Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Impossible!

Written by

Michelle Magorian

Published by

Troika Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Published by TROIKA BOOKS
First published 2014
Troika Books, Well House, Green Lane, Ardleigh CO7 7PD, UK
www.troikabooks.com

Text copyright © Michelle Magorian 2014

The moral right of the author has been asserted
All rights reserved

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-909991-04-0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Printed in Poland

1

September 1959

'I'LL BE FRANK WITH YOU,' SAID MISS DAGLEISH, her long, lean figure towering over a polished mahogany desk. 'You resemble a boy in a gymslip.'

Josie stood smartly to attention in her navy uniform, squeezing the muscles in her nostrils in an attempt to prevent the pungent stench of lavender seeping into her nose. But there was no escape. Its aroma continued to hover above the ancient furniture in the dimly lit headmistress's study. The smell always reminded her of the time her mother used to wash the knickers of an elderly neighbour who kept wetting herself. Whenever the neighbour visited their flat, she always ponged of it, and ever since, the slightest whiff of lavender brought back memories of stale wee.

'What on earth possessed you to have it cut again?' demanded Miss Dagleish. 'It was far too short three weeks ago when you started here. Did someone force you?'

'No, madam,' replied Josie. 'I asked the hairdresser to do it.'

'Hairdresser! My dear, you have the appearance of someone who has been dragged into a barbershop and had

clippers taken to their head.' She gave an exasperated sigh. 'It's difficult enough to find acting roles for a red-headed girl as it is. And yes, I know you have the advantage of being small for your age and of possessing freckles, and freckles are what producers want nowadays. Unfortunately for us you have an overabundance of them. It would have been more beneficial to have had a handful scattered either side of your nose. Talking of which, is there something the matter with yours?'

'No, madam.'

'Then will you kindly have the courtesy not to twitch it when I am speaking to you.' Miss Dagleish shook her head as though lost for words. 'Good wigs are so expensive these days. You realise this means I am now quite unable to put you up for any work until your hair grows and that's hardly fair on your aunt when she has been generous enough to make a substantial contribution towards your fees.'

'What about boys' roles, madam?'

'That's not why you had it cut short, is it?'

'Yes, madam. Boy's parts aren't so soppy. I always played boys in me last school. Me sister had her hair cut short when she was twelve too, and she got a boy's part.'

'And what kind of educational establishment was she attending at the time?'

'A grammar school, madam.'

'Ah. She played a boy in an amateur production. That explains it.'

Before Josie could tell her that Elsie had played the role in a professional production in the very theatre where she was now working, Miss Dagleish's arm shot up, the palm of

her hand directed at Josie. Her sign for silence.

'This is a London stage school, Josephine,' she said icily, 'not a small town dramatic society. Our pupils work in the world of the theatre, film and the BBC – where girls play girls. In spite of the fact that you are a mere beginner, as a pupil of this establishment it is vital that you think and behave like a professional. Is that clear?'

'Yes, madam,' murmured Josie.

'I had assumed that since your brother and sister are in the profession, they would have made this clear.' She wrenched her lips sideways into a taut smile. 'Is your sister in work at the moment?'

'Yes, madam. On Saturdee I'm watchin' the run-through of the play she's rehearsin' at Winford rep.'

'Ah. *Life With Father*. One of our junior pupils has a role in it. Michael Bailey. He's playing one of the four sons.'

'I know the boy playin' the youngest son,' added Josie.

'Really? How?'

'He's the half-brother of my sister's fiancé.'

'I see. And what of *your* brother, Ralph Hollis? Which Shakespeare play is he appearing in at present?'

Josie suppressed a smile. It always sounded funny when people pronounced his name *Rayfe*.

'He ain't in a Shakespeare one. I mean, *isn't*, madam. He's in a play called *The Hostage*.'

'The Hostage! But your aunt told me he was working in Stratford.'

'He is. He's in the Theatre Workshop Company.'

The muscles in Miss Dagleish's face went into spasm. It

was then that Josie remembered that Auntie Win had called the director of the Theatre Workshop Company, 'That Joan woman who swears like a trooper.' It was obvious that Miss Dagleish knew what her aunt knew.

'This play you mentioned, have you seen it?' she asked Josie.

'No. Me mum says it's only for adults.'

'And a certain class of adult, I'm afraid. Not what I call theatre. No style.' She cleared her throat hurriedly. 'Now, although it's impossible for you to be put up for any auditions this term, I do have some good news for you. You are to move up to the next form.'

Josie was puzzled. She had already been moved into the row of Form II desks when it was discovered she had covered all the Form I work at her previous school.

