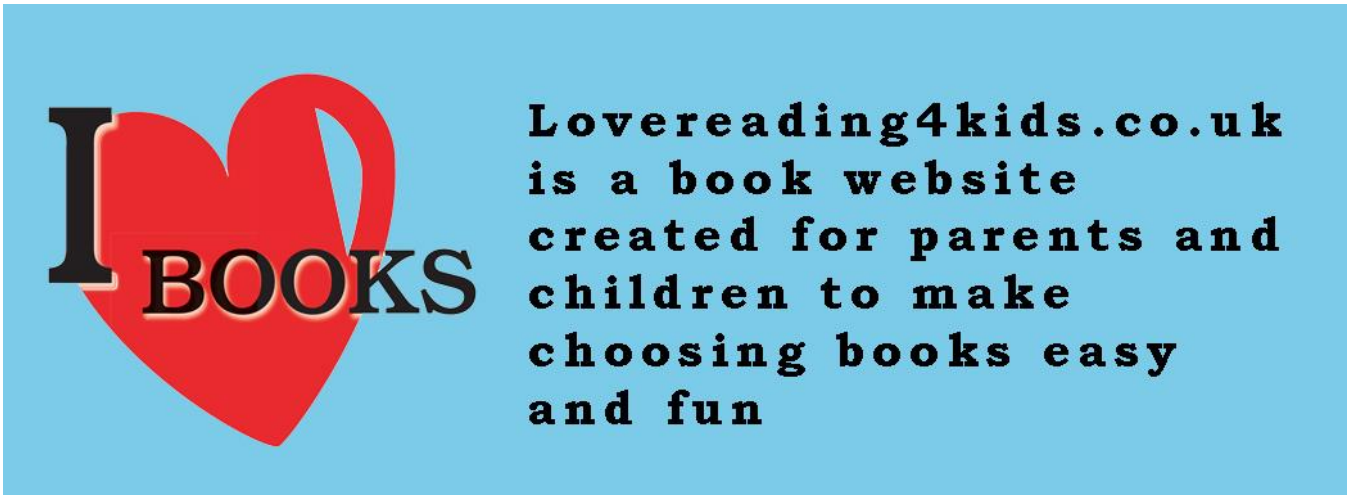

Opening extract from

A Stitch in Time

Written by

Penelope Lively

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

To Joy, Max, Tim and Nick

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Chapter One

A House, a Cat and Some Fossils

"ALL RIGHT, BACK there?" said Maria's father.

"Not much longer now," said Maria's mother.

Neither of them turned round. The backs of their heads rode smoothly forward between the landscapes that unrolled at either side of the car; hedges, trees, fields, houses that came and went before there was time to examine them. Fields with corn. Fields with animals. From time to time, on the left, snatches of a milky green sea bordered with a ribbon of golden sand or shingle. That is the English Channel, said Maria, inside her head, to the ashtray on the back of the car seat, the sea. We have come to spend our summer holiday beside it, because that is what people do. You go down to the beach every day and run about and shout and build sandcastles and all that. You have blown-up rubber animals and iced lollies and there is sand in your bed at night. You do

that in August. As far as I know everybody in the world does.

The car slowed down and turned into the forecourt of a garage. "QUAD GREEN SHIELD STAMPS!" screamed the garage, "WINEGLASS OFFER! JIGSAWS! GREAT PAINTING OF THE WORLD!"

"Just short of three hours," said Mr Foster. "Not bad."

"Quite good traffic," said Mrs Foster.

They both turned round now to look at Maria, with kindly smiles.

"You're very quiet."

"Not feeling sick or anything?"

Maria said she was quite all right and she wasn't feeling sick. She watched her father get out of the car and start to fill it with petrol from the pump. He was wearing a special, new, holiday shirt. She could tell it was a holiday shirt because it had red and blue stripes. His shirts for ordinary life were never striped. On the far side of the petrol pump another car drew up. It was full of children, most of them small and several of them wailing. A boy of about Maria's age looked at her for a moment through the window, his expression irritable and bored. A woman got out of the car, saying loudly, "Now just shut up for a moment, the lot of you."

