Opening extract from

Walk Two Moons

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1

A Face at the Window

Gramps says that I am a country girl at heart, and that is true. I have lived most of my thirteen years in Bybanks, Kentucky, which is not much more than a caboodle of houses roosting in a green spot alongside the Ohio River. Just over a year ago, my father plucked me up like a weed and took me and all our belongings (no, that is not true – he did not bring the chestnut tree or the willow or the maple or the hayloft or the swimming hole or any of those things which belong to me) and we drove three hundred miles straight north and stopped in front of a house in Euclid, Ohio.

'Where are the trees?' I said. 'This is where we're going to live?'

'No,' my father said. 'This is Margaret's house.'

The front door of the house opened, and Margaret, the lady with the wild red hair, stood there. I looked up and down the street. The buildings were all jammed together like a row of birdhouses. In front of each one was a tiny square of grass, and in front of that was a long, long cement sidewalk running alongside the cement road.

'Where's the barn?' I asked. 'Where's the river? Where's the swimming hole?'

'Oh, Sal,' my father said. 'Come along. There's Margaret.' He waved to the lady at the door.

'We have to go back,' I said. 'I forgot something.'

The lady with the wild red hair opened the door and came out on the porch.

'In the back of my closet,' I said, 'under the floorboards. I put something there, and I've got to have it.'

'Don't be a goose,' he said. 'Come and see Margaret.'

I did not want to see Margaret. I stood there, looking around, and that's when I saw the face pressed up against an upstairs window next door. It was a girl's round face, and it looked afraid. I didn't know it then, but that face belonged to Phoebe Winterbottom, the girl who had a powerful imagination, who would become my friend, and who would have all those peculiar things happen to her.

Not long ago, when I was locked in a car with my grandparents for six days, I told them the story of Phoebe, and when I finished telling them – or maybe even as I was telling them – I realized that the story of Phoebe was like the plaster wall in our old house in Bybanks, Kentucky.

My father started chipping away at a plaster wall in the living room of our house in Bybanks, shortly after my mother left us one April morning. Our house was an old farmhouse which my parents had been restoring, room by room. Each night, as he waited to hear from my mother, he chipped away at that wall.

On the night that we got the bad news – that she was not returning – he pounded and pounded on that wall with a chisel and a hammer. At two o'clock in the morning, he came up to my room. I was not asleep. He led me downstairs and showed me what he had found. Hidden behind the wall was a brick fireplace.

The reason that Phoebe's story reminds me of that

plaster wall and the hidden fireplace is that beneath Phoebe's story was another one. It was about me and my own mother.

2

The Chickabiddy Starts a Story

It was after all the adventures of Phoebe that my grandparents came up with a plan to drive from Kentucky to Ohio, where they would pick me up, and then the three of us would drive two thousand miles west to Lewiston, Idaho. This is how I came to be locked in a car with them for nearly a week. It was not a trip that I was eager to go on, but it was one I had to take.

Gramps had said, 'We'll see the whole ding-dong country!'

Gram squeezed my cheeks and said, 'This trip will give me a chance to be with my favourite chickabiddy again.' I am, by the way, their *only* chickabiddy.

My father said that Gram couldn't read maps worth a hill of beans, and that he was grateful that I had agreed to go along and help them find their way. I was only thirteen, and although I did have a way with maps, it was not really because of that skill that I was going, nor was it to see the 'whole ding-dong country' that Gram and Gramps were going. The real reasons were buried beneath piles and piles of unsaid things.

Some of the real reasons were:

1. Gram and Gramps wanted to see Momma, who was resting peacefully in Lewiston, Idaho.

2. Gram and Gramps knew that I wanted to see Momma, but that I was afraid to.

3. Dad wanted to be alone with the red-headed Margaret Cadaver. He had already seen Momma, and he had not taken me.

Also – although this wasn't as important – I think Dad did not trust Gram and Gramps to behave themselves along the way unless they had me with them. Dad said that if they tried to go on their own, he would save everyone a lot of time and embarrassment by calling the police and having them arrested before they even left the driveway. It might sound a bit extreme for a man to call the police on his own tottery old parents but when my grandparents get in a car trouble just naturally follows them like a filly trailing behind a mare.

