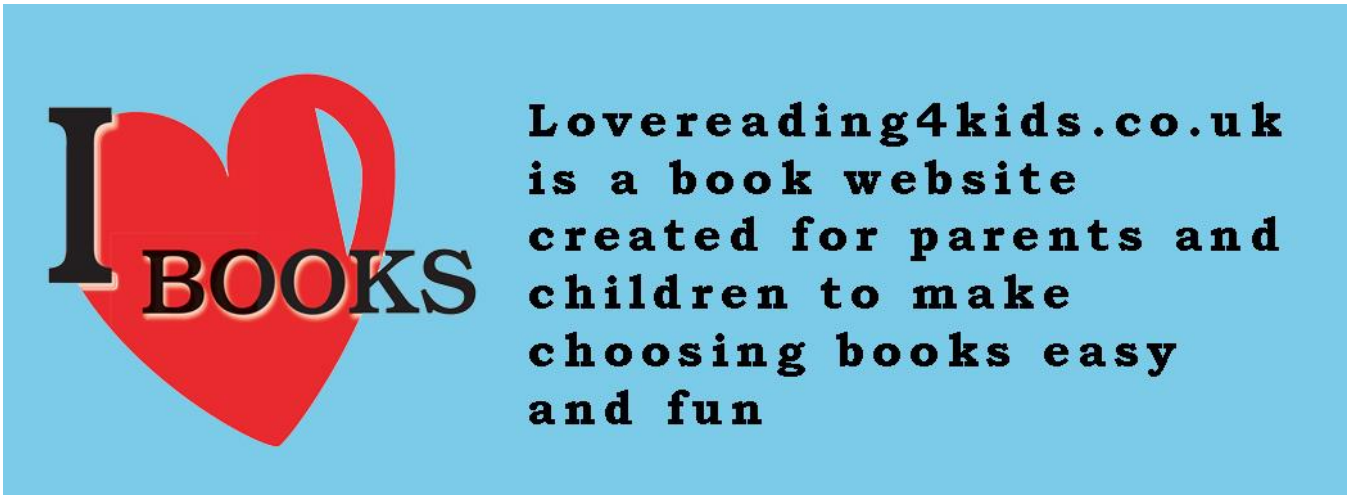


Opening extract from

The Wrong Train

Written by

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the Wrong Train



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Jeremy deQuidt

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For Lizzie, Jack, Alice and Bea,
same lovely sailors,
same leaky sieve.

The boy didn't realise what he'd done at first because the train was where the last train should have been – a little two-carriage diesel at the end of the platform – and he'd run flat out to catch it.

Putting his feet up on the seat opposite and getting his breath back, he sat looking down the carriage at the long black line of windows and the strip lights reflected in the glass, and even then the penny didn't drop. There were usually at least half a dozen other people on the last train, but the carriage was empty. It was just him.

There was enough charge left on his phone to ring his dad to tell him he'd caught the train, so his dad could pick him up, and then the phone died. But that didn't matter because his dad would be at the station, and it was only three stops.

It dawned on him only slowly that there was

something wrong – a thought that there should have been a station by now began to rise up through his head, like a child tugging at his sleeve for attention, and he sat up in the seat. Cupping his hands to the window and blanking out the lights of the carriage, all he could see was dark, and that was what was wrong. Breath condensing against the cold glass he rubbed it clear and looked again, but there was nothing to see. Only dark.

What started as suspicion became certainty as the train rolled on and no familiar lights drifted past the window – not the flyover across the road, or the floodlights of the petrol station.

This wasn't the right train.

He stuck his face to the glass and stared out, trying to work out where he was, but there were no clues, not one – no station, no sign, nothing. He desperately wanted the train to stop so he could get off, but it just kept on going. Fifteen minutes – twenty? He sat looking helplessly at the empty carriage and the dark mirrors of the windows while the sound of the diesel droned on, taking him he hadn't a clue where.

At last, the train began to slow. For several minutes it crawled along as though on the point of stopping, but never actually did, and each time he thought it would, it began to pick up speed again.

Finally the train juddered to a halt in the dark, and he didn't even know whether it was at a station or not, because cupping his hands to the glass there were only a few lights and a low concrete wall to be seen out of the window. But the light on the door button came on, and being off the train seemed a better deal than being on it. So, getting out of his seat, he stepped onto the cold, dark platform before he'd even really thought through whether that was a good idea or not.

