Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

A Spoonful of Jam

Written by

Michelle Magorian

Published by

Egmont

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Part One *Breaking up*

One

'When did you find out?' asked Elsie.

'Last night. Mum told me when Dad was out. That's why she's so enormous. She said it's coming in August.'

'But that's only a month away!' exclaimed Elsie, amazed.

There was a loud clapping from the front of the classroom. A tall, gawky woman in her thirties was scrabbling around in her desk, her long, ungainly legs splayed out from her chair like a resting spider. She peered at them through tortoiseshell spectacles.

'Not so much talking please.'

They raised their desk lids.

'Everyone seems to be having babies now,' Elsie whispered. 'Your mum. My mum. My cousin, Kitty. Joan's friend, Kay. Everywhere I look I see babies or women about to have babies. There's no escapin' from them. They seek us here, they seek us there. Them babies seek us everywhere. It's an invasion.'

Geraldine giggled.

'They'll be taking over the world,' said Elsie, eyeing her friend's reaction. 'They'll be marching to Downing Street. There'll be baby riots.'

'Come on, you two!'

Peering over Elsie's desk lid was a tall, distinguished-looking girl. It was Imelda Francis, the Book Monitress for the last week of term. She was glaring down at them.

They handed their Latin textbooks up to her. She glanced at the brown paper they had taken off, now lying neatly in a pile of other removed brown-paper covers. 'You're not going to use them again next term, are you?'

'Haven't you heard of paper rationing?' Geraldine commented.

'I wouldn't think that would concern you,' snapped Imelda, staring pointedly at Elsie. 'With your father working at the paper-mill.' She spat out 'paper-mill' with as much distaste as if she had mentioned a sewer.

'It's because he does work there that I know how little paper there is,' said Elsie, flushing.

'Ignore her,' Geraldine said when Imelda was out of earshot. 'She's not worth it.'

But remarks like that did hurt Elsie. Not that she would ever let on.

'Are you pleased?'

'About what?' said Geraldine.

'The baby.'

'I don't know. My mother thinks it'll make things better at home.'

'With your dad?'

Geraldine nodded. Elsie noticed the familiar glazed look in her friend's eyes.

'Has he thumped you again?'

Geraldine looked away. 'Yes. I wish he'd never come back. My mum said it's the war that's changed him.' She glanced quickly at Elsie. 'At least he said sorry afterwards. Sometimes when I'm in bed he comes into my room and cries and promises he'll never do it again.'

'If only you could come and stay with me,' said Elsie. 'Are you sure your mum won't let you stay even a couple of days?'

'She wants me to help her. She's always so tired. And she thinks it would be too much for your mother, what with her having been ill and everything.'

'Perhaps we could meet up for a picture.'

'Yeah. That'd be nice!'

They returned to clearing their desks, neither of them saying what was really on their minds, that Elsie wouldn't be going to Geraldine's place. Elsie had been to her flat a few times but the last time, Geraldine's father had locked Geraldine in her bedroom in a rage, leaving Elsie alone with him. He hadn't hurt Elsie. In fact, he had been friendly. But so friendly it made Elsie squirm.

Just then, Alice Brogan's voice could be heard reading a chapter from *Anne of Green Gables*. Elsie peered over her desk lid at her. She was standing at the front of the class.

Alice and Geraldine were Elsie's closest school friends. They were total opposites. Alice had blonde hair, which hung down in two straight plaits, and was nearly always smiling about something, whereas Geraldine had wavy brown hair and, although lively, had a sad expression on her face when off guard. Alice had two sisters, whereas Geraldine was an only child. Alice's father worked in a bank. Geraldine's father was still out of work because of a war injury. Alice was well organised, always near the top of the class and popular. Geraldine was a daydreamer, hovered

near the bottom of the class and Elsie was her only friend.

The two things they did have in common were that their uniforms fitted (unlike Elsie's) and Elsie could make them laugh. The problem was that Geraldine was hardly ever allowed out and Alice lived miles away on the other side of the school and she was often away at gymkhanas.