'Please, madam,' said Josie hesitantly, 'I'm already in the Form II row.'

'I am quite aware of that, my dear. On Monday, you will move your books into the Form III row. From what the teachers tell me, the work in Form II is far too easy for you. You will remain in the same ballet class and will join Form III's acting, singing, make-up lessons and etiquette classes.'

Josie was speechless for a moment. Miss Dagleish stared at her.

'Oh. Yes, madam,' Josie blurted out hurriedly. 'Thank you, madam.'

'You may go. And remember, Josephine, in future I want more hair from you.'

'Yes, madam.'

Josie curtsied and backed out of the room, only to bump into a tall, gangly girl called Doris and her mousey-haired, dumpy friend, Thelma, both of whom had been lurking in the corridor.

'What audition is she putting you up for?' Doris demanded.

'And why weren't we chosen?' said Thelma. 'We've been here far longer than you.'

'It wasn't about an audition,' said Josie.

'Oh? What was it about then?' asked Doris.

'I'm being put into the Form III row.'

'Ooh, clever clogs!' they chorused.

'We'll have to start calling you *Professor*,' said Thelma.

'You'll end up like Clive,' Doris added. 'This is his second year in Form IV and he says he has to do exactly the same work as he did last year.'

It was at that moment Josie realised that if she was going to be with the thirteen and fourteen year olds in Form III from Monday, she would be put into the last form the following year and stay there for three years doing the same lessons.

As they ran off shrieking with laughter, Josie headed down the large hallway towards a door at the side of the staircase. She pushed it open and hopped down the stairs to the rear room in the basement. At the back and in the middle of the room were long wooden benches with square cubby-holes underneath for shoes. Attached to each bench was a wooden wall with pegs for clothes. Josie hurried over to the one in the centre to get changed for her dance class,

took off her long grey socks and sat down to put on her black tights, lifting her knees away from the floor to avoid the splinters in the floorboards. Three other girls were chatting and changing on the other side. They were in her Grade IV ballet class and had been at the stage school since the juniors. They avoided talking to her because she was small – the smallest in the senior part of the school – and they were jealous. The smaller you were, the more chance you had of being given work because you could play roles your age and younger. During her first week she had overheard one of them saying loudly enough for her to hear, 'She has no talent. She was only accepted because of her size.'

Seated cross-legged at the end of her bench in leotard and tights was Hilda, a thirteen year old with long chestnut-brown hair scraped into a bun. Oblivious to everyone, she had her nose in one of her Lorna Hill ballet books.

Even when she was reading, Hilda appeared graceful. She was the best dancer in the school. One of the boys in her class had told Josie that she had broken her leg in an accident, and that although she had recovered, it meant that she wasn't good enough for the high standards of a ballet school, so her parents had decided to send her to a stage school instead. It was her second term. She and Josie were the only pupils who had received proper ballet lessons and had taken Royal Academy of Dance examinations. Back home in Sternsea, Josie's ballet teacher was a down-to-earth retired ballerina, whereas the elderly dance mistress at the stage school, Miss Frobisher, did nothing but sway from side to side in a long skirt, tossing a silk scarf into the

air. Her assistant, an ex-pupil called Miss Peabody, couldn't demonstrate any dance positions either and had a back as straight as a ramrod. It was so stiff Josie wondered how she was able to bend over to tie up her shoelaces.

Every class would begin with a few stretching exercises after which Miss Frobisher would produce pictures of women posing in Grecian robes. Miss Peabody, who knew these tableaux by heart, would make the pupils imitate the poses by placing their arms and legs into the correct positions. They then had to walk gracefully into each pose over and over again.

Josie remembered the day she and her aunt had visited the school and how impressed she had been to see Hilda twirling in graceful pirouettes around these tableaux as the other pupils glided effortlessly into them. Sadly, once she was a pupil, Josie discovered that they were rarely allowed to be too energetic because dance classes were always accompanied by gramophone music. If they jumped too high it would cause the needle to scratch a record, and their parents would be sent a bill to pay for the cost of a new one.

The gramophone was also used for singing lessons, where they had to sing songs accompanied by more records. They were usually sickly sweet ones about roses and violets and the humming of the bee-ee-ees. During one of these classes, Miss Tilbury, the singing mistress, had told Hilda that she had a lovely voice and that when she was older she would be ideal for Noel Coward musicals where *elegance* was essential. 'None of this rock and roll nonsense,' she had added firmly. Josie had been tempted to ask Miss Tilbury what she

thought of the musical her Auntie Win had taken her to see the previous week but a warning instinct made her keep her mouth shut.

