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*For Isotta*

# THEN

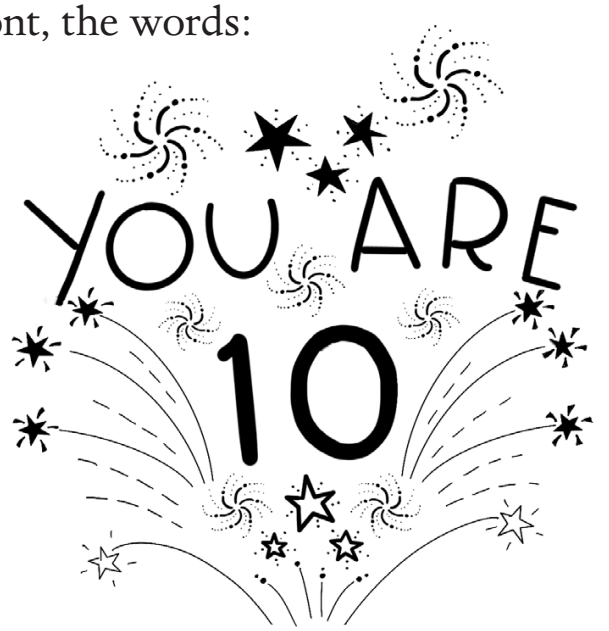
# 55 YEARS AGO

That year there was no party, and no cake, because no one felt like celebrating, but Rosanna still lined up her cards on the mantelpiece, so that it felt a bit like a birthday. There was one from her grandmother, with a picture of a girl stroking a kitten, and one from her aunt and uncle, with a picture of a girl stroking a puppy, and one from her other aunt and uncle with a picture of a girl not stroking anything, but just standing in a flowery meadow, smiling and holding a daisy chain.

Though the cards were very nice, Rosanna would secretly have preferred a picture of a girl steering a red-sailed boat across a tropical sea towards a mystery island, like the illustration on the front of the adventure storybook she'd been given as her best present.

Her favourite card was the one from her mum and

dad, and she put it in the middle of the mantelpiece. On the front, the words:




were illustrated as if they were bursting fireworks, lighting up a dark sky dusted with stars. Inside was a verse:

*Ten candles on your birthday cake*
*Each one's a wish for you to make –*
*Adventures all, they wait for you*
*To come and make those dreams come true.*

But there'd be no wishes this year. She put the birthday candles in a little box and placed them in a drawer.

Maybe next year, she thought.

After all, she had plans; lots of plans.

# NOW



# CHAPTER 1

'Miss *Filey's* house?' repeated Ed, outraged. 'We have to spend every day this week at Miss *Filey's* house? Are you totally serious?'

'Sorry, but it can't be helped,' said his dad, avoiding Ed's gaze and sidling out of the door.

'IT CAN'T BE HELPED,' echoed Ed's mother loudly, from the other room, where she was packing DVDs into a box. 'IT'S NO GOOD MOANING, ED.'

'I'm not moaning, I've hardly said anything – but can't we discuss it? Don't I have a say?'

'NOT IN THIS CASE,' called his mother. 'SORRY. YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO GRIN AND BEAR IT. THERE IS LITERALLY NO ALTERNATIVE, AND

IF MISS FILEY HADN'T MADE THE SUGGESTION, I DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'D HAVE DONE.'

'But I'd rather spend next week in the shed. I'd rather spend it in the middle of a car park. In the rain. I bet she doesn't even have WiFi.'

'Who are you talking about?' asked his nine-year-old sister, Roo. She had an irritating habit of quietly entering rooms and then speaking before you even realized she was standing next to you.

Ed swivelled to face her. 'Sit down, Roo, I've got bad news.'

Her pointed face seemed to sharpen. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Yes, fine,' he said dismissively. 'It's not that sort of bad news. It's about the half-term holiday club. It's been cancelled.'

'Why?'

'The toilet at the hall overflowed and the building's been declared a biohazard and they're having to get specialist cleaners in. And so—'

'Why did it overflow?'

'No idea.' It was another of Roo's irritating habits to interrupt good stories with unimportant questions. 'So anyway, the club's not on, and for some reason we can't stay in the house when Mum and Dad are at work.'

'YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHY YOU CAN'T,' called their mother, who had bat-like hearing. 'THE WHOLE BACK OF OUR HOUSE IS BEING TORN OFF FOR THE NEW EXTENSION, SO THERE'LL BE WORKMEN EVERYWHERE AND CABLES, AND THEY DON'T NEED CHILDREN WANDERING AROUND.'

'I don't *wander*.'

'AND ANYWAY YOU'RE BOTH TOO YOUNG TO STAY ON YOUR OWN, DON'T ARGUE, ED, OR I SHALL GO MAD.'

'So, what *are* we going to do?' asked Roo. 'Can we go to our cousins?' she added hopefully.

'THEY'RE AWAY,' called their mum.

'This is where the bad news comes in,' said Ed. 'Dad has done something completely random. He bumped into Miss Filey at the recycling bins this morning and she suggested that we go to her house during the day. For an entire week.'

'DON'T EXAGGERATE,' called Mum. 'YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO AT THE WEEKEND, SO IT'S LITERALLY FIVE DAYS.'

'Miss Filey?' asked Roo.

'Yes. Unbelievable, isn't it?'

'I've never been inside her house,' said Roo.

'Nor me. Why would anyone want to?'

'Well . . . it might be interesting.' Roo said the last few words quietly; she never enjoyed contradicting Ed, who was a year and a half older than her, because Ed enjoyed arguing and was good at it, and she didn't, and wasn't. But Miss Filey's house, at the bottom of the road, was intriguing. All the other houses were small and quite new, but hers was large and quite old; a broad, brick bungalow in a wide, square garden filled with flowering bushes and surrounded by trees. The front door was set in a deep porch, and above it was a window shaped like a fan. Reflections danced across it when you walked past.

'But even if it's interesting, it'll still contain Miss Filey,' said Ed. He leaned forward from the waist and opened his mouth wide, pitching his voice to an enthusiastic shriek. *'Super weather, isn't it?'*

'ARE YOU DOING AN IMPRESSION OF MISS FILEY?' called Mum.

'Yes, but it's not unkind, just accurate. *Have a simply smashing day!'* he added.

And it was true, thought Roo – that was exactly how Miss Filey talked: like somebody out of a black-and-white film. And she never stopped to have a conversation, but just trilled a comment as she hurried by, as if she was calling from a passing ship.

'SHE'S ALWAYS VERY KIND,' shouted their mum. 'REMEMBER SHE CAME TO THE FUNDRAISER AND BOUGHT EVERYTHING ON THE PLANT STALL AND ALL THE SMASHED BISCUITS IN THAT TIN THAT GOT DROPPED.'

'But what will we do there?' asked Ed, who didn't like talking about the fundraiser. 'I mean, seriously, Mum – what will we do at Miss Filey's house? Talk about the weather for five days? Eat broken biscuits?'

He waited for an answer, but there was no response from the next room.

'It might be OK,' said Roo.

'It won't. It'll be mind-numbingly boring.'

But Ed was wrong, because what happened at Miss Filey's house wasn't boring.

What happened at Miss Filey's house was beyond imagination.