Hearing the doors of the train close behind him, and the engine revving up and pulling away leaving him there in the dark and the cold, he wasn't so sure it had been a good idea at all. There was no one else on the platform, but by then it was too late to do anything except watch the lights of the train disappear. When the sound of it couldn't be heard any more, there was no sound at all.

Just silence.

It didn't even look like a real station. The slab concrete of the wall ran along the back of it and there was a little shelter with a bench, but nothing else – not a ticket office or a machine. Not even a sign to say where it was. He could see the ends of the platform sloping down to the tracks and there were three lamps on poles, but the light from them was thin and weak. There were no houses, no street

lights. So far as he could see, there wasn't a road, not even steps down to one. It was just a platform, dark and still, in the middle of nowhere.

Pulling his coat round him he tried laughing at the dumbness of what he'd done, but in the cold silence his laughter fell from his lips like a shot bird, and that made him feel more alone. Sitting down on the bench, he turned up his collar against the cold and wondered what on earth he was going to do.

He'd been sitting like that for a while before he noticed the light.

At first it was so small that he wasn't sure what it was – just a tiny dot swinging to and fro. But as it came slowly nearer, grew larger, he realised it was a torch.

No, not a torch.

A lantern.

A glass lantern.

Someone carrying a lantern was walking along the railway tracks, out of the darkness, towards him.

He sat up, not quite sure what to make of this. But as the light came closer, came slowly up the slope of the platform's end, any concerns he might have had evaporated as he saw that it was carried by an old man. The man held the lantern in one hand, and a shopping bag and a lead attached to a small dog in the other. He came unhurriedly along the

platform and, stopping by the bench, looked down at the boy and then up and back along the platform in that vague, undecided way that small children and elderly people do. The little dog sniffed at the boy's shoes.

The boy sat looking at the man – at the frayed collar and thumb-greased tie, the thin raincoat, the cheap, split plastic leatherette of the shopping bag, the worn shoes and the scruffy little grey dog. A bunch of dead leaves and withered flowers poked out of the top of the bag and that didn't seem quite right.

The boy grinned apologetically.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But could you tell me when the next train's going to be? I got on the wrong one and I need to get on one going back the other way.'

The old man glanced down at him, but didn't say anything and the boy wasn't sure whether he'd heard or not, so he said it again, and this time the man turned his head and looked at him.

'It's not a station,' he said brightly. 'It's a Permanent Way Post. You're on a Permanent Way Post.'

He had an odd voice – sing-song, and brittle like a reed. Without seeing the face it could have been a man's or a woman's.

'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' said the boy.

The man looked back along the track and, lifting the hand that held the lead and the bag, he pointed at the rails.

'It's what the railway workers use when they mend the tracks,' he said. 'It's not a station.'

'But the train stopped here,' the boy objected. 'I got off it.'

'Well, you shouldn't have done that,' the man laughed. 'You shouldn't have done that at all. I wouldn't have come along if you hadn't done that.'

The boy didn't understand what the man meant by that either, but the man sat himself down on the bench next to him and smiled reassuringly, so he smiled back. Up close, the man's clothes smelled of washing powder and old cloth – it was a homely smell, like cups of tea and newsagents. The man put the lantern on the ground between his feet. It lit his socks and his shoes, the grubby grey coat of the little dog. The boy could see his eyes now, they were watering in the cold night air. The man smiled again.

'If you're stuck here,' he said. 'Toby and me better keep you company. Least, until your train comes. We've got plenty of time, me and Toby.'

The little dog looked up and wagged its tail.

The boy pulled his coat tighter, pressed out the cold pockets of air and folded his arms round him to keep the warmth in.

'It's all right,' he said. 'Really, I'm fine – as long as I know there's another train going to come.'

But as he said it, he looked along the empty platform and, if he was honest with himself, he thought he'd be glad of the company.

'Wouldn't dream of leaving you,' said the old man. 'Not now you've got off the train. Wouldn't be right for me to leave you, would it?' He smiled and, bending forward, stroked the little dog's ears.

The boy frowned. 'It will stop, won't it?' he asked, looking along the bare platform.