The musical, *My Fair Lady*, was the story of a cockney dustman's daughter who had been taken from the gutter where she had been selling flowers, and had been turned into a young lady for a bet. It was the scenes with the cockneys leaping up and whirling round each other that Josie loved best. She longed to be allowed to dance with the same gusto and energy. That same night, she had overheard people in the seats behind them talking enthusiastically about another new musical, *West Side Story*. It was the most revolutionary musical they had ever seen. Auntie Win must have been eavesdropping too because as they made their way out through the crowded auditorium she said, 'I'll take you to see that one in your half-term.'

Just then there was the sound of a bell ringing.

She gave a start and ran, towards the stairs.

Please let today's dance class be less boring, she thought.

At breaktime, stepping out into the small, scrubby garden at the back of the school, Josie dashed over to where a group of boys were kicking a ball. The fourth form girls had gathered in their usual spot by the far wall, drinking in Esmeralda Havilland's every word. Esmeralda was the head girl, a curvaceous fifteen year old with short, wavy blond hair who walked regally about the corridors as though already touched by fame.

Because she bragged about her meetings with famous

actors and actresses, the girls ate up her stories about them, as though knowing what they had said and done put themselves in their hallowed company.

'So then what happened?' she overheard Brenda Mackie, one of the awestruck admirers, ask.

'He escorted me into a coffee house in Kensington where they played Latin American music. The coffee was served in flat glass cups. It was very sophisticated. And we ate open sandwiches. That's without bread on top. *Swedish style*, they call it. So exotic!'

'Gosh!' said a skinny girl called Merle.

Josie suspected Esmeralda was about to describe every garment she was wearing at the time to her open-mouthed audience and it was the last thing she wanted to hear. Without asking if she could join in the boys' kick-about, she weaved in among them, chasing their ball until, with a balletic touch, she whacked it sideways with the inside of her foot towards a tall dark-haired boy with spots. Her older brother Harry had taught her the rudiments of the game before emigrating to Australia with his wife.

The boys said nothing, but unbeknown to her they peered over her head, their eyebrows raised. As Josie continued to swerve happily around them, she kept glancing over her shoulder, expecting her two friends, Jack and Derek to appear. She had missed their company that morning. Their lopsided grins always made the ordinary lessons like history and geography bearable, and in the acting lessons the three of them would always gravitate towards one another. She stopped short, having realised that from Monday they

wouldn't be in the same form any more. But then she remembered she would still see them in the dance classes.

'When are Jack and Derek coming back from the auditions, Gordon?' she asked one of the Form I boys.

'Haven't you heard?' said Len, a stocky boy with frizzy hair. 'They've been offered a tour with the Scottish Shakespeare Travellers' Company. Lucky so and sos.'

Josie froze.

'Both of 'em?'

'Yes. They're sharing the same role. They start rehearsals on Monday. They've got a three-month contract.'

Josie felt as though someone had kicked the football directly into her stomach.

'That's good,' she forced herself to say.

After the deportment class where they had to walk around a room with a book on their head, remembering to pull in their tummy muscles and imagine they were wearing a corset, Josie dived back into the cloakroom and heaped her enormous duffle coat around her shoulders. It was several sizes too large for her so that she could grow into it. On her first day, Esmeralda Havilland had commented loudly to Merle that it looked as though Josie was wearing a blanket, and had laughed at her. But Josie didn't care. Sliding her arms into the sleeves, it was as though her family were wrapping their arms round her. She plonked her wide-brimmed navy hat onto her head, pulled on her white gloves, grabbed her bottle-green attaché case and climbed up the stairs to the hall.

Outside, it was already growing dark. With a heavy heart she walked down the stone steps and headed for the bus stop hauling herself onto the first double decker that pulled up. She dragged her case up the stairs. She was in luck. Her favourite seat, the single one at the front, was empty and it cheered her a little. As the bus juddered between stops, she rested her cheek against the window, drinking in the blazing London streets below and the scurrying commuters on their way home. She wondered what her parents were doing in their ground-floor flat in Sternsea, and wished she were going back there . . .

She thought back to the day of her audition, how she had stood on the pavement, taking in the grand houses surrounding the square. Her aunt, who had visited the school earlier on behalf of Josie's parents on one of their visitors' days, had been impressed to find that a school whose fees were half those of other London stage schools stood in such 'genteel' surroundings. And Josie, who had had always been at her happiest when acting in school productions, had gazed up at the old house that was Miss Dagleish's stage school and had thought, *This is where I want to go!*

It had taken a few days to adjust to its smallness. She had been used to being in a school where each form had its own classroom. At the stage school, the four senior forms shared one room. The row of double desks on the left was Form I, the two rows in the middle were Forms II and III and the row on the right by the display board was Form IV. Each form took it in turns to have lessons while the other forms attended singing, acting and dance classes in the other rooms.

