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MAGGIE WAS QUEEN OF THE PLAYGROUND on Monday, showing all the girls how to do this new dance, the Charleston. Her big sister went to Hailbury Town Hall on Saturday nights and came back with all the latest crazes.

'You flap your arms around and kick up your legs and pull this silly face while you're doing it,' said Maggie, demonstrating.

We all tried to copy her, while the boys jeered. I knew I was hopeless at dancing and probably looked like a demented hen as I flapped away, but I saw Peter Robinson watching me. He was smiling.

When Maggie and I walked out of school arm in arm, he was watching again. We tapped and kicked our way down School Lane, and he whistled after us. We

both tossed our heads and didn't look round, though my cheeks were burning and I knew I'd gone candyfloss pink.

'Peter Robinson's sweet on you,' said Maggie.

'No, you're the one he likes,' I said, though I was secretly sure he was whistling at *me*.

I didn't know whether I liked him or not. Aunty would say he was a bit of a lout, with his home-cut hair and his frayed shirt and his clumsy boots, but then she'd say that about nearly all the boys at our school. She would also say it was nonsense to start liking boys at my age. I tended to agree with her – but Peter Robinson did have a nice smile.

When Maggie and I turned the corner I glanced round quickly and gave him a little wave.

'Mona!' said Maggie as we went up Market Street. 'You're just encouraging him.'

We walked like soldiers: a charge past Mr Samson the butcher's shop because we hated seeing the rows of dead birds hanging above his door, their beaks dripping blood; a quick march past Mr Thomas the greengrocer and Mr Slade the ironmonger and Old Molly's general stores because they didn't interest us; then a sudden halt outside Mr Berner's toyshop.

He sold many other things too – tobacco and newspapers and all kinds of basic household goods that Old Molly forgot to stock nowadays – and on the shelves behind his counter he kept jars of sweets, though we rarely had a penny between us for two ounces of fruit drops or sherbet lemons or banana toffees.

It was the toys in his window that always made us pause. It wasn't a patch on his glorious Christmas

selection, when he stocked dolls as big as real babies with their own cots, and prams you could push along, and a Noah's Ark with a lift-off lid and pair after pair of wooden animals – elephants the size of our fists, all the way down to a couple of minute ladybirds with black dots on their glossy red backs.

Still, today there was a toy yacht to sail across the village pond, a spinning top all the colours of the rainbow, a skipping rope with red handles, net bags of marbles, and two dolls in floral dresses, one with yellow hair, one with brown.

Maggie and I spent a good five minutes discussing the merits of the dolls, and whether we preferred the blonde one or the dark one, though our chances of buying either were nil. Maggie didn't have any proper dolls, just a very grubby bolster that she insisted was her baby, Mary-Ann. She had to fight to maintain maternal rights over Mary-Ann because she had younger sisters who wanted to share her.

'You're soft in the head, Maggie Higgins,' said her mother. 'A great girl of ten playing with dollies! If you fancy doing a bit of mothering, then lug your baby brother around and feed and change the little beast.'

She didn't actually say *beast*, she said an incredibly rude word that made my eyes pop. Aunty says Mrs Higgins is rough and common and she wishes I wouldn't play with her Maggie all the time. I like Mrs Higgins. She shouts at all her children and calls them rude names, but she gives them lots of cuddles too, and she tosses the little ones in the air and makes them squeal in delight.

As always, when we got to Maggie's tumbledown cottage at the end of Rook Green, I stopped off to say hello to Mrs Higgins. She gave me a big kiss on the cheek as well as Maggie, and cut us generous slices of bread and dripping.

We rarely had such a treat at home – we didn't have roasts on Sundays to make the dripping from. Aunty said it wasn't worth it just for the two of us. Besides, she said bread and dripping was common, just for cottage folk. We lived in a cottage too, but when I said this to Aunty she gave me a slap and told me off for cheeking her.

