

CITY OF HORSES

FRANCES MOLONEY

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S

Pushkin Press
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

Copyright © 2023 Frances Moloney

First published by Pushkin Press in 2023

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

ISBN 13: 978-1-78269-396-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Pushkin Press

Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

www.pushkinpress.com

CHAPTER ONE

It was the first day of the winter term, and the sky was grey and blustery as Misty made her way towards the school gates. Her pace quickened as she approached, the anticipation of seeing her two closest friends after what had felt like, to her, a never-ending break, building with every step that she took.

It wasn't that she couldn't wait to tell them about all the exciting things she had done with her time off, it was in fact the exact opposite, she couldn't wait to forget about it entirely. The holiday had dragged. Misty had spent most of it curled up on the sofa, scrolling mindlessly through channels on the TV. Her father had tried his best to fill the void left in her life since her mother had died the summer before Misty started secondary school, but his idea of a Christmas dinner consisted of a plate of sausage rolls and readymade roast potatoes that were on offer in ALDI.

When Misty's mum was still alive, Christmases had bristled with excitement. A few weeks before the big day,

her dad would bring home a real, six-foot-tall fir tree, which Misty and her mum would decorate carefully with the baubles they had collected; one for each year since Misty was born. Her dad would be in charge of the music, Slade and Paul McCartney's cheesy festive tunes blasting out of the antiquated CD player that perched in the corner of the living room like a relic from a previous life. Misty hadn't minded her dad's retro music taste so much back then. Back when there were still three of them and everything was generally much easier to tolerate.

Misty could barely remember her first Christmas without her mother. That year had passed by in a numbing blur; there were no forced celebrations, just an empty space where the tree would normally be, an aching reminder of all they had lost. She wasn't sure which had been worse, the complete absence of the past two years, forgetting about it altogether, or the fake festivities of this most recent Christmas. Either way, she couldn't wait to see her friends and go back to the safety and security of the regular school routine.

As usual, despite living the nearest to school, Misty was the last of her friends to arrive. Ruby's mum was a successful lawyer who always dropped off Ruby well before school started and Jasmine, Misty's other best friend, just didn't like being late for anything. Misty was by far the most disorganised of the trio, always joining them at the

last minute, her fiery red hair streaming out behind her, papers escaping from the top of her rucksack where she had hastily stuffed them before leaving the house.

It hadn't always been this way but without her mother to remind her to pack her school bag the night before, handing her a lunchbox on her way out the door and asking if she had her PE kit, it wasn't so easy. Her dad was too busy trying to hold down a job, run the house and pay for everything on one salary, so Misty tried her best not to bother him with anything she considered too trivial. Secondary school had offered Misty a fresh start. It was a chance to make new friends in a place where she wasn't defined by or reminded of her loss.

As she passed through the gates and entered the playground, Misty made her way over to her friends. She was relieved to find that they weren't talking about the Christmas break at all. Ruby was clutching an A5 piece of paper tightly to her chest and gesturing animatedly in Jasmine's direction, barely pausing to acknowledge Misty as she approached them. Ruby was the confident one, which meant the other Year Nine girls were secretly a little bit afraid of her. She had wild curly black hair and olive-toned skin.

'Auditions start this week,' Ruby exclaimed in excitement, without giving any additional context. 'The first round are at lunchtime.'

‘Auditions for what?’ Misty asked, her brain struggling to click into gear.

‘For the school play, silly,’ Ruby replied, as if this was the densest question she had ever had the misfortune to answer. ‘It’s *Romeo and Juliet* this year and I’m going to play Juliet.’

‘If you get the part,’ Jasmine suggested timidly. She stood literally head and shoulders above all of the other girls in their year and spent most of her time trying and failing to blend into the background. Her white-blonde hair and elvish pale skin didn’t help much.

‘Of course I will. Look, I’ve been practising.’ Ruby mimed drawing a dagger over her throat in a very dramatic fashion.

‘I thought she poisoned herself?’ Misty asked distractedly.