It suddenly occurred to her that from Monday she would no longer be eating dinner at the school but would be expected to join the third- and fourth-formers at a tea house where Miss Dagleish had an arrangement with the manageress. Only she wasn't to call it dinner; she had to call it lunch. Dinner, she had been informed, was the meal you ate in the evening, unless you had something on toast instead, in which case you must call it supper. It was all part of their training in dining-room etiquette, which involved not only knowing how to hold a knife and fork correctly but which piece of cutlery to pick up first.

She remembered her first bewildering etiquette lesson when Miss Bentley-Higham had announced grandly, 'Remember, gels, it's *napkins* not *serviettes*.' Glancing at Josie she had immediately added, 'And for those who don't know what a napkin is, it's a square piece of starched white linen that you place on your lap or tuck into the front of your collar to prevent food spillages soiling your garments when eating a meal.'

The bus gave a jolt. It was her stop. She snatched up her case and leaped down the stairs. It was time to put on a cheerful face for her aunt.

2

Auntie Win

JOSIE RACED UP THE ORNATE 1930s CIRCULAR stairway past the other flats to the second landing and her aunt's familiar door. Her aunt had only been in the flat for a few months. It was the first time she had lived on her own since leaving the Women's Royal Army Corps. For years she had saved every penny of her pay so that she could afford a radiogram and rugs, never dreaming that one day she would win enough money on the premium bonds to buy herself a posh flat in London.

Unfortunately, she was always losing the key. Several times Josie had needed to ask Mrs Jenkins from one of the other flats if she could borrow a chair so that she could stand on it and push open the window above the door. Her aunt would lift her up so that Josie could slide backwards through it on her stomach, jump down into the hallway and open it with the spare key that was kept in the cutlery drawer under the kitchen table. It was either that or climb up the fire escape at the back of the building and enter by the kitchen door, which was usually unlocked.

Josie glanced up at the light above the door and hesitated

for a moment. Should she tell her aunt she had let her and her parents down by making it impossible for a producer to cast her in a play this term? She thought back to the day she had left Sternsea, how her father had stood on the railway platform as she and her mother leaned happily out of the train window, chatting to him. Her mother had travelled with Josie and her luggage to help her settle in with her aunt.

'When you come 'ome at 'alf term and you're talkin' like a toff,' he had said, 'will you still speak to us?'

Miss Dagleish had explained to her parents that any pupil with a working class accent would be taught to speak RP – Received Pronunciation.

'Don't be daft. Of course she will,' said her mother. 'Elsie and Ralph still do.'

'And Auntie Win,' added Josie. 'She talks posh too, Dad.'

'Ah. That's cos she caught *officeritis*,' he had said, grinning. 'As soon as she started goin' up in the ranks, she started talkin' different. You can't 'ave an army major soundin' as though she's sellin' spuds dahn the market. A major in the WRAC 'as to speak wiv a plum in 'er mouth, don't she?'

'That's enough!' her mother had warned, fighting to control her laughter.

They had been interrupted by the sound of a guard's whistle. Her father had stepped back, and as the train pulled out Josie had waved frantically, startled to feel a strange ache in her throat.

What was she going to say when they rang that night?

She opened the door into the wide, carpeted passage. As she hung her coat up on one of the hooks on the wall, she was reminded of Miss Dagleish's disapproving gaze when she had first spotted it, preferring Josie to have worn a neat navy blue girl's coat, not an enormous boy's duffle coat that was brown. But it was so comfortable. All boys' clothes were comfortable. Girls had to put up with dresses with fiddly bows and pastel cardigans with endless buttons. It wasn't fair.

From the sitting room, she could hear Julie Andrews singing *Wouldn't It Be Loverly* from *My Fair Lady* and then there was silence, broken a few moments later by an American chorus singing '*Papa-pa-paya! Papa-pa-paya!*' She couldn't help smiling. Within seconds there came the mellow, relaxed tones of Perry Como singing,

'Don't let the stars get in your eyes.

'Don't let the moon break your heart.'

A tall, middle-aged woman with a pointed face and a dash of grey in her permed brown hair peered round the door. She was wearing a pair of old slacks and a man's white shirt covered in royal blue paint. She beamed and began dancing, flinging her arms and legs about.

