Irene, who said: 'What are you thinking of, Mary Ward? Whatever are you like?'

'Please, Irene,' I begged. '*Please.*'

I was in Mr Harker's house, where Irene worked. Mr Harker had turned his cellar into a factory where he made cricket bats. The smell of wood and oil came up into all the rooms. A painted sign on his gate said: *Harker's Bats.*