She'd have liked a niece like Curly Locks, sitting on a cushion and sewing a fine seam, working alongside her but only speaking when spoken to. I've got coal-black hair that won't hold a curl, no matter how often Aunty twists it up with rags. I can't sit still for five minutes indoors – not unless I've got a book to read, and Aunty thinks reading stories a waste of time.

I hate sewing, which exasperates Aunty no end. She's a dressmaker and sews exquisitely. All kinds of grand ladies wore Aunty's dresses, even Minor Royalty. I don't know who Minor Royalty is, but she makes Aunty very proud: she whispers her name the way people murmur *Jesus Christ* in church.

Nowadays Aunty sews garments for elderly folk because the fashions have changed. She disapproves of the short skirts that show off the young ladies' ankles – sometimes even their knees. 'Call themselves ladies!' she says, sniffing.

She's running out of old ladies now – they keep getting ill and dying. She mostly sews for Lady Somerset, who

doesn't pay very much for her clothes because we live rent-free on her estate. Aunty and I don't have roasts – we don't have steak pies or chicken or chops either. I'm only sent to Mr Samson's for half a pound of his cheapest mince, or a little bit of liver or, worst of all, tripe.

If Lady Somerset is late paying her bill, Aunty makes me go and ask Mr Samson if he has any bones for our dog, when any fool knows we don't have a dog, much as I'd love one. Aunty makes soup by boiling up the bones with a few onions and carrots and some pearl barley. It tastes quite good, but it makes the whole cottage smell, and Aunty worries that the reek will get into all the fine materials stored on shelves in her workroom. We have to have the windows wide open on soup days, even in winter.

The Higgins family don't have much money for food either, especially as there are so many of them, but they always have bacon because they keep a pig in their back garden, and fresh eggs from their chickens. They sometimes have pheasant and rabbit and trout too, as Mr Higgins and Maggie's oldest brother, Tom, sneak up to the estate late at night. I'd never mention this to Aunty in a million years in case she told on them to Lady Somerset and they got nabbed for poaching.

It's quite hard for me to keep secrets. My teacher, Miss Nelson, says I'm a terrible chatterbox. I know I drive Aunty daft with my questions. She made me work on a cross-stitch sampler with the motto *Silence Is Golden.* No wonder it's called cross-stitch. It makes me terribly cross as I stitch. I keep poking my fingers with the needle, and then I get little red dots on

the material. I can't understand how Aunty can bear to stitch-stitch-stitch all day long – and once, when Lady Somerset wasn't happy with her new evening gown for the Hunt Ball and demanded a substitute, half the night too.

My mother didn't stitch ball gowns, she *wore* them. One day, when I was hiding at the back of Aunty's wardrobe, I found a beautiful dress. (Aunty discovered I'd been secretly helping myself to the raspberry jam in the store cupboard and looked ready to give me a good slap.) I felt the slippery satin and the strange bobbles of the beads brushing my head as I crouched down. I risked opening the door a crack to see what it looked like. The satin was the palest pink with elaborate silver beading, the most beautiful dress I'd ever seen.

It couldn't have belonged to Aunty. She's plain and pinched and wears fierce glasses, and her dark frocks have high necks and long sleeves. The pink dress had little puff sleeves, and such a low neck it must have shown a lot of bosom. Aunty hardly has any chest at all. I held the pink dress close, rubbing it against my cheeks, even though the beading scraped uncomfortably, and breathed in the faint scent of rose.

After I'd been discovered and given the slap I asked if the pink dress had belonged to my mother, even though any mention of Mother makes Aunty agitated.

'How dare you go in my wardrobe and mess about with my clothes, Mona!' she said.

'I'm sorry, Aunty. I came across the dress by accident. It's so beautiful. It *was* my mother's, wasn't it? *Please* tell me when she wore it! Was it when she met my father?

Aunty, you simply *must* tell me! Please, please, please!' I begged.

But it was useless. Aunty was as uncommunicative as the dressmaker's dummy in her workroom.

'That's enough, Mona. Don't work yourself up into one of your states,' she said, and she wouldn't tell me a single thing I wanted to know.

