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opening extract from

The Burying Beetle

written by

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published by

Luath Press

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IT WAS AFTER I ate King that everything started to go wrong in our entire family, as if someone had put an evil spell onto us, a hex – like a bad fairy godmother had said at my birth, 'When you are eleven you are going to be struck by a sorrow so big it will be like a lightning bolt. There will be grief like a sharp rock in your throat.'

CHAPTER ONE

Silphidae – Necrophorus vespillo

The Burying Beetle has the curious habit of burying dead birds, mice, shrews, voles and other animals by digging the earth away beneath them. This accomplished, the beetle deposits her eggs upon the dead carcase, and when the larvae, or grubs, hatch they find an abundant food-supply near at hand. These insect-scavengers perform useful work, and it's largely because of their efforts that so few corpses of wild creatures are discovered. These carrion beetles also devour some of the decomposing flesh of the carcase, seeming to relish the bad odour that is given off. The Burying Beetle is rarely seen, unless close watch is kept over a dead rodent, bird, or other animal, and they seem to fly about on their scavenging expeditions in pairs, being attracted to the spot by scent. The commonest species is brownish black with bands and spots of orange-yellow.

British Insects by W. Percival Westell, FLS
(The Abbey Nature Books)

NOW, WHEN I throw out a dead mouse, I shall note where the body lands, watch for a pair of winged gravediggers to arrive and inhale as if they have just arrived at the seaside. I'll watch them tuck in to a morsel of meat, have sex on the putrefying flesh, then bury the evidence. Weird, or what!

Today, the eleventh day of August 1999, is my twelfth birthday.

The sun didn't rise this morning, or if it did it was so cloaked in dark grey cloud that the sky barely lightened. And then it rained. Not the sort of rain that looks like long knives, but a very Cornish drizzle – a sea mist, a mizzle that soaks you through just as thoroughly as a downpour.

We're staying in this cottage on the edge of a cliff overlooking a long white beach. Today, it's as if the cottage is in the sky on its own island of dull green, the tall pines hung with glistening cobwebs as if summer has gone and suddenly it's autumn. Like that feeling you get when it's time to go back to school after a long hot summer, and you put on your winter uniform for the first time, and can't remember how to tie the stupid tie, and you remember getting up in the dark, and going home in the dark. I hate that. The thought of a long dark winter ahead. But I do quite like the feeling of the season changing; my school beret snug on my head; knee-socks; lace-up shoes; the warm smell of my own breath under the striped woollen scarf.

Today, no birds come to the feeder hanging from the copper beech.

There's no sound of sea, even. A heavy grey blanket muffles the waves' collapsing sound on the sand. Ghost gulls moan and whine. There's not a hope in hell of seeing the eclipse, even though Totality is immediately over this part of Cornwall. But at 10.30am we put on waterproofs and walk through the gate onto the coast path. We push through sodden bracken, our shoes and jeans'

hems soaked immediately, and walk to the railway bridge. All along the coast path there are little groups of people. A man with a small child on his shoulder. A family huddled under a golf umbrella. The sky a solid grey. No light bits, no fluffy bits or streaky bits, just a dead greyness, heavy with moisture. It's like being in the middle of a cloud. We *are* in the middle of a cloud.

People line the path at the highest point where there's a panoramic view of the bay and its beaches. Even the beach below us is crowded with people. Not loaded down with buckets and spades, ice creams, windbreaks, and with gritty sand in their private parts, but carrying umbrellas and wearing wellies and waterproofs. And we have all come together to share this moment. And just before 11am, as promised, we can see an even darker darkness spreading from the west over towards Clodgy, coming towards us, enveloping us in a cold clamminess. The gulls are silent.

And at the Moment of Totality, cameras flash on every beach on this side of the bay – Carbis, Porthminster, the Island, and over towards Newquay, Gwithian, Phillack, and Hayle. The sky is dark and all the bright stars have fallen and are twinkling among us.

Brilliant! Today at this very minute, I am twelve, and I feel in my bones that something momentous will happen to me. (Anyway, being eleven was so shitty, it's got to be better this year.)

'Jack! You are aware it's your Daughter's Birthday? No card or present! You could at least Phone her.' Mum slams down the phone. 'Where is he, Damn him?'

'Mum?'

'Sorry Sweetie, I just thought I'd try your father. He's Not There.'

'Oh!' I try to look disappointed. Mum thinks I must be upset that Daddy didn't remember my birthday. I forgive him. He's got some good reason, I'm sure. Men aren't any good at stuff like birthdays and anniversaries. I read somewhere that it's because they have more important things to think about, like earning money and fighting wars – or anyway, they think they're more important things. I think the female of the species have far more important things to think about – like looking after their babies and caring for their families, cooking healthy food for them and hugging them a lot.