Maria stared at the face of the petrol pump. It had a benevolent face, if you discounted a bright orange sticker across its forehead, which referred to the Wineglass Offer.

"Noisy lot," said the petrol pump. "You get all kinds, this time of year."

"I expect you do," said Maria. "It'll be your busy season, I should imagine."

"Too right," said the petrol pump. "It's all go. Rushed off my feet, I am, if you see what I mean." In the other car, the two youngest children had struck up a piercing argument about who had kicked whom, and the petrol pump spluttered as it clocked up the next gallon. "Excuse me… It goes right through my head, that racket. Personally I prefer a nice quiet child. You're just the one, are you?"

"That's right," said Maria. "I'm an only."

"Very nice too," said the petrol pump. "I daresay. Had a good journey down?"

"Not bad," said Maria. "We had quite good traffic."

"I'll tell you where you get good traffic," said the petrol pump with animation. "The coast road on a Saturday night. Nose to tail all the way. Spectacular. Now that's what I call traffic."

"We get good rush-hours," said Maria, "where we live. On the edge of London."

"Is that so? Jammed solid – that kind of thing?"

There was no time for more. Maria's father got into the car again and started the engine.

"Cheerio," said the petrol pump. "Nice meeting you. All the best. Take care. Don't do anything I wouldn't."

"Right you are," said Maria. "Thanks for the petrol."

"You're welcome."

Back behind her parents' travelling heads, with Dorset unrolling tidily at each side of her, Maria hoped there would be something to talk to at this holiday house her parents had rented for the month. You can always talk to people, of course. It's usual, indeed. The trouble with people is that they expect you to say particular things, and so you end up saying what they expect, or want. And they usually end up saying what you expected them to. Grown-ups, Maria had noticed, spent much time telling each other what the weather was like, or wondering aloud if one thing would happen, or another. She herself quite liked to talk to her mother, but somehow her mother was always about to go out, or into another room, and by the time Maria had got to the point of the conversation, she had gone. Her father

when she talked to him would listen with distant kindliness, but not as though what she said were of any great importance. Which, of course, it might not be. Except, she thought, to me. And so for real conversations, Maria considered, things were infinitely preferable. Animals, frequently. Trees and plants, from time to time. Sometimes what they said was consoling, and sometimes it was uncomfortable, but at least you were having a conversation. For a real heart-to-heart you couldn't do much better than a clock. For a casual chat almost anything would do.

"A holiday house," she said to the ashtray, "is presumably bright pink or something. Not normal at all. With balloons tied to the windows and a funny hat on the chimney. And jolly music coming out of the walls."

"Here we are," said Mrs Foster, and as she spoke Maria saw this place announce itself with a road-sign. Lyme Regis. She had been studying road-signs throughout the journey. The places to which one was not going were always the most enticing, lying secretly to right and left out of sight beyond fields and hills, promised by signposts that lured you with their names – Sixpenny Handley, Winterborne Stickland, Piddletrenthide and Affpuddle. They seemed not quite real. Could they be like other

places, with bungalows, primary schools and a Post Office? Like the green tracks that plunged off between hedges and fields, they invited you to find out. And I'll never know now, she thought sadly. That's one of the lots of things I'll never know.

She turned her attention to Lyme Regis, which she would have to know, like it or not. It did not seem too bad. It did not, for instance, have houses in rows. Maria had quite strong opinions about a fair number of things, though she seldom mentioned them to anyone, and she did not care for places in which houses were lined up in rows, staring blankly at you as you passed, though in fact she lived in this kind of house herself, and so did everyone she knew. The houses in this town, on the whole, were differently arranged. Their problem, if you could call it that, was that the town was built upon a hillside, or several hillsides, and seemed in grave danger of slithering down into the sea, so that each house had to dig its toes in, as it were, bracing itself against the slope with walls and ledges and gardens. The houses rose one above another, lifting roofs and chimneys and windows out of the green embrace of trees. She had never seen a place with so many trees, big ones and little ones, light and dark, all different. And between them you

could see slices of a sparkling sea, tipped here and there with the white fleck of waves.