Elsie picked up a clump of ink-stained jotters and crammed them into the well-worn satchel her mother had found in a junk shop. She glanced guiltily aside at Geraldine. What had brought them together was their fathers, who had both been away in the Army for four or five years. Both girls had been disappointed when what appeared to be a stranger began living with them. They had had to endure the rows, the tense silences, the moods, the sudden bursts of rage, their dreams of a wonderful reunion smashed. But life had improved for Elsie in the last few months and she didn't know quite how to tell Geraldine. Her bouts of happiness felt like a betrayal.

'What's your dad like now?' asked Geraldine.

Elsie was startled. It was as though her friend had read her mind. 'He hardly yells at me at all now.

He just ignores me. Like old wallpaper.'

'Lucky you.'

Sometimes Elsie was exhausted with walking round the playground with Geraldine, listening or talking about how bad things were at home. At least Alice was cheerful when they were together, but Geraldine implied that Alice had an easy life and that she was shallow. Elsie suspected it was because Alice was too happy for Geraldine's comfort.

'And you've got Harry to muck around with,' Geraldine added enviously.

'Not for long. He starts at the paper-mill on Monday.'

'But he's only just had his fourteenth birthday! Mum says everyone's got to stay at school till they're fifteen now.'

'Dad found a way round it. Harry would have gone mad if he'd had to stay at school another year.'

'So there'll be no one to protect you next term.'

'Don't remind me!' Elsie laughed, attempting to make light of it.

As she crammed more jotters into her satchel she noticed her hands were shaking. The old familiar nausea had risen into her mouth.

She was aware of a clearing of throats. When each girl had emptied her desk she had to sit quietly with hands clasped on her desk lid and wait for the slow-coaches to catch up. Elsie could feel her face growing hot, which made her even more flustered. She grabbed a handful of loose paper and pencils and stuffed them into the satchel, but then found she couldn't do up the buckles. She shoved some paintings and her remaining exercise books into her shoe bag, and her gym kit into a string bag. As she propped the string bag against the leg of her desk, her chair began to capsize from the weight of her satchel hanging on the back of it. But eventually her hands were clasped on her desk too, and she listened until Alice finished the last chapter of *Anne of Green Gables.*

Miss Pinkerton stood in front of the blackboard and surveyed them all. 'Hands up those who are going to see *Nine Till Six* this evening?'

Elsie and Geraldine raised their hands.

'Usual drill, girls. Come looking your best. The other parents like to see that their daughters are mixing with other well-turned-out girls. A tidy appearance reflects a tidy mind.'

My mind must have exploded then, thought Elsie.

'Freshly pressed dresses, polished sandals, brushed-back hair, but, don't forget, enjoy the play! It will be the last chance for you to see the upper sixth before they go up to university or college or training hospitals, so I do hope you will come and be a good audience for them. One day that will be you up there.'

'Not me,' murmured Elsie under her breath.

'Well now,' Miss Pinkerton said, beaming, 'I doubt any of you will forget your first year at this establishment. The year 1946–1947 will, I am sure, be etched in your memories. Some of you have done exceptionally well in your studies and deserve a well-earned holiday. You have wolfed down some bread and butter for the mind. Now it is time to enjoy some jam. Remember, there is always room for improvement. So I shall expect you to return next year for some–'

'Scones?' suggested a voice at the back of the class.

Elsie swung round. It was Rebecca Stein. A black-haired girl with olive skin, she only spoke occasionally but when she did she nearly always surprised Elsie with her wit. It was strange to think that in three terms they had hardly exchanged two words.

'Quite,' said Miss Pinkerton, smiling. 'Some of you, however, have failed to live up to the exceptional

potential I know you possess. You wouldn't have been accepted here otherwise. I hope that when you return, reinvigorated, you will start with a new determination. Now! Has anyone any exciting plans for the summer vacation?'

Elsie watched the hands shoot up.

'Yes, Felicity?'