'Course it will,' the man said. 'Just wave it down, and you'll be all right.'

They sat quietly for a while. The man didn't say anything, he sat looking into the dark at the end of the platform, tapping his shoes on the cold ground, one then the other, as though drumming a little tune to himself while he watched for the lights of the train. The boy began to think that things hadn't worked out so badly. All he had to do was wait for the train. If he'd only been able to ring his dad, he wouldn't have minded at all.

He breathed out, making clouds with his breath, trying to pile one breath on top of the other.

The novelty of doing that was just beginning to wear thin, when the man turned and looked at him.

'I'll tell you what we'll do,' he said. 'I'll tell you a

story while we wait for your train – help pass the time, a nice little story will. It's a long time since I've told anyone one of my stories.'

'You don't have to,' the boy said. 'Really, I'm all right.'

But the man smiled, only this time it seemed he was smiling more to himself than to the boy.

'Got a little brother, have you?' he asked.

There was something so penetrating about the eyes that looked out of that old face, that the boy didn't need to answer.

'I thought so,' the man said. 'I know a story about a girl and her baby brother. I'll tell you that one if you like – help pass the time, it will.'

The boy shook his head resignedly.

'All right, then,' he said.

'Tickety-boo,' said the old man brightly, and sitting back on the bench, he took a quiet breath, and began.

It happened so seamlessly as the man spoke that the boy couldn't say when the platform stopped and the small house started, but once it had happened there wasn't a platform around him any more – there was only the sense of a summer sky, and green leaves, and a girl standing on a dirt track that led to a small house.

Nanny's Little Candle



It was her mum's idea to move. 'New baby, new house,' she'd said.

But the baby wasn't Cassie's dad's, and Cassie didn't have a dad any more, not since he'd found that out. So now it was just Cassie, and her mum and the new baby.

'It will be lovely,' her mum kept saying. 'Everything you didn't have in the town, everything you've always wanted – big garden, trees to climb. You can walk down the track and get the bus to the new school when you start in the autumn. It'll be simple.'

But she was thirteen now. She'd wanted the tree and the garden when she was eight, but not now. It was like her mum couldn't see that. It wasn't even going to be her old school. Everything had to be new – Mum's new smile, Mum's new plans, Mum's new baby – everything.

Everything, that is, except for the bungalow at the end of the track. There was nothing new about that. It was from the 1930s – bit of a garden, bit of an orchard – all overgrown. When the old lady who'd lived there died it just stood empty. Wasn't even cleared of her things. After a year, it was put up for rent – a big red sign at the end of the track – that's how Cassie's mum found it.

It was falling down, but it was cheap. When they moved in the old lady's furniture was still there – not

the beds and sheets, they'd all gone – but everything else; chairs, table, cracked bar of soap on the window sill, old pages out of a *Women's Weekly* sellotaped to the wall. Her TV licence pinned to one side of the kitchen mirror. There was even a calendar with her hospital appointments marked on it in pen.

It smelled damp. Felt damp.

'It won't do, not once we've got the place all cleaned and aired,' her mum had said. She'd gone round singing a happy cleaning song like she was some princess in a film, opening the windows – the panes all dirty with old rain and dust. 'Listen, Cassie,' she'd said as she'd stood by a window, and Cassie had listened. There was nothing, just birds singing and insects in the orchard. No street, no cars, no noise. Nothing of their old life at all.

'You see, love?' her mum had said, smiling. 'You see?'

There was a cubby-hole kitchen with a couple of painted shelves and a two-ring gas hob, lino tiles on the floor. A rusty little key that didn't fit anything hung knotted on a string in the larder like it had been there for ever.

Cassie's room was at the back. From the window she could see the orchard thick with summer nettles and weeds. There were thirteen apple trees and beyond them, at the edge of the open fields, a water

butt and an old brick-and-plaster outbuilding with the roof all fallen in.

There was so much work, so much cleaning to do. The water and the electricity didn't always work though, and when they didn't her mum would ring the renting agents on her mobile, only there was barely enough signal to make herself heard and she'd just end up shouting at them.

Sometimes, after Cassie had gone to bed, she'd hear her mum ringing 'Michael', whoever he was, and she'd end up shouting at him too.

And then there was the baby.

All those times her mum had told her and Dad that she'd been working late, well, it hadn't always been work, had it?