"Delightful," said Mrs Foster.

"Nice Victorian atmosphere," said Mr Foster. And then, "This must be it, I think."

They turned into a gravelled drive, tightly lined with bright green hedge. The drive made a little flourish between hedge and a somewhat unkempt shrubbery, and then ended up in front of a house. Maria and her parents got out of the car and stood in front of the house, considering it. At least Maria considered it. Her mother said, "How pretty. I like the white stucco," and her father began to take the suitcases from the car. Maria went on considering.

It was a tidy house. It did not sprawl, as some of its neighbours sprawled, into such follies as little towers and turrets, glassed-in verandas, porches and protrusions of one kind and another. It stood neat and square – or rather, rectangular, for it was longer than it was high – with a symmetrical number of green-shuttered windows upstairs and down, at either side of a black front door with a fan-light above it. Its only frivolity was a pale green iron canopy with a frilled edge that ran the length of the house just beneath the upstairs windows.

"Well, Maria," said Mr Foster. "Is it anything like you imagined?"

"No," said Maria.

"About 1820, I should think," said Mr Foster, in his instructing voice. "That kind of architecture is called Regency."

And Maria thought, never mind about that, because somewhere there's a swing. It's blowing in the wind – I can hear the squeaking noise it makes. Good, I shall like having my own swing. And someone's got a little dog that keeps yapping. She walked round the corner of the house into the garden, to see where this swing might be, but there was nothing to be seen except a large square lawn, edged with more dense and shaggy shrubbery and a good many trees. At the end of the garden was a hedge, and beyond that the hillside dropped away steeply down towards the sea. The sun had gone in now, and the glitter was gone from the sea. Instead it reached away upwards to the sky, grey-green splashed here and there with white, to melt into a grey-blue sky so gently that it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. To right and left the coast stretched away in a haze of greens and golds and misty blues, and immediately in front of the town a stone wall curled out into the sea to put a

protective arm round a little harbour filled with resting boats, their masts like rows of toothpicks. Gulls floated to and from across the harbour, and on the beach behind it people sat in clumps and dogs skittered in and out of the water. It was a view you could spend much time examining.

The swing, she decided, must be in the adjoining garden, which was almost completely hidden by trees. The house next door, which was large, and of the towered and turreted kind, could just be seen between them. She went back to the front of the house again, where her father was just unlocking the door. They went inside.

"Good grief!" said Mrs Foster. "It's the real thing! Stopped dead in 1880."

Whereas outside all had been softly coloured – green and blue and gold – within the house all was solidly brown. The walls, in the hall at least, were panelled. A brown clock ticked upon a table over which was spread a brown velvet tablecloth ("Tassels and all," said Mrs Foster, picking up one edge and letting it drop again. "My!"). A brownly patterned carpet was spread across part of the brown tiled floor. Thick brown curtains hung at either side of the French windows opening on to the garden, visible through the door of what was clearly the main

room. (This, said Maria to herself, is what is called a drawing-room, like they have in books and I have never seen before.) They all three walked into this room, and stood for a moment in silence.

"The drawing-room, I should imagine," said Maria's mother.

Bulbous chairs and small, uncomfortable-looking sofas stood about, confronting one another. A vast piano was shrouded in a brown cover made to fit it. On the mantelpiece, stuffed birds sat dejectedly on twigs beneath a glass dome: they seemed, at first glance, to be sparrows but would be worth further investigation, Maria thought. I could look them up, she decided hopefully. She liked looking things up. Perhaps they would turn out to be rare warblers, or something extinct.