'Too many nights,' sang Josie, joining in with Perry Como.

'Too many stars,' Auntie Win sang in answer.

'Too many stars. Too many stars,' they sang together. *'You're the only one. You're the only one I'll ever love!'*

When the record had stopped playing they leaned back against the coats and laughed.

'Beans on toast?' asked her aunt.

'Yeah. Please.'

Or would that be too dangerous? thought Josie.

Her aunt wasn't the greatest cook. Mum said it was because she had been used to years of other people cooking for her in the army. When Auntie Win attempted to boil an egg, she would either approach it like a military campaign or lose herself in a detective novel until the sound of dried shell breaking caught her attention, which was why her mother had arranged for Josie to stay at Mr and Mrs Carpenters' place every weekend. That way she was sure Josie would be eating some decent meals and would also have the opportunity of seeing Elsie who rented a room there. Henry, her fiancé, was Mrs Carpenter's son. For the last three Fridays, as arranged, Josie had taken her washing with her so that Mrs Carpenter could add it to her family wash. Auntie Win didn't have a washing machine. Like most of the other residents in the flats, her basket of laundry was picked up weekly by a laundry service.

Josie poked her nose into the room that was being turned into a bathroom. The garish flowery wallpaper had been stripped off and in its place hung plain white lining paper. The legs of the newly installed bath were now hidden from view by a long piece of freshly painted board. Three of the walls around the old fireplace, the windows and behind the bath were white but the fourth wall was the same royal blue as the side of the bath. She noticed that the airing cupboard in the corner was now encased in white doors. Carefully avoiding the tin of blue paint stuck to an old sheet on the

floor, she opened them. This was luxury. Her mother had always dreamed of having an airing cupboard. She climbed over cardboard boxes to the new basin and turned on the taps. Water came out of them! This meant that she and Auntie Win would no longer have to strip wash at the sink in the kitchen.

'On Sundays, I'll switch on the hot water!' she heard her aunt yell. She had obviously heard the water running.

Dashing back to the passage, Josie flung off her clothes in the room she shared with her aunt and opened the wardrobe door. Facing her was Auntie Win's old army uniform: a bottle-green jacket and skirt and, on the shelf above, her bottle-green cap with a badge of a lion below a crown.

She hung her school uniform next to it. Hardly had she slipped into a pair of corduroy trousers and a woolly jersey when there was a loud crash from the kitchen. Josie raced down the passage, through the half-decorated sitting room and empty dining room area towards the kitchen and the smell of burning, where she found her aunt scrabbling round the black and white floor tiles, attempting to pick up the charred remains of two pieces of toast.

'I forgot to put the oven gloves on when I pulled out the tray,' she explained, blowing on her fingers.

'The beans!' cried Josie, leaping towards a small saucepan on a glowing electric ring. A hot spoon was stuck inside. Using a damp, slimy cloth to hold the handle, she prized it out. As she stirred the congealed beans she could see that half the contents were now firmly attached to the bottom of the blackened saucepan. She forced them loose with the

edge of the spoon while Auntie Win waved the billowing smoke out through the doorway onto the fire escape.

Later, after crunching her way through the scraped toast and dried baked beans, followed by a handful of fig rolls to take away the taste, Auntie Win brought two cups of tea over to the red Formica-topped table. It was a different world to tea-making at school. Josie heard that once the girls reached Form IV they had to use sugar tongs and learn how to pour tea properly into small china cups through a tea strainer. Already Josie had gathered that her mum poured tea *incorrectly*, always putting the milk in first to draw the tea leaves to the bottom to prevent them sticking to your teeth.

Her aunt planted herself in the chair opposite, clasping her cup.

'So what did you do today?' she asked, peering over the rim.

Josie looked away hurriedly.

'In diction class we had to recite, "If you play *gof* with no coat on you could *cetch* a cold. Always remember to take a *handkerchiff*. Oh my goodness! My *forrid* is *frahtfulli* hot! I must *jest git* my *medcin*. I do hope my temper*atu*re will have *gorn* down by the morning."'

Auntie Win stared at her.

'It means, if you play golf with no coat on, you could catch a cold. Always remember to take a hankie. Oh my goodness! My forehead is frightfully hot!'

'Yes, yes. I get the picture,' said Auntie Win.

'And in etiquette,' Josie continued, 'we were taught how to tell a visitor where the toilet is, I mean, the *lavatory*, in case they're too shy to ask, I s'pose. When they arrive –'

'You say let me show you where the lavatory is?' interrupted Auntie Win.

'No. You say, "Let me show you the geography of the house."'