Her mum had called the baby 'Niall', which sounded like the river. Cassie just called it 'the baby'.

'His name's Niall,' her mum would say. She wouldn't give up trying to get Cassie to say his name, but it wasn't something Cassie wanted to do. If it hadn't been for it, things wouldn't have changed, would they? She'd have been back in the old house with her mum and her dad and it would have been just the three of them like it always had.

But it wasn't.

She didn't even want to hold the baby. Just

thinking about her mum holding it made her feel physically sick.

'Go on, you have a go,' her mum would say, but Cassie wouldn't take him. Her mum would rub her own face against the baby's soft, downy black hair and say, 'He smells like biscuits and vanilla. Go on, you'll like it when you do.' But Cassie didn't want to, and finally her mum would turn away and stand by the open back door holding the baby and looking out at the thick nettles and the weeds in the orchard, and Cassie almost didn't care if she was crying or not, because the baby cried enough for both of them.

He hardly ever stopped – least that's what Cassie thought.

Not that what she thought seemed to matter to anyone any more. She couldn't even talk to her old friends about any of it because the mobile signal was so crap.

So she made do the best she could; lying on her bed listening to her music, to Niall crying, to her mum trying to pretend that everything was princess-land wonderful.

And then, Cassie found the little wooden box.

It was in the old outbuilding. She'd got to it across the orchard, cutting her way through the tall nettles with a stick. The plaster on the walls was rust stained and blooming with yellow mould, and there was a

big metal pot filled with a mush of wet leaves that stank when she stirred them. The ground was covered with broken roof tiles and twigs and pigeon droppings, but in one corner was a wooden box – not much bigger than a shoe box. The wood was warped and weather-stained and there was a little brass key plate on the front. It was locked tight. But the box rattled when she shook it, so there had to be something inside. She took it back through the nettles.

'There won't be anything worth having,' her mum said as Cassie tried the kitchen drawers for a screwdriver to prise it open. 'It's probably just old tools.'

But Cassie didn't care.

Only, she couldn't find a screwdriver.

As if someone had whispered the idea into her head, she suddenly remembered the rusty little key on the string in the larder.

That would be about the right size. She pulled it off its string and tried it in the lock.

Bingo.

With a little bit of careful effort, it turned.

She couldn't believe her disappointment. There were four old candles in the box, that was all. They were wrapped in yellowed wax paper – three white ones and a black one. The black one was dirty and greasy. Cassie had to wipe her fingers clean on her top after she'd touched it.

‘I said it wouldn’t be anything worthwhile,’ said her mum, standing there, Niall on her hip.

‘I think they’re good,’ said Cassie, but she didn’t know why she’d said that because they weren’t good at all. She could still feel the greasiness of the black candle on the tips of her fingers. But when her mum said to put them back outside where she’d found them, Cassie didn’t want to. They were hers now. She put them on the old lady’s dressing table that was in her room.

They were still there when she went to bed.

It wasn’t that she’d meant to light them, and if she’d had any batteries left in her torch when she went to bed, she wouldn’t have done. But when the electricity went off that night after tea they were the only candles they had. Rather than go to bed in the dark, Cassie stood the four candles in a plate of water on the dresser and lit them with a match. First the white ones and then, the last of the match almost burning her fingers, she lit the black.

She lay in her bed watching as the flickering shadows crept upwards and forwards across the wall. Her mum had gone to bed. Through the thin walls she could hear the sound of Niall crying and her mum shushing and singing little songs to him, like she used to do to Cassie when she cried.

Only, her mum didn’t do that for her any more.

Cassie punched her pillow flat and with the candles still burning and the shadows reaching out across the walls, she put her headphones in, turned her music up to drown out the sound of the baby, and closed her eyes.

She let the words and the music wash over her. The sheets were cool and her body felt long and still. She lay there, all quiet with the music in her head. But there was a whispering line in one of the songs she'd never noticed before. Someone was speaking along to the music, only it didn't fit the song. It was reedy, like an old woman's voice.

'. . . Hangman's noose snuffed out my light, burn little candle nice and bright . . .'

Over and over again.

She heard it in the next song too, and finally, as slowly as though coming to her through syrup, she realised that wasn't how any of the songs went, and that she was dreaming.