My grandparents Hiddle are my father's parents, and they are full up to the tops of their heads with goodness and sweetness, and mixed in with all that goodness and sweetness is a large dash of peculiarity. This combination makes them interesting to know, but you can never predict what they will do or say.

Once it was settled that the three of us would go, the journey took on an alarming, expanding need to hurry that was like a walloping great thundercloud assembling around me. During the week before we left, the sound of the wind was *hurry, hurry, hurry*, and at night even the silent darkness whispered *rush, rush, rush*. I did not think we would ever leave, and yet I did not want to leave. I did not really expect to survive the trip.

But I had decided to go and I would go, and I had to be there by my mother's birthday. This was extremely important. I believed that if there was any chance of bringing my mother back home it would happen on her birthday. If I had said this aloud to my father or to my grandparents, they would have said that I might as well try to catch a fish in the air, so I did not say it aloud. But I believed it. Sometimes I am as ornery and stubborn as an old donkey. My father says I lean on broken reeds and will get a face full of swamp mud one day.

When, at last, Gram and Gramps Hiddle and I set out that first day of the trip, I clutched seven good-luck charms and prayed for the first thirty minutes solid. I prayed that we would not be in an accident (I was terrified of cars and buses) and that we would get there by my mother's birthday – seven days away – and that we would bring her home. Over and over, I prayed the same thing. I prayed to trees. This was easier than praying directly to God. There was nearly always a tree nearby.

As we pulled onto the Ohio Turnpike, which is the flattest, straightest piece of road in God's whole creation, Gram interrupted my prayers. 'Salamanca—'

I should explain right off that my real name is Salamanca Tree Hiddle. Salamanca, my parents thought, was the name of the Indian tribe to which my great-great grandmother belonged. My parents were mistaken. The name of the tribe was Seneca, but since my parents did not discover their error until after I was born and they were, by then, used to my name, it remained Salamanca.

My middle name, Tree, comes from your basic tree,

a thing of such beauty to my mother that she made it part of my name. She wanted to be more specific and use Sugar Maple Tree, her very favourite because Sugar Maple is part of her own name, but Salamanca Sugar Maple Tree Hiddle sounded a bit much.

My mother used to call me Salamanca, but after she left, only my grandparents Hiddle called me Salamanca (when they were not calling me chickabiddy). To most other people, I was Sal, and to a few boys who thought they were especially amusing, I was Salamander.

In the car, as we started our long journey to Lewiston, Idaho, my grandmother Hiddle said, 'Salamanca, why don't you entertain us?'

'What sort of thing did you have in mind?' I hoped they would not expect me to do something thumpingly embarrassing, like climb on top of the car and sing a little ditty. You can never tell with my grandparents.

But Gramps said, 'How about a story? Spin us a yarn.'

I certainly do know heaps of stories, but I learned most of them from Gramps. Gram suggested I tell one about my mother. That, I could not do. I had just reached the point where I could stop thinking about her every minute of every day. I wasn't ready – or at least I did not *think* I was ready – to talk about her.

Gramps said, 'Well, then, what about your friends? You got any tales to tell about them?'

Instantly, Phoebe Winterbottom came to mind. There was certainly a hog's bellyful of things to tell about her. 'I could tell you an extensively strange story,' I warned.

'Oh, good!' Gram said. 'Delicious!'

And that is how I happened to suspend my tree

prayers and tell them about Phoebe Winterbottom, her disappearing mother, and the lunatic. It is also how I discovered that beneath Phoebe's story was another story.

