HOW TO BE FREE



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PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S

THE VERY BEGINNING

This book is about three things.

1. Finding things. In particular, it is about finding a nun who goes missing and the three small girls called Hanna Kowalczyk, Calla North and Edie Berger who set out to find her and bring her home.
2. Family. A lot of people think that family is just the people that you are related to but it is so much more than that. Families can be made of the people you love, your pets, your friends, your favourite recipe for salted caramel truffles, and people that you've not even met yet.
3. Footnotes. This is not just because I enjoy things that start with the letter F but rather because I am very forgetful and footnotes allow me to add things in when I remember them. These things might be Additional Important Information, or Jokes, or Useful Things That You Should Be Aware Of. All you need to do is look for the

little number in a sentence (like this one[1]), and find the number at the bottom of the page that corresponds with it.

But before all of that, it is about a girl called Sarah Bishop.

1 This is a footnote. You will see that it is the only footnote on this page and now, all you need to do is go back up and read the rest of the sentence on the page itself. I am aware that is a lot of information to take in so you are welcome to stop for a moment and have a biscuit before you do. I recommend a pink wafer.

A GIRL CALLED SARAH

There are several things that you need to know about Sarah Bishop and the first one is this: she was born in the last days of the First World War and so, for a long time, knew a world with no cake or sweets at all. This was because of a thing called rationing. Rationing was when the government gave people a booklet full of small coupons. These coupons could then be used to purchase things and make sure that everybody got everything they needed during the war. The only problem was that when those tickets were used up, people wouldn't have any left until the next ones were given out.

It took two years after the war for rationing to end. Sarah was two when it did and she watched as all of her neighbours and the people in her town embraced the freedom of a life without coupons and restrictions. Her parents, however, did not. They had been so saddened and broken by the events of the war that they did not quite know what to do with themselves. They would spend days trying to figure out what to say to each other and their daughter and failing entirely at both. And so they lived a quiet and small and sad life where they slowly withdrew from the world and all of the wonders that it

had to offer. They ate plain and simple food, and refused social invitations and, when their sadness grew almost too much for them to bear, they would not even leave the house for weeks.

But then, one day, Sarah Bishop realized that there was another way to live.

This was all due to the work of Angela Anderson, her next-door neighbour. Angela's daughter was getting married and Angela had decided to bake a cake to celebrate the occasion. Angela was not a good baker and occasionally she was even catastrophic, but fortune had favoured her on this day and she had somehow managed to bake the sort of cake that you might find if you ever looked up the definition of "cake" in the dictionary. It was perfect. It was so perfect, in fact, that Angela had asked all of her neighbours to come around and witness it. She had rung the doorbell of old Miss O'Hara from Number 47, knocked on the door of Mr and Mrs Jacobson from Number 49, and even though she could not quite believe that she was doing it, she had invited around the strange and never seen out in public Mr and Mrs Bishop at Number 51.

Mrs Bishop had refused, of course. It was almost instinctive to her now. "I have to look after my daughter," she said. "And cook the supper. Then there's the cleaning. You know."

"It's eleven o'clock," said Angela Anderson, with a force that surprised her. "There's time for all of that yet. Come and look at my cake and have a cup of tea, and bring your daughter too."

She had seen the daughter going back and forth to school. Always by herself. Always far too pale for comfort. Never with one of her parents at her side.

"I don't know," said Mrs Bishop.

"Come," said Angela Anderson. "Please."

And for some reason that she did not understand, Mrs Eileen Bishop did. She brought her husband, George, dressed in his suit and as formal as a man going to church, and her small and wide-eyed daughter, Sarah, and when they had all finished staring at the wonder of Angela's perfect cake, the wide-eyed Sarah walked forward and calmly helped herself to a bite.

Sarah was punished, of course, but she did not care. And even when she *did* care about being confined to her room or fed meals even plainer and sadder than before, all that she had to do was remind herself of how that cake had tasted. She had never thought that something like it could exist in the world. She wanted to know everything about it. She wanted to understand it, completely, and she wanted to make her own.

And so, Sarah began to educate herself. She would visit the local library on her way home from school and when the librarian was looking the other way,[1] Sarah would sneak out of the children's section and into the adult room where the recipe books lived. They mentioned

1 Librarians back then were very fond of rules and could often be a bit scary when they found people breaking them. Now, of course, they are some of the best people on the planet and you should always bring them cake to celebrate this.

ingredients that she had never tasted and places she had never heard of and sometimes, late at night, she would dream about the time that she might be able to make them for the people that she loved. She was not quite sure who these people might be and where she might find them but she knew with a definitive and sharp sense of sadness that they would not be her parents.

It was during one of her library visits that Sarah met Mrs Weisenreider, an elderly refugee from Germany, who had come over to England after the war and now spent her days reading cookery books to remind herself of all that she had left behind. Mrs Weisenreider was the one who taught Sarah about Springerle cookies, which were tiny little patterned biscuits that had been made in her Swabian village in Germany ever since the fourteenth century, and one day she gave Sarah the mould to make her own.

It was also Mrs Weisenreider who introduced Sarah to the other widows. They had come from all over Europe, "for love," said Mrs Van Dam, "for freedom," said Mrs Gladstone, "and not for the food," added Mrs Bertolini, as quick and as smooth as anything you'd see on the London stage. This always made the rest of them laugh and then Mrs Weisenreider would bustle the group out of the library and down towards the nearest café for a cup of tea and deeply inappropriate gossip. Sarah was always sent home for this part and so, the moment she was old enough, she got a job in the café so that she could gossip with them.