'Sounds like you need a map and compass.' Auntie Win looked puzzled. 'I don't remember seeing any plays with people wanting to know that particular information. Anything else?'

Josie nodded. 'We had dinin' room etiquette. You must never say, "Pass the cruet, please." I got that right cos I've never even heard of cruet. You say, "I *wonder* if you could pass the salt, pepper, mustard." And do you know that a lady or gentleman never puts vinegar on fish or bacon and eggs?'

'I didn't, but I'll keep that in mind for future reference. Now, tell me what's upsetting you?' her aunt said, looking Josie directly in the eye.

Josie could see that it was no use attempting to keep the meeting with the headmistress to herself.

'Miss Dagleish isn't going to put me up for any auditions this term because of my hair.'

'Ah. So asking that young woman to finish you off with the clippers hasn't helped?'

'No.'

'But you can play boys' parts. Elsie did at your age.'

'That's what I told her,' said Josie.

'And?'

'Boys only.'

'Really?'

Josie gave a dismal nod.

'But you're so good at playing them,' said her aunt.

Josie attempted to smile.

'Never mind, you can audition for parts next term. Although why you have to go away and work in some of these companies beats me. Why can't they rehearse plays at the school and perform them there? And anyway, what's the rush?'

'I think Miss Dagleish is worried I might grow too tall and there'll be less parts I can play.'

'You're hardly likely to be a giant, are you? Elsie's twenty-four and she's a titch. She still sometimes gets cast as a child. Don't you fret. You've got plenty of time. Anyway, it'll give you more of a chance to make friends. How are those two comic ones, Derek and John?'

'There'll be rehearsin' in a Shakespeare Company from Monday. They're sharin' the same part.'

'So you won't be seeing so much of them then?'

'Not for three months. They're tourin'.'

'And you're still not making friends with the girls.'

''ow did you know that?' asked Josie, surprised.

'I guessed. Years of being in charge of young women,' she added.

'There is one girl,' said Josie slowly, 'but she's always readin' books.'

'Look who's talking! You're Arthur Ransome mad.'

'I know. But hers are always ballet stories and the girls in them are always prancin' around and bein' . . .'

'Girlish?'

Josie forced herself to smile.

'So what else are you upset about?' pressed her aunt.

'If I don't get any acting work, I won't be able to earn any money to pay you back.'

'I don't want you to pay me back. As long as they see what a talented young niece I have and help her to use that talent then I'm happy. I'm sorry I can't afford to send you to one of those top notch stage schools like Italia Conti or Corona but I was told that your school is the best of the cheaper ones.' She gave a broad smile. 'You wait till they see you in full flood. There's none of that namby-pamby little Miss Helpless about you. You've got spirit.'

Josie lowered her nose into her cup and said nothing. Unfortunately, she did feel helpless. It was because of the comments Miss Dagleish had made about her face. Josie knew she could improve her voice and her dancing, but what could she do about her freckles?

'And?' said Auntie Win, picking up the dismal expression on her face.

'Remember when you told the man who was in charge of sellin' this flat that you were buying it without a husband or a father's permission and that you had the money?'

'Yes.'

'And that he was so shocked it looked as though he had sucked a lemon and been smacked across the face with a wet fish?'

'I do indeed. I treasure the memory.'

'Well, when I told Miss Dagleish that Ralph was in the Theatre Workshop Company . . .'

'Ah. Same reaction.'

'Yeah.'

'I wouldn't mention that to your mum. You know how proud she is of him, especially now he's playing in a London theatre and not gallivanting all over England.'

'So why won't she let me see him in *The Hostage*? Is it because there's a swear word in it?'

Auntie Win nodded.

'More than one I'm afraid.'

'Miss Dagleish said that the Theatre Workshop Company had no style.'

'That's true. They take your breath away instead.' Auntie Win smiled. 'And make you laugh.'

Sounds more fun than what we're doing at school, Josie thought.

'You look exhausted,' said her aunt. 'Early night, I think.'

'But I don't want to be asleep when Mum and Dad call.'

'You don't have to go to sleep. You can read that book Molly's lent you.'

Josie was still sharing Auntie Win's double bed. The other bedroom in the flat was filled halfway to its high ceiling with suitcases, boxes, books, dining-room chairs, a table, stacks of light brown wood in assorted shapes and sizes, and what her dad called *men's tools*. Her aunt's plan had been to put all the bits of furniture and the shelf units together

in the sitting room before Josie moved in. Unfortunately, all that stood on the white carpet was a modern, red high-backed settee, a matching armchair and footstool, a low coffee table with a shelf underneath, a radiogram which housed a wireless and record player, and a television set hidden behind wooden shutters.