3

Bravery

Because I first saw Phoebe on the day my father and I moved to Euclid, I began my story of Phoebe with the visit to the red-headed Margaret Cadaver's where I also met Mrs Partridge, her elderly mother. Margaret nearly fell over herself being nice to me. 'What lovely hair,' she said, and 'Aren't you sweet!' I was *not* sweet that day. I was being particularly ornery. I wouldn't sit down and I wouldn't look at Margaret.

As we were leaving, I overheard Margaret whisper to my father, 'John, have you told her yet – how we met?'

My father looked exceedingly uncomfortable. 'No,' he said. 'I tried – but she doesn't want to know.'

Now that was the truth, absolutely. Who cares? I thought. Who cares how he met Margaret Cadaver?

I was standing on the porch, and I saw Phoebe's face again at the window next door. At the time, all I could think of was getting to our new house, which I hoped would be miles and miles away, out in the green countryside. When at last we left Mrs Cadaver and Mrs Partridge, we drove for approximately three minutes. Two blocks from Margaret Cadaver's was the place where my father and I were now going to live.

If someone had blindfolded me and spun me around a few times and driven me around for an hour and

then removed my blindfold, I would have thought that I was still in front of Margaret's house. Tiny, squirt trees. Little birdhouses in a row – and one of those birdhouses was ours. No swimming hole, no barn, no cows, no chickens, no pigs. Instead, a little white house with a miniature patch of green grass in front of it. It wasn't enough to keep a cow alive for five minutes.

'Let's take a tour,' my father said, rather too heartily.

We walked through the tiny living room into the miniature kitchen and upstairs into my father's pint-sized bedroom and on into my pocket-sized bedroom and into the wee bathroom. I looked out the upstairs window down into the back yard. Half of the tiny yard was a cement patio and the other half was another patch of grass which our imaginary cow would devour in two bites. There was a tall wooden fence all around it, and to the left and right were other, identical fenced plots.

We sat on the front steps and waited for the moving van. When it arrived, we watched the men cram our Bybanks furniture into our birdhouse. After they finished, my dad and I inched into the living room, crawling over sofas and chairs and tables and boxes, boxes, boxes.

'Mm,' my father said. 'Mm. It looks as if we tried to squeeze all the animals into the chicken coop.'

Three days later, I started school and that's when I saw Phoebe again. She was in my class. The students in my new school spoke in quick, sharp bursts and dressed in stiff, new clothes. The girls all wore their hair in exactly the same way: in a shoulder-length 'bob' (that's what they called it) with a long fringe which they repeatedly shook out of their eyes. We once had a horse who did that.

Everybody kept touching my hair. 'Don't you ever cut it?' they said. 'Can you sit on it? How do you wash it? Is it naturally black, like that? Do you use conditioner?' I couldn't tell if they liked my hair or if they thought I looked like a whang-doodle.

They all seemed to talk quite a lot, and everyone seemed to have braces on their teeth. One girl, Mary Lou Finney, said the most peculiar things, like out of the blue she would say, 'Omnipotent!' or 'Beef brain!' I couldn't make any sense of it. There were Japanese twins (a brother and sister), who didn't speak at all except to say, 'Yes, yes,' and 'Yes, yes.' There were Megan and Christy who jumped up and down like parched peas, moody Beth Ann, and pink-cheeked Alex. There was Ben who drew cartoons all day long, and a most peculiar teacher named Mr Birkway.

And then there was Phoebe Winterbottom. Ben called her 'Free-Bee Ice Bottom' and drew a picture of a bumble-bee with an ice cube on its bottom. Phoebe tore it up.

Phoebe was a quiet girl. She stayed mostly by herself and seemed quite shy. She had the most pleasant face and huge, enormous sky-blue eyes. Around this pleasant round face, her hair curled in short ringlets as yellow as a crow's foot.

During that first week, when my father and I were at Margaret's (we ate dinner there three times the first week), I saw Phoebe's face twice more at her window in the house next door. Once I waved at Phoebe, but she didn't seem to notice, and at school she never mentioned that she had seen me.

Then, one day, at lunch, she slid into the seat next to me and said, 'Sal, you're ever so courageous. You're ever so brave.'