‘She did but it didn’t work. That was Romeo,’ Ruby continued. ‘Then Juliet wakes up, finds him dead and stabs herself. It’s all very complicated, you see. And *very* romantic. Can you imagine wanting to kill yourself over Shaun in Year Eleven?’

‘I think she stabs herself in the side.’ Jasmine blushed as she tried to steer the conversation away from the mention of her crush. The girls had been studying the Shakespeare play in their English class the previous term.

‘I know,’ Ruby confirmed. ‘I just decided that doing it this way would have more impact. You could call it artistic license, I suppose.’

'I'm sure you'll get the part,' Misty said firmly.

The sound of the bell cut through Ruby's reply and the three girls headed off towards their form groups for registration. Misty and Jasmine were both in the same form, 9C, but Ruby was in 9E, much to her annoyance. Even Ruby couldn't persuade the teachers to move her to the same form as her friends.

'Good luck!' Misty called as Ruby turned and marched off in the opposite direction, practising her lines as she went. 'See you later.'

But Ruby didn't reply for she was already busy, lost in her own world of plays and poetry, imagining what it would feel like to lose her imaginary lover to his own fatal hand.

'How were the auditions?' Misty asked when she met Ruby in the playground after school. Jasmine had already left for her after-school swimming lesson, but Misty had stayed behind knowing that Ruby would be raring to give her a full, blow-by-blow account of the proceedings.

'Fine,' Ruby replied hesitantly. 'At least, I *think* I did enough to impress them.'

'I'm sure you did.'

'They told me I got through to the next round anyway, though I was kind of hoping they'd be so blown away by my performance they would offer me the part of Juliet on the spot.'

‘When is the next round?’ Usually, the main part in the school play went to one of the older pupils in the school but Misty was used to Ruby’s outlandish imaginings and knew it was usually best to go along with them. Besides, if anyone could defeat the Year Eleven girls, Ruby would be the one to do it.

‘Wednesday and we’ll find out who got what part on Friday. They’re going to put a list up on the noticeboard outside the Year Eleven common room.’

The girls turned at the sound of a roaring engine as a sleek four-by-four drew up alongside them. Ruby’s younger brother, Jason, was hanging out of the back window pulling faces at them as her mum shouted for Ruby to get in the car.

‘I’d better go,’ Ruby said glumly. ‘See you tomorrow.’

As Ruby opened the door on the front passenger side, Misty could see that her mum was busy taking a call on her hands-free and already indicating, impatient to be off as she tried to pull out into the busy after-school traffic.

‘Sorry, Misty,’ Ruby’s mum called out of the window. ‘I’d give you a lift home, but I’ve got to get back for a meeting.’

‘That’s ok, Sheila. Bye, Ruby. See you tomorrow,’ she called as the car edged its way slowly forward. She smiled wistfully as the vehicle retreated, missing the hustle and bustle of her friend’s family already.

*

As Misty walked up the hill towards home, she could see that all of the lights were on in the living room even though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon. The house glowed ominously in the cold, winter darkness like a lighthouse warning her to stay away from the door. From the top of the hill, you could almost make out the hidden blackness of the sea in the distance, and a sudden chill made her pause for a moment, before pushing on through the downward gusts of wind and upwards to where the house was waiting to greet her.

Misty pushed open the cast-iron gate and it squeaked in protest as she dislodged droplets of frozen water from its hinges. The path was overgrown with weeds, but the lawn was as immaculate as ever and there didn't seem to be any other sign of a disturbance. The door stood closed before her, its bright red paint a cheerful contrast to the surrounding gloom. The windows were tightly shut to keep the cool evening air at bay. From the front garden, the living room looked undisturbed.

Misty opened the front door and stepped quietly into the tiled hallway. The first thing she noticed was her dad's waterproof jacket, hanging on the coat rack in the hall. She was at once comforted by its familiar shape and smell and confused as to why it was there at all. It was far too early for her dad to be home from work, and he wouldn't have gone out into the sharp, crisp air that morning without it.

She shrugged off her own coat and pulled off her fur-lined boots and left them in an ungainly pile at the foot of the stairs.