Perhaps there'll be a second post.

I hated it when we first came here. There's a farm above us on the top of the hill and you could hear the cows calling for their calves all day long. I know they have to take them away from the mothers so the cows will carry on producing milk for people, but it's so cruel. I don't drink cow's milk and I don't think many people would if they only knew how cruel it is to produce the stuff. Soys don't have babies.

The countryside is so much scarier than the city. It's all life or death here.

Our townie cats have practically gone wild. They spend all day hunting and bring in half dead creatures – voles, which they don't even eat, just leave them on the floor for us to tread on. Harvest mice – which are so pretty – golden honey coloured with the longest whiskers – are carried in and let go, so the three cats have sport all day, trying to recapture the terrified little things. They work together, like a pack of lions or a pride or whatever. They take turns – one keeps guard while the others sleep.

We even get slow-worms, which are grey-pink, with a silvery stripe. Sometimes the cats chew them a bit and let them go. I have decided that slow-worms are the best thing about living

here. They suddenly appear on the floor in the sitting room and the cats are a little scared of them. It's the fear of serpents thingy, I expect. Inbuilt sensible fears that keep you from being stung or poisoned or bitten.

I'm not frightened to pick slow-worms up, though I read in one of the trillion books here (I love books) that they can bite. But their jaws are so tiny that they couldn't manage anything but a nip anyway. They feel very cool and not slippery or slimy at all, just cool and smooth. But they don't like to be handled, they squirm like mad, so I usually just throw them out into the garden and hope the cats don't see where they've gone.

It's a bit like a zoo in this house. Apart from the slow-worms and mice and voles, we have crickets. There's a plague of them at the moment, on the curtains, on the wooden ceiling, leaping around the carpet and confounding (I think that's the word) the cats' attempts to catch them.

I never saw a cricket in London. Though of course I've seen and heard cicadas in hot countries, when Mum used to take me away each winter. That was the good side of being a Sickly Child. Getting out of school and cold wet winters to go somewhere warm and sunny and just swim and snorkel and lie around all day reading. Heaven!

I remember a very sad looking praying mantis that was trying to climb a wall and he only had one back leg. I should think it makes you totally confused losing one of your jumping legs. I like praying mantises. I had one once in Kenya – I rescued it from the loo. It was nearly drowned but had kept its head above water. I fished it out and put it to dry on a piece of toilet paper on the table next to my bed. It was fine, and it stayed there for ages, just watching me. I could feel its huge eyes following me around the room, like Mona Lisa's. It was the most beautiful bright apple

green and had an articulated neck and head. Like a large truck. It stayed three days. It must have been grateful and was trying to tell me.

Our house is ramshackle – I love that word – it sounds just like it is – a sort of black-painted shack on the edge of a cliff. And there's a big beach below us. I can walk down across the rocks, but I have to take ages getting up again. Keep stopping for breath. But that's OK. There's no one to see me struggling, except Mum.

That's the main problem of being here. There's no one around.

When Mum said we were moving out of London for my health and coming to St Ives, I thought we would be in the middle of the old town and I could sit on Porthmeor Beach and watch the sun set, and be able to make friends. It's always been a dream of mine to live here, ever since we came a few years ago, when Mum and Daddy were happy together. It's sort of idyllic and I just love everything about it: the gulls everywhere, their calling to each other, the surfers riding the big waves, the little boats bobbing in the harbour, the artists' studios we looked round, the white sand that almost blinds you when you look at it without sunglasses on.

'Sweetie – will you answer the door...?

'... I'm in the bathroom.' I finish the sentence for her.

'Miss Gussie Stevens?'

'Yes, that's me!' This very wet looking (I mean soaked wet) man has a huge cellophane-wrapped bouquet in his big red hands.

'Birthday, is it?'

'Yes, how did you know?'

'Lovely view you've got here!'

'Yes, thanks!'

The flowers – all red and yellow carnations and purple irises – from Daddy, of course.

Happy Birthday, Babe! All my love – Daddy xxx

'Hmm! Typical!' Mum fumes when she gets out of the bathroom.

Well I think they're wonderful. I sniff them, but there's no scent at all. It's a very grown-up sort of present. No one's ever given me flowers, except in hospital.

I stick them all over the house. In my room mostly, so I can appreciate them, but I've left a few in the sitting room too. I put all the red carnations together, cut short, all the yellow ones in a blue jug, and all the irises – not my favourite flower – cut down very short so the heads are mixed together and clustered, in a small white bowl on the dining table. The flowers suddenly look much nicer than they had in the bouquet, all tall and precious and posh looking. I throw out the nasty ferny stuff, much too weddingy. Now they look like mine, from my own darling Daddy.