Elsie gazed out of the window, beyond the lawn and the flower-beds to the sunken tennis court surrounded by high rhododendron bushes. She was vaguely aware of voices mentioning Cornwall, Scotland, Norfolk, and the Lake District. She was half sorry to be breaking up. She was going to miss the fields and the school's large, sprawling buildings with their wide echoing corridors and polished floors. School was a luxury compared to home.

She would miss Miss Pinkerton too. Miss Pinkerton had nicknamed Elsie her 'little dormouse', partly because she was small but also because her work had improved that term. 'It's as though you have been asleep in the winter and have suddenly come out of hibernation.'

'Elsie!'

Elsie looked up. 'Yes, Miss Pinkerton?'

'You haven't said what you'll be doing. Now I know we can't all go away for our holidays and, after all, the government has urged people to take their vacations at home. Less burden on our rather depleted transport. Will you be one of those taking holidays at home?'

'That's right,' said Elsie, relieved. She could hardly say she and her family would be going 'down 'oppin' '. Hop-picking just wasn't 'done'. Even her cousin, Joan, told everyone they were going down to their 'chalet', which sounded like Switzerland, but was really just a posh name for a windowless, tin hopper's hut. She crossed her fingers tightly under the desk. 'And I'll be helping out at the Palace.'

Miss Pinkerton frowned. 'I think you are a little old for fairytale inventions, Elsie.'

'She means the Palace Theatre,' said Imelda Francis. 'One of her brothers is an *actor*,' she added with an air of scandal in her voice.

'As was Shakespeare, of course, before he wrote his wonderful plays,' pointed out Miss Pinkerton. 'Not all members of the acting professions are rogues and vagabonds, Imelda Francis.'

The Book Monitress gave a snigger and nudged

her neighbour, a beanpole of a girl with a long, aquiline nose and the air of a thoroughbred horse.

'And the Palace Theatre is not variety. It puts on some quite good plays between the comedies and the thrillers.' She beamed at Elsie. 'So you'll be sweeping the stage and making tea? That sort of thing?'

'Yes,' lied Elsie.

What Miss Pinkerton didn't know was that Elsie had never been backstage in her life. Her seventeen year old brother, Ralph, had often arranged to show her round but each time the day grew closer she had made an excuse not to go. Whether it was out of shyness or an unwillingness to have her dream of what it was like ruined, she didn't know.

Elsie hated telling lies. Now she would have to undo it by making it come true, and she cursed her big mouth.

'That's marvellous. Very enterprising. I expect you'll have lots of interesting stories to tell the form when you come back. Mind you get out in the sun too, young lady. It will help you grow a bit. We don't want you coming back next term as the smallest girl in the school again, do we?'

'No, Miss Pinkerton.'

Before they were released, Miss Pinkerton gave them a lecture on the dangers of swimming-baths and certain rivers, because of the risks of catching infantile paralysis, which attacked the nervous system, making it impossible to walk without leg-irons or to breathe unaided.

'If you get it you have to live in a big box called an iron lung,' whispered Geraldine. 'I'm going to try and go to the swimming-baths as much as possible so I can catch it.'

'Why?' asked Elsie, staggered at the idea.

'Then Dad can't hurt me any more. I'd be protected by the box.'

'But you wouldn't be able to go to school.'

'Perhaps I could be a boarder here.'

'There aren't any boarders. Geraldine, you don't mean it, do you? About the iron lung. I'd hate not being able to breathe properly.'

Geraldine shrugged. Elsie controlled her exasperation. If only Geraldine would stop feeling so sorry for herself. And then Elsie felt ashamed.

Outside, mothers collected their daughters while hordes of the other girls climbed shrieking on to school buses.

Alice had joined them on the steps, looking like an advertisement for uniforms, her briefcase and sandals polished, her Panama neatly on her head, her brilliant blue eyes radiant.

