Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Tom's Midnight Garden

written by

Philippa Pearce

published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



I

Exile

IF, standing alone on the back doorstep, Tom allowed himself to weep tears, they were tears of anger. He looked his good-bye at the garden, and raged that he had to leave it—leave it and Peter. They had planned to spend their time here so joyously these holidays.

Town gardens are small, as a rule, and the Longs' garden was no exception to the rule; there was a vegetable plot and a grass plot and one flower-bed and a rough patch by the back fence. In this last the apple-tree grew: it was large, but bore very little fruit, and accordingly the two boys had always been allowed to climb freely over it.

These holidays they would have built a tree-house among its branches.

Tom gazed, and then turned back into the house. As he passed the foot of the stairs, he called up, 'Good-bye, Peter!' There was a croaking answer.

He went out on to the front doorstep, where his mother was waiting with his suitcase. He put his hand out for it, but Mrs Long clung to the case for a moment, claiming his attention first. 'You know, Tom,' she said, 'it's not nice for you to be rushed away like this to avoid the measles, but it's not nice for us either. Your father and I will miss you, and so will Peter. Peter's not having a nice time, anyway, with measles.'

'I didn't say you'd all be having a nice time without me,' said Tom. 'All I said was——'

'Hush!' whispered his mother, looking past him to the road and the car that waited there and the man at its driving-wheel. She gave Tom the case, and then bent over him, pushing his tie up to cover his collar-button and letting her lips come to within a few inches of his ear. 'Tom, dear Tom——' she murmured, trying to prepare him for the weeks ahead, 'remember that you will be a visitor, and do try—oh, what can I say?—try to be *good*.'

She kissed him, gave him a dismissive push towards the car and then followed him to it. As Tom got in, Mrs Long looked past him to the driver. 'Give my love to Gwen,' she said, 'and tell her, Alan, how grateful we are to you both for taking Tom off at such short notice. It's very kind of you, isn't it, Tom?'

'Very kind,' Tom repeated bitterly.

'There's so little room in the house,' said Mrs Long, 'when there's illness.'

'We're glad to help out,' Alan said. He started the engine.

Tom wound down the window next to his mother. 'Good-bye then!'

'Oh, Tom!' Her lips trembled. 'I am sorry—spoiling the beginning of your summer holidays like this!'

The car was moving; he had to shout back: 'I'd rather have had measles with Peter—much rather!'

Tom waved good-bye angrily to his mother, and then, careless even of the cost to others, waved to an inflamed face pressed against a bedroom window. Mrs Long looked upwards to see what was there, raised her hands in a gesture of despair—Peter was supposed to keep strictly to his bed—and hurried indoors.

Tom closed the car window and sat back in his seat, in hostile silence. His uncle cleared his throat and said: 'Well, I hope we get on reasonably well.'

This was not a question, so Tom did not answer it.

He knew he was being rude, but he made excuses for himself: he did not much like Uncle Alan, and he did not want to like him at all. Indeed, he would have preferred him to be a brutal uncle. 'If only he'd beat me,' thought Tom, 'then I could run away home, and Mother and Father would say I did right, in spite of the quarantine for measles. But he'll never even try to beat me, I know; and Aunt Gwen—she's worse, because she's a child-lover, and she's kind. Cooped up for weeks with Uncle Alan and Aunt Gwen in a poky flat . . .' He had never visited them

before, but he knew that they lived in a flat, with no garden.

They drove in silence. Their route took them through Ely; but they only stopped for Alan Kitson to buy a picture-postcard of the cathedral tower. It was for Tom. Tom was bitterly disappointed that he was not allowed to climb the tower, but his uncle pointed out to him with great reasonableness that this was quite out of the question: he was in quarantine for measles. He must not mix with Peter, in case he caught his measles; and he must not mix with other people either, in case he already *had* Peter's measles. Fortunately, the Kitsons had both had measles, anyway.

They drove on through Ely and the Fens, and then through Castleford and beyond, to where the Kitsons lived, in a big house now converted into flats. The house was crowded round with newer, smaller houses that beat up to its very confines in a broken sea of bay-windows and gable-ends and pinnacles. It was the only big house among them: oblong, plain, grave.

Alan Kitson sounded the car-horn and turned into the drive—only it was really too short to be called a drive now. 'The house had a better frontage, I believe, until they built up opposite, and had to widen the road too.' He pulled up outside a pillared front-door; and Aunt Gwen appeared in the doorway, laughing and wanting to kiss Tom. She drew him inside, and Uncle Alan followed with the luggage.