She opened her eyes, but even as she did, she knew that the dream was still going on because the room that she saw wasn't her room. It was a cold, bare kitchen and where the dresser should have been there was an iron cooking range with a shelf above it. A dirty rag-rug lay on a stone floor. There was a chair, a table with a couple of house bricks on it – red and brown. She knew the room was quite dark because it

was night time, but in the way of dreams she didn't question for one moment that she was able to see everything that was there quite clearly, right down to the colour of the bricks. On the shelf above the range, was a black candle – its flame burning with a dirty, greasy smoke, as though the candle had been made from fat and skin, not wax. Its flame drifted lazily in a draught, but it cast no light, no shadows. If anything it made the room even darker still.

She lay staring at the kitchen and candle.

As she watched, the door latch lifted and an elderly woman came in. She was dressed as no one dressed any more – in a long thick skirt with a black bonnet and a shawl, and she was carrying a leather bag. She put it down on the table. There was something inside the bag, but Cassie couldn't see what it was. She could hear Niall crying now – she even had to listen to him in her dreams. It was almost as if the old woman could hear him too, because she glanced irritably down at the bag as though the sound of his crying was coming from there. But the woman didn't do anything about it. She tipped her purse out and began counting onto the table a whole handful of coins, then she scooped them up and, crossing the room, dropped them into a jar on the shelf beside the candle. The flame guttered darkly.

Only then did the woman turn and look at the

bag. There was a different expression on her face now – wicked and deliberate. She lifted her eyes and looked straight at Cassie. Cassie could only watch dumbly as the woman took a cloth down from the shelf and began folding it into a small pad. When she'd done, she walked back to the table and opened the bag. The sound of crying was suddenly louder and Cassie realised that it was coming from inside the bag, not from Niall. With one hand the woman held the bag open and with the other she reached in with the pad of cloth and, pressing it down, stood there like that for as long as it took for all the crying to stop.

When there was no more noise, she looked up from the bag and smiled at Cassie. It was a cruel smile. Picking up the bricks she dropped them into the bag and snapped the clasp shut.

Then, Cassie wasn't looking at the kitchen any more. She was standing on the bank of a river by a deep pool and it was dark and cold, and she was watching a leather bag sink slowly out of sight.

With a start, she opened her eyes wide. The ripples in the dark pool, the river bank, they'd all gone.

There was sunlight on the pillow by her cheek. She sat bolt upright and looked at the room, her breath stuffed up in her chest. There was nothing, no range,

no rug, no table. For a moment, she could have said exactly where they'd stood, but even as she looked the image faded and disappeared. It was just her room with sunlight streaming in. But she was shaking.

On the dresser the candles had melted and run over the plate into one dirty mess. The room smelled of burning and stale fat. She got out of bed, the lino damp and cold on her feet. She opened the window, retching and breathing in great lungfuls of fresh air.

She felt sick.

It must have been the candles, she thought. They'd done carbon monoxide at school – maybe it was like that? She could have suffocated and no one would have known. It had been like a poison.

She stood there breathing in the clean cool air. She could hear her mum moving about in the kitchen, the radio on, the sound of the baby crying.

Like the crying from the bag.

Her tongue felt fat and dirty in her mouth. Her head ached. She sat on the edge of her bed and tried not to remember the dream.

But she couldn't forget the dream.

She still didn't feel well when it was time for her mum to go into town to get the shopping – it was the big shop too. But her mum didn't believe her when she said she felt too sick to go – she'd done that before

to get out of the shop – only this time she really did feel sick, and her mum didn't believe her. She tried to tell her that it was the smell of the candles, tried to tell her about the dream, about the baby in the bag. But when she told her about that – about the baby in the leather bag – her mum's face had gone white-pale like it only did when she was really angry, and there was nothing Cassie could say or do to put it right then. It ended with her mum calling her vicious and selfish and spoilt – and a whole lot else besides that was to do with her dad, not her – and then her mum put Niall and the buggy and all the rest of his stuff into the car and drove off without Cassie.

That's how it always ended up these days – Cassie on her own and her mum with the baby. It never used to be like that.

It was never like that.

Her mum hit the brakes hard at the end of the track, she drove like that when she was really angry. The car swung out onto the road and the noise of it grew fainter until there was nothing left but the quiet, and a taste in Cassie's mouth like dirty wax.