To tell you the truth, I was surprised. You could have knocked me over with a chicken feather. 'Me? I'm not brave,' I said.

'You are. You're ever so brave.'

I was not. I, Salamanca Tree Hiddle, was afraid of lots and lots of things. For example, I was terrified of car accidents, death, cancer, brain tumours, nuclear war, pregnant women, loud noises, strict teachers, elevators, and scads of other things. But I was not afraid of spiders, snakes and wasps. Phoebe, and nearly everyone else in my new class did not have much fondness for these creatures.

On the first day of class, when a dignified black spider was investigating my desk, I cupped my hands around it, carried it to the open window, and set it outside on the ledge. Mary Lou Finney said, 'Alpha and omega, will you look at that!' Beth Ann was as white as milk. All around the room, people were acting as if I had single-handedly taken on a fire-breathing dragon.

During that next week, if an innocent spider was crawling toward someone's desk, they would all yell, 'Sal, get it!' When a wasp flew in the window for a peek around the room, they said, 'Sal, it's a wasp, get it!' And once, a tiny green garden snake slithered along the baseboard and everyone screamed, 'Sal, a snake, oh, Sal, get it!'

As I was trying my best to assist these various creatures in finding their way out of our classroom and back into the wide open spaces, people would say, 'Sal, kill it, kill it!' I wondered how they would like it if someone smooshed *them* just because they happened to stray into someone else's room.

I suppose that just because I was not afraid of these little creatures, people thought I was brave. I suppose they didn't know how I felt about cars, cancer, nuclear war and all those other things. What I have since realized is that if people expect you to be brave, sometimes you pretend that you are, even when you are frightened down to your very bones. But this was later, during the whole thing with Phoebe's lunatic, that I realized this.

At this point in my story, Gram interrupted me to say, 'Why, Salamanca, of course you're brave. All the Hiddles are brave. It's a family trait. Look at your daddy – your momma—'

'My momma is not a real Hiddle,' I said.

'She practically is,' Gram said. 'You can't be married to a Hiddle that long and not *become* a Hiddle.'

That is not what my mother used to say. She would tell my father, 'You Hiddles are a mystery to me. I'll never be a true Hiddle.' She did not say this proudly. She said it as if she were thumpingly sorry about it, as if it was some sort of failing in her, some sort of loss.

My mother's parents – my other set of grandparents – are Pickfords, and they are as unlike my grandparents Hiddle as a donkey is unlike a pickle. Grandmother and Grandfather Pickford stand straight up, as if sturdy, steel poles run down their backs. They wear starched, ironed clothing, and when they are shocked or surprised (which is often), they say, 'Really? Is that so?' and their eyes open widely and their mouths turn down at the corners.

Once I asked my mother why Grandmother and Grandfather Pickford never laughed. My mother said, 'They're just so busy being respectable. It takes a lot

of concentration to be that respectable,' and then my mother laughed and laughed, in a friendly, gentle way, and her own spine was not made of steel, you could tell, because she bent in half, laughing and laughing.

My mother said that Grandmother Pickford's one single act of defiance in her life as a Pickford was in naming my mother. Grandmother Pickford, whose own name is Gayfeather, named my mother Chanhassen. It's an Indian name, meaning 'tree sweet juice', or – in other words – maple sugar. Only Grandmother Pickford ever called my mother by her Indian name, though. Everyone else called my mother 'Sugar'.

Most of the time, my mother seemed nothing like her parents at all, and it was hard for me to imagine that she had come from them. Only occasionally – very, very, rarely – in small, unexpected moments, the corners of my mother's mouth would turn down and she'd say, 'Really? Is that so?' and she sounded exactly like a Pickford.

4

That's What I'm Telling You

On the day that Phoebe sat next to me at lunch and told me I was 'ever so brave', she invited me to her house for dinner that night.