When Sarah was twenty-one, she was given the unexpected present of two new baby sisters named Georgia and Lily. One week after this, the Second World War began and with it came the death of her father. He had signed up with the navy in the first few weeks of fighting, unable to deal with the thought of this happening all over again and unable to let it happen without him being involved, and he had lost his life almost as quickly. And so when her friends were moving on to do war work and dig for victory, Sarah stayed with her mother to help her look after the twins and keep money, somehow, coming into their sad and broken house. She doubled her shifts at the café and when the air raids began, she started to work nights as well as an emergency telephonist.[1]

Somewhere, in the middle of all of this hustle and bustle, Sarah's mother died.

And that meant that Sarah had to become both mother and father to the twins even though she was barely an adult herself.

The widows helped her, of course, for they knew about what had happened and they all loved Sarah very much at this point. Mrs Weisenreider took in their washing to do alongside her own and Mrs Van Dam made enormous amounts of nourishing soup for them all to eat together while Mrs Bertolini and Mrs Gladstone sat down and

1 This is a fancy word for somebody who answered the phone calls at the fire station after a raid and sent the fire fighters to where they were needed the most.

looked through all of the paperwork and bills that Sarah's mother had been ignoring for so, so long. It was then that they realized that things were about to go very wrong for Sarah and so they began to plot.

Their plot involved the sending of many letters to all of their friends and relatives scattered across Europe, and long conversations with each other at the café, and for a few months, Sarah did not know anything about it. She spent her days with the twins, and the love and help of the widows kept the three of them safe. She would talk about what the future might hold and dream of a bakery that might be her very own. "But I have to forget that now," she would say to whichever widow was sitting by her side, "I have the girls to look after and I'm the only person they've got."

One day, when Lily and Georgia were busy playing hopscotch with each other on the street outside, and the widows had received the final pieces of information that they needed, they took Sarah to one side and began the process of telling her everything.

"Sarah, my dear, we have something to tell you," said Mrs Weisenreider. "We all care for you so much and we love you as if you were our own family. And we know that your parents have not left you with enough money to live on. There are so many bills here and none of them have been paid for quite some time. Did your mother ever speak to you about money? Properly?"

"I thought we were managing with my extra shifts," said Sarah. "I didn't know things were bad."

"They are not good," said Mrs Weisenreider. "There are many bills that have not been paid and your father, before he died, took out a loan with the bank. That has not been paid back either."

Mrs Van Dam nodded. "There is no way that your shifts will cover all of what is owed. We have spent weeks trying to make the numbers work, but they will not. There is just not enough money."

"So we have been putting a plan together for you these past few weeks," said Mrs Gladstone at her gentlest. "And if you would be happy to accept our help, then we will give it to you."

"But you've already given me so much," said Sarah. "How can I ask any more of you than that?"

"But so much is not enough," replied Mrs Weisenreider. "Permit me to explain our idea to you."

And so she did.

I'LL NEVER FORGET YOU

The plan was this: train tickets to Cornwall for Sarah, Lily and Georgia; the promise of an apprenticeship in a bakery run by Mrs Bertolini's best friend's great-niece by marriage; and enough money to get Sarah started in a brand-new life doing the things that she had always dreamt of. It was the greatest gift that the widows could have given her and when Sarah protested it, when she told them that it was too much, they told her that they loved her and that she had to go.

"You have a life beyond this house and it is waiting for you to live it," said Mrs Van Dam in her quiet and gentle way, "and it is our joy to make it happen for you."

When Sarah protested again, Mrs Van Dam patted her knee, and Mrs Gladstone took her hand and Mrs Bertolini took the other while Mrs Weisenreider told her to write.

"Not every day," she said, "because you will not have time and we do not expect it of you. But when you can, please tell us how you are. Please remember us."

"I'll never forget you," said Sarah, and she didn't. She sent the first postcard from the bakery, the day after she had made panettone for the first time, her hands still aching from kneading the dough and her mind still full

of its magic. She sent the others on a regular basis from that point on and the widows devoured each and every one of them. They learnt about how Georgia grew up into somebody who was clever and quick and about how she always asked Sarah questions that she never knew the answer to. They learnt about Lily and about how she was funny and stubborn and was always the first to be awake and the last to fall asleep. And they learnt about how Sarah was becoming the baker that she had always dreamt about being.

In turn, the widows sent Sarah postcards of their own. They told her all about the things that were happening in the local area and even though these were not often the most exciting or dramatic pieces of news, for Sarah they were perfect. She learnt about how the library had got new books, about a group of nuns who were setting up a convent just outside of the village, and about how to make the perfect sponge pudding even though rationing was back in effect and half of the ingredients were missing.

For a while, there was nothing but postcards flying back and forth and Georgia and Lily grew accustomed to trotting down to the post office with another one in their hands and returning with a fresh one for Sarah to read. Even Mrs Bertolini's best friend's great-niece by marriage had become interested and was starting to learn English as a result of them.[1] And when the postcards started to bring bad news with them, when one of the widows died

1 Her vocabulary was very good but rather cake specific.

and then the other, she was the first to wrap her arms around Sarah and help her through it all.

The last widow was Mrs Weisenreider, and even though her handwriting grew increasingly wild and her spelling even wilder, she wrote postcards right up to the end. For a while, both Sarah and Mrs Bertolini's best friend's great-niece by marriage[1] worried about why they might have stopped coming and then a letter arrived which explained it all. Mrs Weisenreider had died and left Sarah everything that she had.

And everything, along with all of the money that she had saved over the years, was just enough for Sarah to buy a small bakery of her very own.

"Where will you buy it?" asked Georgia.

And for the first time in her life, Sarah did not have to think about how to answer one of her sister's questions.

"Home," she said.

1 Whose name was Giulia Ricci in real life but nobody used that, not even Giulia herself.