They toured the room. On one wall was a huge brown oil painting of a man in Highland costume standing in front of a mountain, surrounded by a great many dead birds and animals. A glass-fronted cabinet stood against another wall, crammed with china ornaments. A bookcase was filled from top to bottom with books that tidily matched one another, all their spines lettered in gold. You could never, Maria thought, never never take a book like that to bed with you. Or read it in the lavatory. You would

have to sit on one of those hard-looking chairs, wearing your best clothes, with clean hands.

"Well," said Mrs Foster, "what do you think of it?"

"I hadn't thought," said Maria, "that a holiday house would be like this."

"To be frank," said her father, "neither had I."

They inspected the rest of the house. Downstairs there was a dining-room, in which eight, leather-seated chairs were gathered round a very long table. Above the sideboard hung another brown oil painting in which dead hares, rabbits and pheasants were spread artistically across a chair. There was a further room, which Maria instantly identified (to herself) as a study, lined with bookcases from floor to ceiling and furnished with more brown chairs and sofas. The kitchen was relatively normal. Upstairs there were several bedrooms and a bathroom. The bath, Maria noted with delight, had feet shaped like an animal's claws. She considered it for some time before following her parents down the stairs again.

As they reached the hall once more there was a sudden disturbance. The fringed cloth upon the table twitched, and from under it emerged a large tabby cat, which strode into the middle of the carpet and sat staring at them for a moment. Then it set about washing its face.

"Fully furnished seemed to include resident cat," said Mr Foster. "Nobody said anything about that."

The cat yawned and wandered out of the open front door. It cast a speculative look at the car and stalked off into a shrubbery.

Mr and Mrs Foster became active and business-like, unloading the car, carrying things into the house and investigating the cooker and the electrical appliances, which seemed to be firmly of the twentieth century. Maria followed them around, helping when asked.

"Which room would you like, darling? This one, with the view of the sea?"

Maria went to the window. It was the same view of the sea and harbour, horizon and cloud, that she had studied from the garden, with, this time, the garden itself in front. The window rattled in a gust of wind and again she thought she heard a swing squeak.

"Yes, please," she said.

The room itself was small, and much filled with furniture – little round tables with frilled edges, a rather high large bed with brass rails at head and foot, many sombre pictures, and, on one of the tables, a miniature chest about eighteen inches high with many small drawers. Maria opened one, and was confronted with

three rows of bluish-grey fossils, like little ridged wheels, neatly arranged on faded brown stuff like felt and labelled in small meticulous handwriting. *Promicroceras planicosta*, she read. *Asteroceras obtusum*.

"Well," said her mother. "We'd better get the cases up. Are you coming?"

"In a minute," said Maria.

She closed the drawer of the chest, deciding to save the fossils until later. She got up on the bed and bounced. It was lumpy but somehow embracing. The big chest of drawers was empty and smelled of moth-balls. She turned to the window and looked out into the garden. There was a huge dark tree at one side of it that she had not noticed before, a very solid and ancient-looking tree, quite different from the more ordinary and recognisable ones that swayed and shook in the sea wind. The garden seemed to perch on the hillside, suspended above the sea, a bare, rather neglected garden, with hardly any flowers. The trees and shrubberies, though, were inviting. They would have to be explored.

The cat brushed its way into the room, making her jump and stumble against one of the small tables. An ornament fell to the floor. She picked it up and saw guiltily that it was chipped. She put it back on the table.

"Fool," said the cat.

"What?"

"Fool, I said. I suppose you think you'll get away with that."

"I might," said Maria.

The cat yawned. "Possibly," it said. "And again possibly not." It licked one paw delicately, sitting in a patch of sunlight.

"I must say you've got some very attractive Victorian atmosphere here," said Maria.

"We aim to please," said the cat.

"Where's the swing?" Maria asked.

"There isn't one."