On Saturday night, when she was in the kitchen having her weekly bath in the tin tub, I crept upstairs and looked in her wardrobe again. I couldn't find the pink dress. I opened the door wide and searched all the way through Aunty's dark serges and cottons, and even felt around the bottom of the wardrobe in case the pink dress had slipped off its hanger. But it wasn't there.

I waited until after I'd had my own bath, and then, while Aunty was brushing my wet hair, I said as casually as I could, 'Please may I have another peep at that lovely pink dress with the silver beads, Aunty?'

'Which dress?' she said. 'Don't be silly, Mona. I don't have any dresses like that.'

'Yes you do. I found it at the back of your wardrobe. It *was* my mother's dress, wasn't it?' I pressed her.

'I think you've been dreaming, girl. A pink dress with silver beads! Even Lady Somerset in her heyday would never have worn such an outfit. There, your hair's nearly dry now. Up the little wooden stairs to Bedfordshire, if you please,' she said, giving me a light tap on the shoulder with the hairbrush.

That's the trouble with Aunty. She's as slippery as the pink satin dress. She'll never answer properly. But I've found that, if I listen carefully enough, Mother herself answers.

Today, when I left Maggie's cottage I decided to go and visit her, even though I'd already lingered too long – Aunty liked me to come straight home from school.

Still, Mother didn't live too far away. I ran down Church Lane, through the old lychgate and up the path, nodding at the ancient yew trees on either side and muttering, 'Pleased to meet yew,' giggling at my own silly joke. I greeted a lot of the gravestones too, reading their names and saying how do you do. The Somersets had a lot of very grand graves. Sir William had a big marble tomb like a little house. I wondered if Lady Somerset would be stuffed inside when her time came.

Mother was round the back, half hidden in the shade, at the end of a long row of gravestones covered in lichen. It was much nicer for her there, away from the recent raw graves with their withered wreaths.

I made sure that Mother had flowers too. I didn't have any money to buy them, but now that it was spring I could pick buttercups and daisies and cowslips and bluebells, and I sometimes stole a hothouse rose or two from someone else's wreath. I didn't think they'd mind too much. I once seized a large bunch of lilies and arranged them in a holy cross over Mother's grave, but then I had a nightmare: the newly dead person had struggled up through the muddy earth to grab their lilies back. I didn't dare go back to the churchyard for days after that.

Aunty never went to visit Mother. I couldn't understand why. She'd taken me to see the grave when I was four, and about to start at the village school.

'There you are, Mona, do you see?' she said, pointing

to the green mound at the end. It looked very plain without a headstone.

I felt sorry for Mother, and when I'd learned to write properly I tried carving her one myself. I found a bit of old fencing and etched *Sylvia Mona Smith* slowly and laboriously with Aunty's sewing scissors. I was named after her. I rather wished she'd called me Sylvia too, because it was much prettier than Mona. I carried on carving, but gave up after *Beloved Mother* because it was such hard work. I'd already blunted Aunty's scissors and she was furious, but I didn't care. I needed Mother's grave to look special.

'So where's Father's grave? Why doesn't he have a bed beside Mother?' I wondered.

'It's a grave, Mona, not a bed. Don't be fanciful. He's buried where he fell in France,' Aunty said.

I didn't know about the war then. I took her literally and worried that I might die each time I fell over. I tumbled frequently because Aunty bought my shoes a size too big so she didn't have to replace them too often.

Once I'd seen the grave I wanted Aunty to take me to visit Mother regularly, but she said it was morbid. I didn't know what that meant, but then I often didn't understand her. When I was trusted to get to and from school by myself, I started taking a detour and wandering around the churchyard on my way home.

If it hadn't rained for a while I'd look around furtively to make sure no one was watching, and then lie full length on top of Mother's rectangle of grass. I pictured her underneath, smiling up at me. I refused

to believe that she had turned into a skeleton: she would be perfectly preserved, her skin still fair, her black hair neatly brushed, lying in her white nightgown with her arms crossed piously over her chest.

Today I lay with my head pressed against the grass and my eyes open, trying to see down through the earth.