'God what a Dreadful Day, so Dark and Gloomy.' Mum hates it when the weather keeps her in. She sounds like Eeyore. The rain's coming down in buckets now and we need buckets to catch the drips that come in all over the house, mostly in the porch, but also in the dining room. The cats – Flaubert, Rimbaud (named by Mum and Daddy, but I call them Flo and Rambo), and Charlie, (I was allowed to name that one, I had her for my tenth birthday and she's all mine), are curled up on the small sofa, not touching each other. They occasionally open an eye, listen to the rain hammering on the roof, look thoroughly disgruntled, yawn at each other and go back to sleep. They all agree with Mum it's too wet even for hunting.

Mum has custody of me and the cats.

What are they for, anyway, yawns? I have a theory that it's a way of showing other animals (or humans) that we are not aggressive towards them. Like lions when they are about to go to

sleep, they all sit around and yawn at each other. It means – I'm not going to fight you or kill you or eat you, because I'm sleepy and friendly – Aah Aah, and the other animals answer with a similar signal. Yes, I reckon that's it. I wonder if anyone has ever done any experiments on yawning. (Just thinking about yawning makes me yawn.)

For my birthday treat, (apart from the spectacular natural display God tried to put on for me, though actually it's the camera flashlights I'll remember, not the cloud-hidden eclipse), I'm having takeaway Indian food and a video. We are watching *Born Yesterday*, one of my favourite films, except I also love *It's a Wonderful Life*, but we watch that at Christmas, and that film with Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack someone or other – where she has these amazing dresses she's almost wearing and Tony and Jack dress up as women in an all women's band. It's so funny. Lemon! That's his name.

Daddy is the curator of the London Film Archive. He used to be a photographer and he's a film-maker too, but he does the other thing to make a living until he gets a break in the movie business. We get to see any movies we want, it's cool. Daddy gave me his old Nikkormat. It's a manual SLR camera. That means single lens reflex and it takes 35mm film. It's heavy and battered and I love it.

I also like Indiana Jones movies – I liked the first one best – *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I have this cool hat, which Grandpop gave me – my Grandpop, who died. It's just like Indiana Jones' hat, a sort of soft-brimmed – trilby, Grandpop called it – in a dark brown felt. He gave it to me when I was a cowboy, and he also made me a gun out of a piece of wood, carved it into a gun shape. I wore it tucked into my belt. Mum didn't approve – I'm not sure if she didn't approve of me

being a cowboy or of me having a gun. Both, probably. I now wear the hat most of the time, to remind me of Grandpop and because Indy is my hero. Harrison Ford – he's so cool, even if he is rather old. I loved it when one of his students had I LOVE YOU written on her eyelids and she kept closing her eyes so he could read the message. If I ever make a movie, it has got to be like Indiana Jones movies. The woman who was Willie in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is married to Steven Spielberg. She is just about the prettiest woman I have ever seen. It must be interesting to look like that – blonde wavy hair and big blue eyes and a wide mouth. You could have anything in the world if you looked like that.

The young Indy was played by River Phoenix – my favourite film actor of all time. He also played Chris in *Stand By Me*, which I saw when I was ten. But he died when I was three. I remember what Gordie said to Chris when he was feeling very sorry for himself – he said, 'You can be anything you want, man.'

I don't only like old or dead film stars. I like Brad Pitt and Keanu Reeves but I don't like the one who looks like a baby doll – the one with the Italian name... ?

I love the music in the Indiana Jones movies – *Da da, da di da di da di da!*

I don't have friends here yet. My best friend in London is Summer Strong. (One of River Phoenix's sisters is called Summer. How's that for a coincidence?) We got to be friends because we sat next to each other at school, and stayed together all through, and she's going to come and stay sometime during these hols. I'm so looking forward to it. I can't wait.

It's such a cool house this. It's all made of wood, even the roof, and it's painted black on the outside and white inside. There are two bedrooms upstairs and a sitting room with a tiny kitchen –

like on a yacht – and then there's a trapdoor and a stepladder to another long room downstairs. The garden is practically vertical down to the beach. There are bamboos and palms and when the sun shines the sea is a beautiful pale turquoise colour in shallow water, like it was in Kenya, and deep blue where it gets deep. It's quite exotic really. A bit of a change from Camden Town.

I forgot to mention the big trees – pines or something, absolutely huge, a line of them like an overgrown hedge on the edge of the cliff. We can't see much of the beach through the branches, but they are Good Windbreaks, Mum says. From downstairs you can see beach and sea between the huge trunks. It's like peeping through the legs of an elephant, massive, dark grey wrinkled hulks. There's a wooden deck, too, with a high rail around, but I haven't had the courage to go out there yet. I'm no good at heights.