'Sure,' I said. To be honest, I was relieved that I would not have to eat at Margaret's again. I did not want to see Dad and Margaret smiling at each other. I knew that Margaret and her elderly mother, Mrs Partridge, were trying their best to make me feel welcome, but they were a bit odd, and I was feeling sad and ornery all the time.

I wanted everything to be like it *was*. I wanted to be back in Bybanks, Kentucky, in the hills and the trees, near the cows and chickens and pigs. I wanted to run down the hill from the barn and through the kitchen door that banged behind me, and see my mother and my father sitting at the table peeling apples.

Phoebe and I walked home from school together. We stopped briefly at my house so that I could call my father at work. Margaret had helped him find a job selling farm machinery. When I phoned him that day, he said it made him happy as a clam at high water to know I had a new friend. Maybe this is really why he was happy, I thought, or maybe it was because he could be alone with Margaret Cadaver.

Phoebe and I then walked to her house. As we

passed Margaret Cadaver's house, a voice called out. 'Sal? Sal? Is that you?'

Phoebe put her hand up to her mouth and said, 'Oh!'

In the shadows on the porch, Margaret's mother, Mrs Partridge, sat in a wicker rocker. A thick, gnarled cane with a handle carved in the shape of a cobra's head lay across her knees. Her purple dress had slipped up over her bony knees, which were spread apart, and, I hate to say it, you could see right up her skirt. Around her neck was a yellow feather scarf ('My boa,' she once told me, 'my most favouritest boa').

As I started up the walk, Phoebe pulled on my arm. 'Don't go up there,' she said.

'It's only Mrs Partridge,' I said. 'Come on.'

'Who's that with you?' Mrs Partridge said. 'What's that on her face?' I knew what she was going to do. She did this with me the first time I met her.

Phoebe placed her hands on her own round face and felt about. 'Is it beans? Is it the beans from that red bean salad I had at lunch?'

'Come here,' Mrs Partridge said. She wriggled her crooked little fingers at Phoebe.

Phoebe looked at me, and I pushed her a little closer. Mrs Partridge put her fingers up to Phoebe's face and mashed around gently over her eyelids and down her cheeks. Then she said, 'Just as I thought. It's two eyes, a nose and a mouth.' Then she laughed a wicked laugh that sounded as if it was bouncing off jagged rocks. 'You're thirteen years old.'

'Yes,' Phoebe said.

'I knew it,' Mrs Partridge said. 'I just knew it.' She patted her yellow feather boa.

'This is Phoebe Winterbottom,' I said. 'She lives right next door to you.'

When we left, Phoebe whispered, 'I wish you hadn't done that. I wish you hadn't told her I lived next door.'

'Why not? You don't seem to know Mrs Cadaver and Mrs Partridge very well—'

'They haven't lived there very long. Only a month or so.'

'Don't you think it's remarkable that she guessed your age like that?'

'I don't see what is so remarkable about it,' Phoebe said. Before I could explain, she started telling me about the time that she and her mother, father and sister Prudence, had gone to the State Fair. They went to a booth where a crowd was gathered around a tall, thin man.

'So, what was he doing?' I asked.

'That's what I'm telling you,' Phoebe said. Phoebe had a way of sounding like a grown-up sometimes. When she said, 'That's what I'm telling you,' she sounded like a grown-up talking to a child. 'All around, people were saying, "Oh!" and "Amazing!" and "How does he do that?" What he was doing was guessing people's ages. He had to guess your correct age within one year or else you won a teddy bear.'

'How did he do it?' I asked.

'That's what I'm telling you,' Phoebe said. 'The thin man would look someone over carefully, close his eyes, and then he would point his finger at the person and shout, "Seventy-two!" '

'At everyone? He guessed everyone to be seventy-two?'

'Sal,' she said. 'That's what I am trying to tell you. I was just giving an example. He might have said, "ten" or "thirty" or "seventy-two". It just depended on the person. He was astounding.'

I really thought it was more astounding that Mrs Partridge could do this, but I didn't say anything.