'Hello, Mother. I've picked you cowslips. I hope you like them. They don't really smell much, but they look pretty. Mrs Higgins gave me some bread and dripping. I like her making a fuss of me. At home I just get a malted milk biscuit and they don't really taste of much, though I like the picture of the cow. I wonder what you'd have given me when I got home from school.'

I waited. I could hear Mother laughing softly. She said she'd have given me a hug and a slice of cherry cake. Then she asked how I'd got on at school.

'I got ten out of ten for my story about a rainy day,' I said proudly. I didn't tell her I'd only got two out of ten for my arithmetic test. She didn't need to know that.

Mother told me that I was her bright girl and she was proud of me.

'I wish Aunty would say that!' I said wistfully.

'But she's not your mother,' she replied. 'You're *my* girl, Mona.'

She always said that, and she was always such a comfort. I wanted to stay lying on her grave for ages, but I heard footsteps coming round the side of the church. I scrambled up, cursing inside my head.

'Are you all right, child?' It was the vicar in his long church dress. 'Did you trip?'

'I just felt like lying down, Mr Vicar,' I said, brushing

grass off my dress. I didn't know his proper name. Aunty and I weren't churchgoers. She said she didn't hold with it, though I didn't know why.

'On a *grave*?' he said. 'Oh dear, you mustn't do that! It's not respectful.'

'Yes it is,' I said. 'I'm always very respectful to Mother.'

The vicar blinked at me. 'Don't answer back!' he snapped.

'I shall if I want,' I said, and then I ran off quick. I hoped he didn't know who I was. I'd be for it if he reported me to Miss Nelson.

I ran all the way along Church Lane, then down the alley and over the stile and across the meadow. There were several skippy calves butting at their mothers' sides. You weren't meant to go too near the cows when the calves were young in case they charged at you, but their faces looked kind, their long-lashed eyes gentle.

'You won't hurt me, will you?' I called. 'I'm Mona. I'm your friend.'

They munched tranquilly, and several nodded their heads as if they understood. Animals seemed to like me. I wished Aunty would let me have a pet. Maybe I could help Mr Thompson, the vet, when I was older. I'd begged him to take me on his rounds during the school holidays, but he insisted I wasn't old enough. Perhaps he was alarmed at the thought of my seeing baby animals being born.

I expect he thought I still believed in storks and gooseberry bushes. Aunty had fed me such nonsense, but when the last baby Higgins arrived Maggie had had to help her mother. She told me about it in detail, and

swore she was telling the truth. We both resolved there and then never, ever to have babies ourselves.

I dodged the cowpats in the meadow, and then crossed the road and went through the great gates of Somerset Manor. There was a deer on top of each one, and when they were closed, it looked as if they were about to clash antlers. Aunty told me that many years ago there were real deer in the grounds. I wished they were still here now. I'd have loved to see little fawns. I always looked around carefully when I wandered in the woods just in case one or two still lurked there.

Our cottage was tucked just inside the entrance. It was the old gatekeeper's cottage. Lady Somerset didn't have a gatekeeper any more. Sam, the head gardener, opened and closed the gates when he could be bothered. He used to have ten men under him, Aunty told me, but now he just had Poor Fred, who was simple, and Geoffrey, who had only just left school. He seemed a little simple too – he'd had to repeat a year to get his leaving certificate.

When I got home Aunty was usually in her workroom (which was originally the front parlour), stitching away, her mouth full of pins. I could never work out how she managed not to swallow any. However, today she was standing on the doorstep, dressed in her Sunday black, looking agitated.

'Where have you *been*, Mona? School finished an hour ago! Look at the state of you! You've got your frock all creased! And what's that down the front? Is it grass stains? What have you been *doing*?' She seized hold of me, pulled me into the kitchen and whipped my dress right off before I realized what she was up to.

‘Aunty! Don’t!’ I protested as she wet a corner of the tea towel and started scrubbing my face. ‘I can wash myself, for heaven’s sake! What’s all the fuss?’

‘We’re going to see Lady Somerset,’ she said.