For a while she sat on the wooden back steps with her headphones in just looking out at the orchard and wishing that she'd gone with her mum. Wishing that her mum would come back so she could say sorry to her.

But her mum didn't come back.

As time wore on Cassie began to feel more and more uncomfortable sitting there. It was an unpleasant sensation, and it grew stronger by the moment. She knew she was alone, only it didn't feel like it. She took one headphone out and looked round at the orchard, at the long track to the road – but there was no one there.

Quite clearly, from inside the bungalow behind her, she heard a sound.

A baby crying.

Just for a moment she thought that it must be Niall and her mum had come back, only there hadn't been a car, so it couldn't have been.

'Mum?'

There was no answer, just the sound of a baby crying. Only it wasn't like the racket that Niall made – it was faint and sickly, like the mewing of a kitten.

She got unsteadily to her feet. Holding onto the door frame she stepped into the kitchen, and pulling out the other headphone she cocked her head and listened again. The sound was coming from along the passage.

Coming from her bedroom.

More puzzled than afraid, because it sounded like a cat, she went down the little narrow passage and,

pausing by the door to listen, turned the handle and opened it.

She was looking again at the flagstoned kitchen with the iron range, only now it was daylight. The woman was there – shawl and skirt and buttoned boots. She didn't seem to notice Cassie. She was pouring hot milk from a pan into a stoneware baby's bottle – Cassie could see the baby in a basket on the floor at her feet – but the milk was far too hot. Cassie could see the steam rising from the pan – you can't give a baby scalding milk.

The woman turned, looked straight at her, and smiled – and then Cassie didn't know whether it was real or not because the iron range and the bottle, the woman and the baby, they weren't there. It was just her room and her bed and the sunlight. It happened so quickly – like when you think you've seen a bird and you look again and it's just an old brown leaf, and you don't know whether you even saw a bird at all.

That's how it was.

The woman was there

then gone.

Cassie stood in the open doorway looking at the empty room, at the turned-back duvet, her clothes on the floor. Her head was aching and she didn't feel well. She wanted to cry now – didn't want to wait on her own for her mum.

Not there.

She took her back door key down from the peg on the fridge, locked the door and went out onto the track, down towards the road. There was a shop in the village. Nearer than the shop was the church. There was a bench just inside the gate. She could sit there in the sun and watch for her mum.

A man was cutting the grass. She sat on the bench listening to the sound of the mower and watching the road, but it didn't make her feel any better. She must have dozed, because the church clock woke her.

The sun had moved round. When she opened her eyes the first thing she saw amongst the headstones was a small white marble statue of a little girl holding a dove. She hadn't noticed it before, but now the sun was actually shining on it. She stretched and stood up. Walked over and read the lead-lettered inscription:

In memory of the infants of the Weir Pond.
June 1888.

There was a weir in the river on the other side of the church, she'd seen it from a distance – a pool with willows on the banks.

And suddenly she knew the place—
a dark pool with willows on the banks,
and a leather bag sinking out of sight.
Something cold had touched her.

She looked again at the date and the style of clothes the little girl wore – at the buttoned boots and the shawl.

She could taste dirty black wax in her mouth.

There weren't any names on the marble, it just said 'infants'.

She looked about her. The man who'd been mowing the grass had finished. He'd put the mower away and was coming up the path towards the gate – an old man, flat cap in his hand. The village was full of them. She tried to stop him.

'Excuse me?' she said loudly.

He smelled of sweat and tobacco and tweed coat, and he passed her by.

'What's this about?' she said, pointing at the marble statue. 'This one.'

But he kept walking, and then she felt stupid and angry just to be left standing there like that.

Beyond the churchyard wall she saw the roof of her mum's car go past. It turned up the track.

Her mum had a way of talking when they'd had a row – short, like a series of statements, not waiting for a reply – and she wouldn't stop what she was doing either. Wouldn't look at Cassie. She was already unpacking the shopping when Cassie got back to the bungalow, and that's what it was like then.

‘I gave a lift to an old woman,’ her mum said, pulling things out of the bags on the table and putting them on the shelves. ‘She was just walking along the road back from town. Had a big leather bag, and I thought, you can’t carry that, so I gave her a lift. We’ve got to get to know the locals, haven’t we, Cassie, now we live here?’

