



Why had she forgotten the little ones?

An email from the most unexpected of places unlocks a childhood mystery.

The Little Ones

The smells of my childhood: the sweet-sour grassy aroma of the rabbit hutch; the nose-tingling eucalyptus of a pine berry squashed between the fingers; the sunshine scent of a cheap orange ice-lolly as it melts and runs down your hand. The sounds of my childhood: the wood pigeons' soft morning hooting; the rattle of bottles in the milk float; the soft murmur of adult voices in the kitchen below my bedroom. The sights of my childhood: the green-glass eyes of my beloved cat, Zoey, the small pink Hawthorn berries on my bedroom wallpaper; Mrs Percival with her long pearly-white hair and small dry smile.

The email sitting in my inbox is from DPBrown72@gmail.com (a name I don't recognise) and has the subject line *A message about Mrs Percival*. This name I do remember, and it is why I have now descended into a deep nostalgic daydream. I take a gulp of wine and it brings me back to the present, and I feel a small wave of shame. I argued with the kids before they went to bed, and it ended with my losing my temper and saying something I swore I'd never say *If you don't like it here, you can always go and live with your father!*

Was I as difficult and lazy as my kids are when I was a teenager? I try to remember, and it dislodges a memory of going to the old house on Edge Lane with a teenage friend, many years after we'd left home. I'd been amazed to find Mrs Percival still there in number 48; more stooped, thinner, her wrinkles a little deeper, but still very much Mrs Percival, with her watchful bird-like face.

The first time I saw her was when I was about eight, so it must have been in 1977. My neighbour's son, Daniel, and I were both lonely, awkward kids who found solace in each other and became inseparable. We lived in the two sides of a grand Victorian semi-detached house in Manchester and were both the kids of busy single mums. It was a different time then; on non-school days children were put out of the door after breakfast with a sandwich for lunch and a bottle of pop. Hours later you would reluctantly leave the day's adventures behind you, and answer the call of your name across the darkening garden. It was an idyllic: no screens, virtually technology-free existence, with nothing but mud, trees and bicycles to while away the long Summer days.

My mind drifts again. It is a Wednesday, sometime in August, and so hot that the tarmac on the road outside the front of our houses has gone soft. Daniel and I are digging it up with bits of fallen slate that we found

in the front garden. We are sweaty and bored and beginning to get a bit fractious.

Daniel sighs, then speaks. 'Let's play police hunt again, we could catch some diamond robbers?'

I hold my sticky fingers to my nose and breathe the aniseedy-petrol smell of the tarmac in deeply. 'Nah, that's boring.'

'Ok let's play dens. We could make a fire and use that old pan to make garden stew in again.'

'Nah, we did that yesterday.'

Daniel makes a *hummph* sound and closes his mouth tight.

I take a sideways squinting look at the old house next door. As usual the windows are blank and impenetrable behind their heavy curtains; but the lawn, as ever, is mysteriously mown; the flower beds mysteriously neat. We've never seen a gardener here though, and I've begun to wonder if elves do it in the night. In all our short lives we've never seen anyone in the house either, no sign of life, no lights or sounds, so whenever we go near it, we feel a frisson of fear.

'Let's go into the garden.'

Daniel follows my gaze and his face blanches behind his freckles. 'We can't go in there!'

'Why?' I suddenly feel a bit mean and reckless. 'Are you chicken?'

'No, but -'

'But what?'

'That house is wrong, it looks like it's waiting for us.'

I have pins and needles in my legs so stand up and stretch. 'They're probably just really rich and live in India or something and they have a servant to keep it really nice for them for when they get back.' I reach down and take his hand, 'Come on.' reluctantly he lets me take it and pull him up.

I lead the way towards the house, hugging close to the high, granite front walls. We reach the entrance. There's a broad sweep of gravel drive ending at two lion-topped gate posts. The house has a name, chiselled deep into the dark stone: *Hascombe*. I hesitate on the threshold, but the shame in being called a coward over a dare I have imposed on myself, is infinitely worse than any other outcome of trespassing that I can imagine.

I take a deep breath and step over the boundary from paving stone to gravel and Daniel follows. We teeter at the end of the drive with nerves and indecision. The lawn rises up towards the house in a steep bank. I grab hold of Daniel's sleeve and pull him towards it. We race over and flop down to a squat at the bottom, it offers us some protection from the blank-eyed gaze of the big old house. I dare myself to stand up a bit and peek over the top of the bank, there's a menace about the place, even in the bright sunshine. The air vibrates with the buzzing of bees.

I get up, dragging Daniel up to stand beside me. 'There's no-one there, come on, let's go round the back.'

'I don't know, I-'

I run on ahead, knowing that though naturally timid, Daniel's pride won't let him be outdone by a mere girl. He follows me silently.

We skirt around the front garden and turn the corner where the grand front door sits on its broad steps. We run past it as fast as we can and I feel a sudden chill run over me and the hairs spring up on my arms and legs. A high stone wall runs across the drive and there's a half-rotten wooden door set in it by the corner where it meets the house. Breathlessly we skirt along the edge of the drive until we get to it. I try the old rusted handle and to my heart-stopping surprise, the door opens easily.