"Yes, there is. I heard it squeaking."

"Have it your own way," said the cat. "You'll soon find out." It squinted at her through half-closed eyes and went on, "And don't maul me about. I can't stand it. The last lot were forever patting and stroking. 'Nice pussy, dear pussy.' Ugh!"

"I don't like cats," said Maria.

"And I'm not keen on children. How old are you? Nine?"

"Eleven," said Maria coldly.

"Bit small, aren't you?"

"That's not my fault."

"Rather on the plain side too, I'd say. Mousy. Not like that Caroline next door to you at home. Her with the long fair hair. And the two sisters she's always rushing about with. Laughing and pushing each other."

"You would know about Caroline," said Maria.

The cat inspected its paw, and stretched. "Is your mother a good cook?"

"Very," said Maria.

"Lavish helpings? Plenty of scraps left – that kind of thing?"

"I should think you'll be all right."

"Good," said the cat. "Last week was a bit thin. Big family. Everyone after the pickings. There's a lot to be said for a small litter." It eyed Maria thoughtfully, "Or don't you agree?"

"You can't be sure," said Maria, "when you are. You don't know what it would be like otherwise. They nearly didn't have me, you know. I heard my mother say so once to her friend. But they're glad they did now."

"Is that so?" said the cat. "Fancy." It sounded unconvinced. "Well, I'll be seeing you, no doubt." It sauntered out of the room and down the stairs, its tail waving elegantly from side to side.

With their possessions spread around the house – paperback books on the tables in the drawing-room, groceries in the kitchen, coats in the hall – its strong personality began to seem a little diluted. It became slightly more docile, as though it belonged to them instead of being entirely independent. They ate their lunch in the kitchen: somehow the dining-room seemed too forbidding, at least for cold pork pies and salad. The cat came in and fawned for a while against Mrs Foster's legs, until fed some scraps. Toady, said Maria to it silently, sucker-up… It gave her a baleful stare and settled down to sleep beside the cooker.

The last tenants of the house had left evidence of themselves in the form of half-emptied packets of cereals on the kitchen shelf (Rice Krispie people they had been, Maria noted, with one family rebel who favoured Frosties), a plastic duck under the bath, a shredded burst balloon and some comics in the waste-paper basket in her room, some bits of Lego down the side of the drawing-room sofa and a battered fork-lift truck behind the cooker. Mrs Foster swept all these objects up and threw them into the dustbin. Maria regretted this: she had been trying to imagine from them what this invisible family might have been like. They seemed to have been of mixed ages and

sexes. The house, she thought, must have been noisy last week. It was very quiet now, after lunch, as her mother washed up, her father read the newspaper, and she stood looking out into the garden.

"Shall we go and see what the beach is like?"

"Yes, please," said Maria.

The beach that they went to was a couple of miles or so from the town. Maria, with several years' experience of beaches behind her, found herself instantly awarding it a high mark. It was unassuming, to begin with – a row of beach huts being about the only facilities it offered. And the clutches of people spread fairly thickly over the area near the car park and beach huts soon thinned out so that to either side the beach stretched away more and more uncluttered, with just a dog or child scampering at the water's edge, or family group encamped against the cliff.

It was the cliffs that instantly attracted her attention. Again, they made no large claims: not for them the craggy grandeurs of Cornwall or Wales. And they looked, in some indefinable way, soft rather than hard. It was the colour, chiefly, the slaty grey-blue that matched so nearly the now clouded sky, so that the sea, which had changed from milky green to a pale turquoise, lay as a belt of colour

between the grey cliffs, the bright shingle of the beach, and the grey sky. And yet they were not, she saw, the same colour all the way up. They were capped at the top with a layer of golden-brown, which in turn was finished off with a green skin of vegetation. And here and there the three levels of colour became confused and inter-mixed, where grass and trees and bushes apparently tumbled in a green tongue down the face of the cliff. She stood staring, entranced, at this agreeable place where Dorset ends, and England, and both slide gracefully away into the sea.