She glanced pointedly at Cassie as she said it.

‘She was so nice about Niall. She loves little children – especially babies. And she knew all about the old cottage that was here before this one. That’s where that outhouse comes from she said. She was a real mine. In fact . . .’

Her mum hesitated, as she put the last of the bread in the bin.

‘I’ve asked her to come for tea tomorrow. If I like her – and she’s that good with babies – she could pop in sometimes and look after Niall if I want to go out. After all you’re never that keen, are you?’ This time she looked right at Cassie – meant to make her feel guilty.

But that wasn’t what Cassie was feeling. What she was feeling was an emptiness, and a darkness and it was all lit by a black, greasy, candle.

‘What was her name?’ said Cassie quietly.

Because she’d already seen an old woman with a leather bag.

‘She just said to call her Nanny Candle,’ said her mum. ‘Isn’t that sweet?’

Before she went to bed, Cassie threw the plate with its mess of dirty wax out into the nettles, as far away from the house as she could. She heard it land. Then she scrubbed her hands clean under the tap and lay in her room with the light on, but she couldn’t sleep. All she could think of was the old woman. Through the walls she could hear Niall crying, only if she listened carefully she could hear other crying too – faint, and far away. Crying that would stop, then start again, only it was never the same cry. It was always a different one.

She couldn’t help thinking of the stone-floored kitchen and the iron range – she could almost see the shape of them rising out of the hard, lightbulb-lit room around her. At last, she pulled on her jumper and padded bare-foot along the dark passage to her mum’s room. She felt safer there. There was a small lamp by her mum’s bed – the light from it was soft and butter yellow – and her mum was holding Niall. He was asleep. Cassie climbed into the bed beside her.

‘Please don’t let that lady come,’ she said. ‘I dreamed about an old lady.’

Her mum shifted a little so that she could put one arm around Cassie.

It felt so warm, so comfortable.

'Don't be silly,' her mum said. 'You didn't see her. She was nice. Just a nice old lady.'

'She isn't nice, Mum,' said Cassie.

She looked up into her mum's face. 'Can we move away?' she said quietly. 'I don't like it here.' And she began to cry.

Her mum's face hardened and she took her arm away from Cassie. She still held on to Niall though.

'Well, you're going to have to learn to like it,' her mum said firmly. 'Because it's all that we've got, and that's an end of it.'

Large, wet tears welled up in Cassie's eyes and rolled down her cheek onto the pillow. But her mum didn't put her arm round her again.

It was just after three o'clock the next afternoon that the old woman came.

Cassie had tried everything she could think of to stop it happening, to make her mum change her mind, but none of it had worked. Short of actually running away there was nothing she could do, and she couldn't do that. So she waited, and now the woman was there, sitting at the little table her mum had laid.

But was it the same woman as in the dream?

Cassie couldn't say. She kept stealing looks at her, trying to decide, but she just couldn't say.

At last her mum said, 'Don't stare, Cassie!' And then she said, 'I'm sorry, Nanny. Cassie's left her manners somewhere else today.'

It wasn't the sort of thing her mum normally said – and if she'd said 'Nanny' once, she'd said it a dozen times. 'Nanny, would you like some tea?' 'Nanny, would you like some cake?' It sounded so false to Cassie, but the woman just smiled each time and took the tea and took the cake, and looked at Cassie and smiled some more.

'Lovely little baby brother you've got,' she said.

'His name's Niall,' said Cassie flatly.

'Oh, I know that, poppet, your mum told me. And I bet you love him to bits, don't you?' She turned to Cassie's mum. 'You know, dear, if ever you wanted me to stop by and look after him for a while, I'd never mind. It would be a nice treat for me, lovely little boy like that.' And she leaned forward and pinched Niall's cheek.

Her mum smiled. She picked up the empty teapot from the table and made for the little kitchen.

'I'll just go and get some more tea, and maybe we can talk about that.'

'I'll get it,' said Cassie quickly, but her mum had already gone, and there was just her and the woman.

The woman carefully sipped at her cup of tea, put it tidily down on the saucer and looked at Cassie. Only this time it wasn't the same woman who had sat there only the moment before.

It was someone else completely.