She followed the beacon of bulbs that lit the way to the kitchen like a string of clues that had been left for her to follow. It was in the kitchen that she found her dad, a steaming mug of tea before him. He sat hunched over the old oak table, the opposite of his usual cheerful demeanour, his hands clasped tightly around the tea as if it would get up and walk away if he let go.

'Dad?' Misty must have said his name thousands if not millions of times before but this time it sounded more like a question than an answer. Her dad didn't move, couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the milky film that was appearing on the top of his drink.

'Dad?' she called again, trying to keep the rising note of panic out of her voice. 'Dad, is everything ok?'

It had just been Misty and her father for the past two and a half years. Things hadn't always been easy between them, but they had eventually settled into a new routine that now felt like a comfy pair of slippers. They were moulded to each other, almost inseparable. This new silent man wasn't anything like Misty's real father. She didn't recognise him at all.

Just when Misty had almost given up hope of him answering, her dad turned his gaze towards her. He looked

slightly older and more wrinkled than he had that morning, but behind the worry in his eyes she could see a reassuring flicker of the dad she remembered. He must still be in there somewhere.

'What's happened? Please tell me what's wrong?'

Her dad looked at her, confused for a moment as if he didn't recognise that the thirteen-year-old girl stood before him was, in fact, his own daughter. His eyes sought out her own and, in that moment, he seemed to remember who he was, who she was.

'Misty,' he said, breaking out of his stupor as quickly as it had come upon him. 'How was school today?' His voice was still much the same as she remembered, though the lyrical vowels were perhaps a little hoarser sounding than normal.

'School?' Misty replied, as if she too had temporarily forgotten herself. 'Fine. Fine, but—'

'That's good to hear.' Dad got up and poured the untouched cup of tea down the sink as if nothing had happened. The brown liquid splashed untidily over the cool porcelain.

'Dad, why are you home so early?' Misty asked, hoping for a response.

Her father was usually a hive of bustling activity, asking her how her day was, if she needed any help with her homework, what she and her friends were up to that

weekend, all whilst chopping onions for dinner, trying not to let them make him cry (the onions always won in the end), and putting on a wash at the same time. It was exhausting just watching him.

'Misty, there's something you should know.'

Misty suddenly felt exhaustion of an entirely different kind. It was the type that tiptoes up behind you unexpectedly and drains the life out of your very bones. It was the feeling of dread. It was quietly creeping up her spine and making all the hairs on her entire body stand fiercely to attention and her heart pound. It was preparing her for bad news.

'They've let me go.'

For a second, Misty wondered what her father meant. *Let him go where?* She briefly thought it was a positive statement: *They've let me go... on holiday... to the beach... away somewhere hot and sunny.* But this was an old mining community, and almost everyone knew what it meant to simply be swept away like discarded rubbish and then entirely forgotten about. And now Misty's father knew too, had been given first-hand experience of it.

'Why?' Misty asked, her mouth hanging open in shock. Her dad had worked for the same firm for over ten years, he was one of their top accountants. Whenever Misty met his boss, Mr Peters, he always told her that her dad was 'one of Gold Star's most valuable assets' whilst chuckling

merrily to himself and patting Misty on the head as if she was forever three years old.

'The company's been having some financial problems. They need to get rid of a few people. Those people include me,' he said bitterly.

'I'm sorry, Dad, I'm sure you'll find another job soon.'

The clichés started pouring out of Misty without her having to think about it. Things she'd heard other people say, things she thought you were meant to say to someone who had just lost their work. It wasn't as if he had momentarily misplaced it, she thought. That he could find it again, if only he looked hard enough.

'I'm sure something will come up,' she continued. 'We'll manage.'

'Thanks, love.'

'Perhaps I can find a weekend job?' she offered half-heartedly. She didn't suppose anyone would allow a thirteen-year-old to work for them. 'I could wash cars for the neighbours or walk their dogs or something—'

'I'm sure it won't come to that, I'll get something else sorted out,' Dad interrupted her mid-flow, and she felt suddenly relieved and then, just as quickly, selfish for feeling that way after everything he had done for her.

'We'll get by, right enough.'