Stacked in a box in an alcove by the fireplace were her aunt's records, and under the window in the unfurnished dining room area was a pile of new curtains with black and white geometric designs. What her aunt needed was a second pair of hands but when any of the husbands of the women from the neighbouring flats had come round to help her, they had bolted out of the door as soon as they had spotted her wielding her Black and Decker drill.

'I'm not going to shoot you with it!' Josie had heard her aunt yell late one afternoon when she had returned from school to witness another well-meaning man scurry out onto the landing and run down the stairs. But Josie didn't mind sharing her aunt's room. It was cosy and she liked watching the flickering gas flames jiggering up the lines of jagged white bony-looking things in the tiny fireplace.

Climbing into bed, she settled back against the pillows and opened *Winter Holiday*. Since she had begun reading it she and Henry's half sister, Molly, had been copying two of the characters' way of sending messages to one another by drawing stick people with their arms placed in the alphabet positions of the semaphore code. The sisters, Nancy and Peggy Blackett, then drew the legs to look as though they were dancing to take attention away from any would-be

spies who might be tempted to read their weekly letters and guess they were using the code. But she found it impossible to concentrate. Instead, she stared at the two photographs on her bedside table.

One was of her brother Harry and his young wife in the Australian outback. The other was of Josie in a bathing suit, taken with her mum and dad on the pebbly beach in Sternsea with Elsie, her older brother Ralph and his red-headed wife, Jessica. Josie was much younger than her brothers and sister. Ralph was seventeen when she was born, Elsie, twelve and Harry, fourteen. Elsie's fiancé, Henry, wasn't in the beach picture because he had been taking the photograph. It had been a special family picnic to celebrate Josie being offered a place at the stage school.

On the wall above the fireplace was the picture that made it all possible, a framed photograph of Auntie Win in her uniform receiving her premium bond cheque.

Josie shut her book and glanced across at the pile of library books on her aunt's bedside table. Ever since Auntie Win had seen Jack Hawkins playing a detective in the film *Gideon's Day*, she had been reading the Gideon novels. Three of them were stacked on top of each other along with another of the author's books, *Let's Kill Uncle Lionel*. Mum said she didn't know how Auntie Win could sleep after reading her crime books. Josie wondered too.

Some nights, just thinking about the titles of the books had her imagining a masked intruder creeping up the fire escape, slipping into the kitchen and through the sitting room. Within seconds he would be advancing down the

passage, ready to crash into their bedroom, a revolver blazing in his gnarled and withered hand. It didn't help that her aunt often forgot to bolt the kitchen door. If Josie woke up during the night she would creep down the passage to check that it was locked.

On the far side of the room was a bookcase filled with green and white paperbacks with grisly titles, many of them written by women: *Dancers in Mourning*, *More Work For the Undertaker*, *Police at the Funeral*, *Death of a Ghost*, *Hide My Eyes*.

How could someone with a nice name like Margery or Dorothy write about murders? There was even one called *Spotted Hemlock* written by a woman called Gladys Mitchell, and hemlock, Josie knew, was a quick-acting poison. But then Mrs Hale, the owner of the house where the Carpenters lived, wrote detective novels too and her name was Henrietta.

Enter a Murderer and *Bullets for the Bridegroom* had just caught Josie's eye when the telephone rang in the hall. As she thrust the blankets aside and leaped out of bed, she heard a wave of laughter from the radiogram in the sitting room.

Her aunt was already standing by a small table in the hall holding the receiver.

'She's fine, Ellen. She's poking her head out of the bedroom door in her striped pyjamas as I speak,' Auntie Win said. She handed the receiver to Josie and returned to her comedy programme.

'Hello, Mum,' said Josie.

'Hello, love. How was school?'

Josie hesitated. It was so lovely to hear her mother's cheerful voice that she didn't want to upset her by telling her how lonely she felt.

'I'm being put up to Form III on Mondee.'

'What?!'

She heard her mum talking excitedly to her dad. Within seconds he was on the phone.

'Yer mum's told me. That's a turn up for the books. Promotion again, eh? You take after yer mum in the brains department, you do.'

Josie didn't like to tell him that it was because the work was too easy and that it had nothing to do with her being brainy.

'Is everythin' packed fer tomorrow night?' It was her mother back on the phone again.

'Yeah.'

'Elsie told me you're off to Winford on Saturday morning to see her and Larry in the run-through.'

'Yeah.'

'Can you give Henry a message at the Carpenters tomorrow tonight?'