There were cold stone flags under Tom's feet, and in his nostrils a smell of old dust that it had been nobody's busi-

ness to disperse. As he looked round, he felt a chill. The hall of the big house was not mean nor was it ugly, but it was unwelcoming. Here it lay at the heart of the house—for it went centrally from front to back with a sideways part to the stair-foot, in a T-shape—and the heart of the house was empty—cold—dead. Someone had pinned bright travel-posters on to the high, grey walls; someone had left a laundry-box with its laundry-list, in a corner; there were empty milk-bottles against a far door, with a message to the milkman: none of these things seemed really to belong to the hall. It remained empty and silent —silent unless one counted the voice of Aunt Gwen chattering on about Tom's mother and Peter's measles. When her voice died for a moment, Tom heard the only sound that went on: the tick, and then tick, and then tick, of a grandfather clock.

'No, don't touch it, Tom,' said Aunt Gwen, as he turned towards it. She lowered her voice. 'It belongs to old Mrs Bartholomew upstairs, and she's rather particular about it.'

Tom had never looked inside a grandfather clock, and he thought it might be something to do later, privately: surely, he could just look. Now, with his back to the clock, innocently continuing to converse with his aunt, he slipped his finger-nails under the edge of the door of the pendulum-case, to try it . . .

'If Mrs Bartholomew's particular about her clock, why doesn't she have it upstairs with her?' Tom asked. He levered gently with his nails: the door was resisting him . . .

'Because the clock is screwed to the wall at the back, and

the screws have rusted in,' said Aunt Gwen. 'Come away from it, do, Tom. Come up to tea.'

'Oh!' said Tom, as if he had not realized where he was standing. He moved away. The pendulum door had been locked.

They were going upstairs to the Kitsons' flat when, from behind them, the grandfather clock struck one, with stately emphasis. Uncle Alan frowned and made some cutting comment. The clock kept good time—its fingers were now correctly pointing to five o'clock—but it seldom chose to strike the right hour. It was utterly unreliable in its striking, Uncle Alan said. Moreover, the voice of the clock was so penetrating that he could even hear it being unreliable when he was upstairs in bed, at night.

They had reached the first floor, where the Kitsons lived. Beyond, another, narrow staircase mounted to the attic flat of Mrs Bartholomew, who owned the grandfather clock and, indeed, the whole house. She was the landlady, and the Kitsons—like the other inhabitants of the big house—were her tenants.

'This is our flat, Tom dear,' said Aunt Gwen; 'and here is the guest-room—your bedroom. I've put flowers in it, and books for you to read.' She smiled at him, begging him with her eyes to like staying here.

Tom's bedroom was lofty, but otherwise only of medium size. There was another door in it, like the door of entry. The window—large and large-paned—was one of those he had seen from outside. Tom had been preparing himself to play the grateful guest; but——

'But there are bars across the bottom of the window!' he burst out. 'This is a nursery! I'm not a baby!'

'Of course not—of course not!' Aunt Gwen cried, equally upset. 'It's nothing to do with you, Tom. This window had bars across it when we came. The bathroom window had too, for that matter.'

Tom's suspicions were not entirely stilled.

When he was left to unpack, before tea, Tom examined the room more closely. The other door only led into a cupboard for clothes; the books were school stories for girls, from Aunt Gwen's own childhood; and there, above all—however much Aunt Gwen tried to explain them away—were the nursery bars to the window.

However, tea cheered Tom a little. Aunt Gwen had made a Devonshire tea, with boiled eggs, home-made scones and home-made strawberry jam and whipped cream. She was a good cook, she said, and she enjoyed cooking; she intended to spoil Tom for food while he was with them.

After tea, Tom wrote a letter of safe arrival to his mother. He enclosed a picture-postcard for Peter, with a very fair statement of his situation. 'I hope your measles are better,' he wrote. 'This is a picture of the cathedral tower at Ely.' (Tom knew that Peter would be interested: the two of them made a point of climbing church towers, as well as trees.) 'We came through Ely, but U.A. wouldn't let me go up the tower. The house here is flats and there isn't any garden. My bedroom window has bars, but A.G. says it's a mistake. The food is good.'

After reading this through, Tom decided—in fairness to

Aunt Gwen—to underline the last sentence. He signed the postcard with his private device: an elongated cat, supposed to be a tom. It signified Tom Long.

He was marking in the whiskers of the cat, when he heard the sound of the grandfather clock from below in the hall. Yes, you could hear it striking, very distinctly; you could count the strokes. Tom counted them, and smiled condescendingly: the clock was wrong again in its striking —senselessly wrong.