It takes us a while to take in what we are seeing, like the adjustment of your eyes when you come out of a dark cinema into the white-light of the outside world. Ahead of us is a walled kitchen garden, to our right is a huge ornate greenhouse, at least thirty feet long. The glass is misty with age, huge plants inside pressing against the foggy panes like eager faces. We approach the entrance cautiously and peek in. The scene inside is like a prehistoric jungle, and I half expect a dinosaur's head to push through the tropical foliage and snag me with its hard lizard-like eyes. There are old tree-ferns, grown so tall that their heads are bent against the roof, like tall men stooping in a low room. In amongst the dark glossy foliage, the bright fleshy flower heads of orchids twinkle like scattered jewels. There's an overwhelming smell of green things, and growth and life that it is intoxicating. For a moment Daniel looks like he is caught in a beautiful dream, but then the expression on his face seems to liquify and re-set into one of utter terror. His eyes are fixed on the air behind me, but before I can turn, a white wizened hand has clamped itself on my shoulder and a thin reedy voice proclaims 'what are you little monsters doing in my garden?!'

We sip the sweet milky tea and inspect Mrs Percival over the rims of our china cups. I am glad that I've stopped shaking. She is tiny, not much bigger than me. Her skin is wrinkled and papery and her long white hair hangs loose over her shoulders. She sits very straight, with her hands folded primly in her lap. She's wearing a grey dress, high necked and long sleeved, a Beatrix Potter style white apron and battered old clogs. She smiles at me in a shrewd, but not unpleasant way. I take another sip of my tea and it goes down the wrong way. I'm terrified of staining the beautiful embroidered table-cloth in front of me, so I manage to keep my mouth shut and the splutter happens entirely internally like a firework going off in a tin. Wordlessly, Mrs Percival passes me a cotton handkerchief to wipe my face with, it smells of lavender.

She puts her hands back in her lap. 'We used to use this room all the time when I was young, but I only open it up for guests now.'

'It's b-b-b-beautiful.' Daniel stutters.

Mrs Percival looks around the room with a satisfied air. 'I've left it exactly as it was'.

We spend the next couple of hours in a kind of enchantment. Mrs Percival gives us a tour of the house, and we follow her funny hobbling steps, our minds bubbling with questions. There's a grand dining room with a sixteen-seater mahogany table stretching towards the bay windows like a fallen monolith; a scullery and kitchen with a huge old range and deep butlers sinks; bedrooms with big iron beds so high and rounded with quilts and eiderdowns that they remind me of the illustrations in *The Princess and the Pea*; bathrooms with chess-board tiles and claw-footed baths so big and deep you could almost swim in them. But the room that strikes us the deepest, the room we will come back to many times over the next four years is the nursery. This is no ordinary nursery, this is a cathedral like room with huge windows, crammed with dolls-houses, play-tents, dressing-up clothes and numerous antique toys that are simultaneously beautiful and creepy. But most wonderful of all is the huge wooden gymnastics frame that stretches from floor to ceiling; festooned with ropes and hoops and criss-crossed with balancing frames and ladders.

Mrs Percival smiles benignly at our astonishment. 'This is where I see the little ones. I would play here with my brother and sister. There was so much happiness in this room.'

I lay a hand tentatively, longingly, on the old wooden frame. Can we?...

She nods. 'Yes, do.'

Daniel and I swap a look of silent joy. 'Race you!' I shout, and start to scale to the top of nearest ladder. Daniel is up after me like a shot. 'I win!' I pant triumphantly, and press my hand against the yellowed roof to steady myself. I look up and my heart stops. There are two small dusty handprints on the ceiling next to mine, and under each a name is written in faded pencil. My chest constricts with a strange kind of sadness and suddenly I want to be back on the ground. Daniel watches me with confusion as I rush back down the ladder. Mrs Percival has a faraway look in her eyes. 'Yes, the little ones love it here, they always do.'

The memory has left me feeling strangely tearful, and I wipe at my eyes with the back of my hand. I click on the email and open it:

Dear Diana

I don't know if you remember me, and I hope you don't mind my having looked you up, but it's Daniel here, we used to be good friends many years ago, and I have very happy memories of that time. The reason I've got in touch is that I recently, by sheer chance, found out something quite extraordinary about our old neighbour, Mrs Percival. Do you remember the play-room, and how Mrs Percival would talk about the 'little ones', herself and her brother and her sister? Remember how we always presumed that she was an old spinster? Well she wasn't. She did grow up in that house, but she was an only child and the children that used that playroom before us were her own children, Lotty and Jacob. They died in the second world war just weeks after their dad, when a stray bomb hit the farm they were sent to as Evacuees. Mrs Percival thought they'd be safe there, and apparently she couldn't live with the guilt and shut herself away until we found her. Isn't that sad?

I can't read any more, My heart is beating fast and I'm half-blinded by tears. I rush up the stairs and go into my children's bedrooms one, then the other. I sit by their beds and stroke their hair, stare into the impossible beauty of their sleeping faces. Lotty and Jacob, the names I have unconsciously given my own children, but also, I remember for the first time in all these years, the faded pencil names scratched on the ceiling of that extraordinary room.

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