I don't know who the owner of the house is, but whoever it is, is a great reader. There are books everywhere. They are very old and dusty, not like mine, but our books are all in store. Mum hasn't enough room for her clothes because of all the books. She is threatening to stuff them in the shed, so she can hang up her huge collection of clothes. Not that she's ever going to wear any of that stuff here. I can't imagine why she bothers. There's not exactly a flourishing social scene of the sort that she had in London. But she's OK really, apart from her intense vanity and the way she has of turning into Cruella de Vil every time she speaks to Daddy. I suppose she's had lots to put up with – not being able to go to work because of looking after me.

I don't know why she and Daddy split – it was last year, before Grandpop and Grandma died. I was in hospital some of the time anyway but when I was at home there were lots of muffled angry voices and Mum cried a lot. I suppose he was having an affair.

He lives with a woman called Eloise, which is a lovely name. I think I might change my name by deed pole... or is it poll? You can do that to make it legal. Augusta is so ugly and I get called Custard sometimes. Summer calls me Org. Daddy calls me Gussie, which is OK. Grandpop called me Princess Augusta for a while. I thought I was a real princess until I was about seven or eight. I was quite relieved when I found out I wasn't. I thought I'd have to leave home and go and live in the palace with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

I want to be known as Kezia – I'm not sure how that's pronounced. I read it in a short story by Katherine Mansfield. There's this family in a house on a bay and the women all just about tolerate the father but can't wait to get him off to work, so they can relax and enjoy themselves. There's a wonderful granny in the story who cooks and looks after the little children. I think the mother is sickly, or she's just had a baby or something. She's a wuss; the father is stuffy and demanding and the women all run round looking after him. It doesn't sound much but it's a lovely story. It makes me feel warm and safe for some reason. A bit like how I feel when I watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. I found it here, the book.

This house is called Peregrine, which I thought was a posh boy's name from out of a PG Wodehouse story, but which is in fact a bird of prey, but we haven't seen any yet. Not that I'd know one if I fell over it, or it hit me in the belly with a wet fish. There are loads of bird books here but I haven't got round to them yet.

Some Like it Hot! That's the name of the Marilyn Monroe film. That makes me feel warm in a different way. I love it that Mum and I laugh out loud at the same bits each time, like at the very end when Tony Curtis gets a proposal of marriage from the

millionaire, and tells him he's really a man, and the millionaire says – 'Nobody's perfect!'

My favourite bit in *Born Yesterday* is when the bully shouts to the woman, 'Billie!' and she shouts back 'Whaddyawaan?' And the bit where he says, 'All this trouble just 'cos a broad reads a book!' I so love her voice. It's all small and squeaky except when she's yelling 'Whaddyawaan?' And the card-playing scene, I love that.

I haven't started my periods yet. I don't suppose I will for a couple of years. I'm small for my age and skinny – that's because of my heart. I have to stay skinny so my heart can cope with my growth. Mum says it's a Protective Mechanism.

Summer has breasts and everything. I don't care really. Except that then she sort of began to be bitchy and whispered behind my back – said I had anorexia not a heart disease – and before we moved she had started to see lots of Janine and Rosa. But I expect that was a sort of protective mechanism too – getting ready for when I left.

My heart has to work really hard just to keep me sitting still. I've heard it through a stethoscope – it sounds like an express train going through a tunnel. Scary, really. I'll have another operation, one day, I expect – when they've found a suitable donor. Which means that someone has to die first, someone whose blood type, tissue type, etc matches mine. It's an amazing thought, someone else's heart and lungs being used by me.

Will I have their feelings? Will I have their heartbreak, their heartache, their heartstrings? What are heartstrings and what does warm the cockles of your heart mean? (A Grandpop expression. Maybe because he lived in Shoeburyness, and that's where they get fresh cockles from the mud.) Will I feel heartless? If the donor

is – was – older than me, will I be suddenly wiser or more stupid? Like when cannibals eat the brain and heart of an enemy. Do they do it in order to have the benefit of the dead person's experiences? Will I be aware of having part of someone else in me? Maybe it's a sort of rebirth for the donor. Like being born again.

I wonder if the dead person's parents will be happy, or rather, less unhappy, that their child's heart will still be pumping for someone else. I would be.

I think if I died and some of my organs could be used to benefit some very ill person, they should be used. I don't suppose any of my organs are good enough. Apparently, I have an enlarged liver etc. Perhaps they could learn something though – the doctors – from my problem. I would be sort of living on then, wouldn't I, my organs examined by medical students time and time again. Why not? Sounds a good idea to me. If I die.

I was once used as a model patient at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. I had to go with Mum when I was about six and sit on a chair in my vest and knickers, and the paediatrician described my symptoms and asked me and Mum questions, and all the young doctors had a listen to my chest and back and had to guess what I had. I think because what I have is a rare condition they take a special interest in me.