"Here, I think," said Mrs Foster. They spread their rug and sat.

They were sitting, as Maria soon found, upon more than just a slab of this grey-blue stone. In the first place it was not stone at all, but a hard, dry clay. A piece of it flaked off under her fingers, as she scratched idly at it. And then, looking closer, lying on her stomach with her face a few inches above the rock, it came to life suddenly under her very eyes. For it was inhabited. There, like delicate scribblings upon the clay, were the whirls and spirals of shell-like creatures – the same, she recognised, as those in the miniature chest of drawers in her room back at that house. But smaller, these were,

barely an inch or so across, some of them, but perfect in each ridge and twist. And as she prised one out with the edge of a shell, it crumbled between her fingers into blue dust, but there, below and beneath, was another, and another, and another. The whole rock streamed with a petrified ghost-life.

"Look," said Maria.

"Fossils," said her mother. "Ammonites. This coast is famous for fossils. You could collect them." She settled herself on her back, a hump of jerseys under her head, and turned the page of her book.

But I don't want to spoil these any more, Maria thought. They're so pretty. And they've been there for millions and millions of years so it's stupid to spend a Friday afternoon now picking them out and breaking them. If I was good at drawing I would draw a picture of them.

Instead, she examined the rock carefully, to remember it, and then wandered off among the neighbouring rocks to see if there were any more the same. Most were smooth and empty but one or two glinted with this remote life, though less lavishly. And then she found that by exploring carefully among the pebbles and chunks of rock with which this part of the beach was littered, she could collect fossil fragments, like sections of small grey

wheels, and occasionally a small, complete, flat one. Once she found a slab of the blue-grey stone, nine or ten inches across, in which two of the fossils hung one above another – ghostly creatures suspended in the small chunk of a solidified ancient sea that she held between her hands. She wrapped it in her anorak to take back with her.

Late in the afternoon they walked back to the car park along a beach from which the sea had retreated, leaving huge expanses of glistening sand on which children ran and shouted. At the edge of the distant water sea birds scurried to and fro before the waves. People were gathering themselves together, picking up buckets, spades, picnic baskets, folding chairs. What are beaches like at night, Maria wondered, all empty…

"I expect you'll soon make some friends down here," said her mother.

"Yes, I expect so," said Maria, without conviction.

Back at the house, in the privacy of her room, she laid the fossils out on the chest. It did not seem her room yet. Last week, after all, someone else had called it their room, and a week or two before that, someone else. It felt impersonal – not quite rejecting her, but not welcoming either. The fossils, she felt, might establish her in some

way. I will get a book about fossils, she thought, and see what kind they are, and put labels on them like that other person did once, who found the ones in the miniature chest of drawers. Had that person, she wondered, collected them from that same stretch of beach? They were much superior to her broken fragments. Taking them out of the drawers to examine more carefully, one by one, she heard the squeak of that swing again, and went to the window to see if she could see it in the next-door garden. Trees, though, blocked the view.

Her father came along the passage and stopped at the open door of the room.

"Well, then… All settled in?"

"Yes," said Maria. Her father was older than most people's fathers; he was beginning to go bald, his hair forming a neat horse-shoe around his scalp. He had changed from his holiday shirt into a special holiday sweater, she noticed. They looked at each other, as they often did, both wondering what to say next.

"Explored everything by now, I expect," said Mr Foster.

"I haven't seen all of the garden yet."

Mr Foster looked out into the garden with faint alarm, as though it might make demands of him. In London they had no garden.

"Yes," he said. "Well, I daresay it could come in useful."

There was silence. "Well," said Mr Foster, "I suppose it's about time for supper." He went downstairs.

They spent a quiet evening, going early to bed. Maria, feeling drugged by wind and sea, slept soundly, woken only once by some small dog that barked shrilly from somewhere outside.