Phoebe said that her father wanted the thin man to guess his age. 'My father thinks he looks very young for his age, and he was certain he could fool the man. After studying my father closely, the thin man closed his eyes, pointed his finger at my father and shouted, "Fifty-two!" My father gave a little cry of astonishment, and all around people were automatically beginning to say "Oh!" and "Amazing" and all that. But my father stopped them.'

'Why did he do that?'

Phoebe started pulling on one of her yellow curls. I think she was wishing she hadn't started this story in the first place. 'Because he wasn't anywhere near fifty-two. He was only thirty-eight.'

'Oh,' I said.

'And all day long, my father followed us through the fair, carrying his prize, a large, green teddy bear. He was miserable. He kept saying, "Fifty-two? *Fifty-two*? Do I look fifty-two?" '

'Does he?' I said.

Phoebe pulled harder on her hair. 'No, he does not look fifty-two. He looks thirty-eight.' She was very defensive about her father.

Phoebe's mother was in the kitchen baking pies. On the counter were two cartons of blackberries. I couldn't keep my eyes off the blackberries. Mrs Winterbottom said, 'I'm making blackberry pie. I hope you like blackberries – is there something wrong? Really, if you don't like blackberries, I could—'

'No,' I said. 'I like blackberries very much. I just have some allergies, I think.'

'To blackberries?' Mrs Winterbottom said.

'Oh, no, not to blackberries.' The truth is, I do not have allergies, but I could not admit that the sight of blackberries reminded me of my mother.

Mrs Winterbottom made me and Phoebe sit down at the kitchen table and tell her about our day. She brought out a plate of homemade cookies. Phoebe told her about Mrs Partridge guessing her age.

'She's really remarkable,' I said.

Phoebe said, 'It's not *that* remarkable, Sal. I wouldn't exactly use the word "remarkable".'

'But, Phoebe,' I said, 'Mrs Partridge is blind.'

Both Phoebe and her mother said, '*Blind*?'

Later, Phoebe said to me, 'Don't you think it's odd that Mrs Partridge, who is blind, could see something about me – but I, who can see, was blind about her? And speaking of odd, there's something very odd about that Mrs Cadaver.'

'Margaret?' I said.

'Is that her name? Margaret Cadaver? Mrs Margaret Cadaver?'

'Yes.'

'She scares me half to death,' Phoebe said.

'Why?'

'That's what I'm telling you,' she said. 'First, there is that name: *Cadaver*. You know what Cadaver means?'

Actually, I did not.

'It means *dead body*.'

'Are you sure?' I said.

'Of course I am sure, Sal. You can check the dictionary if you want. Do you know what she does for a living – what her job is?'

'Yes,' I was pleased to say. I was pleased to know *something*. 'She's a nurse.'

'Exactly,' Phoebe said. 'Would you want a nurse whose name meant *dead body*? And that hair. Don't you think all that sticking-out red hair is *spooky*? And that voice. It reminds me of dead leaves all blowing around on the ground.'

This was Phoebe's power. In her world, no one was ordinary. People were either perfect – like her father – or, more often, they were weird lunatics or axe murderers. She could convince me of just about anything – especially about Margaret Cadaver. From that day on, Margaret Cadaver's hair did look spooky and her voice did sound exactly like dead leaves. Somehow it was easier to deal with Margaret if there were *reasons* not to like her, and I definitely did not want to like her.

'Do you want to know an absolute secret?' Phoebe said. (I did.) 'Promise not to tell.' (I promised.) 'Maybe I shouldn't,' she said. 'Your father goes over there all the time. Your father likes her, doesn't he?'

'Yes. Probably. Maybe.'

'I won't say, then.' She twirled her finger through her curly hair and let those big blue eyes roam over the ceiling. 'Her name is *Mrs* Cadaver, right? Have you ever wondered what happened to *Mr* Cadaver?'

'I never really thought about—'

'Well, I think I know,' Phoebe said, 'and it is awful, purely awful.'