'I can't,' said Josie. 'He's still in Scotland filmin' the documentary. I can give Elsie the message, though.'

'Thanks, love. Can you tell her that this solicitor man came round while we were out and spoke to one of the Dawson daughters from the upstairs flat. Sounded urgent. He needs to find Henry. It's about some legal business. Henry's old school didn't know that the Carpenters left

this address nine years ago. And she couldn't give him his London address because she don't know it. Instead, she told him about little Larry working at Winford rep because she overheard us talkin' about it in the hall when she was leaving for school one mornin'. The solicitor's going to send a letter addressed to Henry at the theatre, care of Larry. Can you ask Elsie to pick it up?'

'Yeah. Larry would only lose it.'

'Or draw Sputniks on it and shove it with all his other drawin's,' said her mum.

Josie laughed. 'Has his mum got the parcel . . . ?'

'With your Guide uniform in it? Yeah. She rang to tell me it arrived this morning. But, Josie, you've only been to three meetings. You can't be enrolled unless you've been to at least four, and then there's all them tests to pass.'

'I've done most of them already. I want to pass the rest tomorrow.'

'What's the rush?'

'I'm still only a tenderfoot. Unless I'm a proper Guide I can't go campin' in the summer.'

'You don't want to go sleepin' on the ground,' interrupted her dad down the receiver. 'It ain't very comfortable, I can tell you. I 'ad enuff of it in the army.'

'I still want to go,' said Josie.

Ever since she had read the first of the Arthur Ransome books, *Swallows and Amazons*, her dream had been to go camping and sailing. Her parents had no interest in that sort of thing. Being a Girl Guide was the only way she would be able to find out what it was like to sleep under canvas

and cook out in the open, and if she passed certain tests as a Guide, she could be a Sea Ranger when she was older and learn to sail. She had it all planned.

'How's Auntie Win's cookin'?' asked her mum.

Josie was about to tell her about the incinerated beans but suspected that her mother might not think it was so funny.

'Delicious,' she said.

'Mm,' said her mother in disbelief. 'Now you get to bed. We'll ring you again when you're at the Carpenters.'

Josie had hardly replaced the receiver when the doorbell rang.

'That'll be Mrs Jenkins!' her aunt yelled from the sitting room.

Josie padded barefoot down the hall and opened the door. Peering at Josie through spectacle lenses as thick as marbles stood a tiny elderly woman. In one hand she held up one of Auntie Win's cardigans, in the other, a long, grey, woolly sock.

'All done,' she announced, waving them.

Josie was staggered. It was only yesterday she had torn a hole in her sock on a large splinter on the floor of the school cloakroom. She observed that the elbow of her aunt's cardigan had also been darned.

'Kettle's on!' her aunt sang out, 'and I've just put out the custard creams.'

'That's what I like to hear,' said Mrs Jenkins excitedly, and she pushed her way past Josie and headed rapidly for the sitting room.

It was a weekly routine. On certain nights, Mrs Jenkins and Josie's aunt would watch television together. Mrs Jenkins didn't own one and she enjoyed a lot of the programmes Josie's aunt liked, especially if they had detectives in them.

Taking the mended sock into the bedroom, Josie hopped back into bed.

'I knew it was him! The brute!'

Josie woke with a start. Her aunt was sitting in bed next to her gazing in triumph at the last page of a *Gideon* book.

'Who did what?' Josie asked sleepily.

'Never you mind. It's far too gruesome for me to tell you. Oh, I do like this Gideon chap.'

'Is he like Sherlock Holmes?' yawned Josie.

'Nothing like. Sherlock Holmes is a private detective. Gideon is part of the police force. High up. And he's married with children. Quite ordinary, yet sharp and determined.'

'I thought you didn't like men,' said Josie.

'There are a few decent ones. Not many, I grant you, but a few.' Her aunt leaned back on her pillow and stared gravely at Josie. 'When you get married, make sure you marry a man who's had a bit of an education and who'll buy you carpets and a refrigerator.'

Josie had heard this piece of advice so many times she knew it by heart.

'Yes, Auntie Win,' she sighed.

What she didn't say was that she had decided she was going to be like her aunt. She would never marry. Marriage was being stuck at home baking cakes while your husband

went out, did exciting work and had cake waiting for him as a reward when he returned home.

'Auntie Win, is that why you've never married anyone? Because you've bought your own carpets and refrigerator?'

But there was no answer. Having discovered the identity of the murderer, her aunt had sunk into a deep and satisfied sleep.

Josie leaned across the bed and switched off her lamp.