It was like a bad dream slowly blossoming in front of Cassie – the old lady in the dream and this other lady were both there at the same time sitting in the same chair – one face over the other – both talking at her.

'You lit it then,' the woman from the dream said.

Cassie stared at her open-mouthed. She felt giddy and sick – could taste the dirty wax on her tongue. Could smell it in the air mixed with the tea and the cake – all stale and fatty.

The woman smiled at her, and Cassie had seen that smile before.

'Nanny always leaves a little candle out to light her way back home,' the woman said.

She put a boney finger to her throat and Cassie saw on the white of her puckered skin, there underneath the collar of her dress, a livid blue and black bruise. It went on a slant all the way round her neck.

'Hangman did that for me, dearie,' she said. 'Hardly fair, when all I do is take those girls' little worries away. Their little mistakes.'

Looking slyly at Cassie, she picked up her cup and

sipped at it again. Only suddenly it was the lady who'd come for cake who was looking at her.

'You all right, poppet? You look all pale,' she said.

And then it wasn't her any more, it was that other face. Cold and heartless.

'Like your mummy's little mistake,' it said.

Cassie glanced at Niall sitting propped in his chair.

'Take him too, if you like? Put him in my bag of bricks, and that'll be the end. Nanny make it all better. You'll see.'

Cassie stuffed her hands over her ears to shut the words out, and what actually happened next she couldn't say, but her mum was there and the table was all turned over and the old lady who'd come for tea was standing pale-faced against the wall, flapping her hands at Cassie, trying to keep her off.

And then, Cassie was alone in the little room among the broken cups and dropped cake, listening to Niall crying from the passage and her mum showing the woman out of the door, saying over and over again how sorry she was. How really, really sorry she was. And when the woman had gone, her mum had stormed back in, face blanched white – Cassie had never seen her so angry. Niall was yelling blue murder in her arms, and Cassie couldn't begin

to explain any of it, because her mum wouldn't listen – said Cassie had done it all on purpose just to hurt her. Wouldn't listen even when Cassie tried to tell her that Nanny Candle was going to come for Niall. That only made it worse.

And she was so scared.

Her mum didn't talk to her, wouldn't even look at her, for the rest of the day – not even a kiss at bedtime – and Cassie went to bed unloved and alone.

And then the power went off again.

She lay frightened and alone in the dark listening to her mum moving around by torchlight, singing to Niall to shush his crying. Then her mum had gone to bed and everything was quiet and dark. Cassie must have slept too, because when she opened her eyes the moon had moved round and its light was coming through the window onto her pillow. But it didn't shine on her bedroom. It shone on a kitchen with an iron range and a flagstone floor, and a candle flickering darkly on a shelf. She could smell its wax.

There was a bag and two bricks on the table, and through Cassie's headphones, loose and tangled on her pillow, she heard a whispering voice.

'. . . Nanny make it all better . . .'

Even as she watched, the latch on the kitchen door began to lift.

She had to wake her mum. But she knew her mum wouldn't believe her.

As the door began to open, Cassie slipped from her bed and hurried along the passage. Behind her in the dark she could hear the sound of Nanny Candle's buttoned boots on the stone floor. Hear the sound of Nanny Candle picking up the bag and the bricks. Noiselessly, Cassie crept into her mum's room. If she hid Niall, Nanny Candle wouldn't be able to find him. She could keep him safe.

The baby was asleep in the cot. He didn't so much as stir as she lifted him out. He smelled of warmth and milk, and biscuits and vanilla, and his hair was soft like down. She could feel it against her face. Why had she never done this before? She wrapped his blanket around him and carried him to the back door. There was a place to hide there – under the back steps. Nanny Candle wouldn't find them there.

Cassie carried him out into the cool dark and crouched with him under the steps. Held him to her. But he began to stir.

'Shh . . .' she said urgently. 'She'll hear you . . .'

But the baby began to make small waking sounds.

'No, no, no,' she said quickly. There was a rising panic in her voice. 'No, no, don't cry. Don't cry, or she'll find you.'

She could hear the sound of Nanny Candle coming.

As Niall began to cry, Cassie folded the corner of the blanket over his mouth and held it there, pressed it down.

'Ssshh . . . Ssshh . . .' she whispered, over and over again, rocking him in her arms until finally, he made no sound at all.