Elsie, in contrast, felt that she was drowning in a navy blue sack surrounded by other smaller sacks. Even with a giant hem on her dress it still dangled somewhere between her knees and ankles, and the stitching on the sleeves on her voluminous blazer kept coming undone so that the cuffs crept over the tips of her fingers. A piece of old elastic prevented the straw hat from falling off, but not from perching lopsided on her head, while her mousy hair escaped wildly from two tiny pathetic plaits.

'When are you going to the Isle of Wight?' Elsie asked Alice.

'Tomorrow. Mummy says you're very welcome to come and stay. Why don't you? Please say yes.'

'Thanks, but I'm needed at home.'

'Me too,' said Geraldine who, Elsie noted, hadn't been asked.

Elsie was too embarrassed to admit her father couldn't afford the fare. 'Maybe next year. Will you send me a postcard?'

Elsie knew she wouldn't see Alice until the following term and she had doubts about seeing Geraldine. Some 'jam' this was going to be.

She hung back, postponing the inevitable, but before she could dodge the onslaught of girls, she felt herself being dragged, albeit resisting, towards the bus. A cold, sick terror overwhelmed her so that all the strength seemed to be sapped from her body. She wanted to jump off the bus but there was nowhere she could go. She had to carry on with her journey and begin the process of making herself invisible. It was the time of day she dreaded the most.

Two

Crushed against the bus window, Elsie balanced her string bag, shoe bag and tennis racquet on her feet with her arms round her bulging satchel. Her glasses kept sliding down the sweat on her nose. Numb and in pain at the same time, she sat hunched in a daze, surrounded by the shouts and laughter of girls all larger than her. The two third-formers who shared her seat, squeezed her closer to the glass, oblivious of her in their excitement.

As the bus shuddered to a halt at each stop, a rising panic began to fill her chest until Elsie thought her heart would burst. She told herself that since they had finished school early it wouldn't matter that Harry would still be at school and wouldn't be there to meet her. But what if some of the other schools had broken up early too? And what if Harry wasn't there to protect her?

The sun was burning the window. She felt as though

she was being slowly cooked. Perspiration was streaming down the sides of her face. She longed to pull off her damp blazer and hat but it would be just her luck if a prefect spotted her and she was given a conduct mark on her last day. She shoved her fingers up inside her hat and scratched her sodden scalp. She still couldn't get used to having hair long enough to plait. She wanted it cut but her mother said it looked prettier long.

By the time Winford was in sight she decided to kill time in town before catching the next bus so that Harry was sure to be waiting for her by their street. But where could she wait until then?

Elsie caught a glimpse of the little dress shop where her cousin, Joan, worked. She couldn't pop in there for a chat. Her fashion-conscious cousin would be too horrified by Elsie's appearance. She called her Miss Ragbag.

They crawled past the clock tower in the square. Ahead of them, past more shops, Elsie spotted a large shabby Edwardian building with huge doors and windows fronting it, the Palace Theatre. Grabbing her belongings, she pushed her way through the girls and stumbled on to the pavement.

'*Comedy and Thrills*!' she said, reading the placard from a kneeling position. She staggered back to her feet and, resuming her pack-horse stance, Elsie hauled herself towards the road which led to the stage door.

'Can I help?'

The voice belonged to an elderly man who was sitting in a cubby-hole in front of rows of letter racks and a wooden board with numbers on it and keys hanging underneath. His head was surrounded by clouds of steam.

'I think you're on fire,' said Elsie, alarmed.

'Kettle's just boiled,' he said, flapping at the steam with an old tea towel. He peered inquisitively at her, 'Now then, what was it you wanted?'

Elsie suddenly felt tongue-tied.

'You 'aven't come for the audition, 'ave you? Only I got no names down for today.'

'No, sir,' Elsie stammered.

'Autograph hunter?'

Elsie shook her head. 'I just wondered if me brother were around so that I could pass him on a message.'

'Your brother? 'Ere?'

'He's assistant stage manager and small parts.'

'Oh, Ralph Hollis.' He glanced at her bags. 'Where you off to then? Somewhere nice?'

'Home. We've just broken up.'

'Ah,' he said. Then he beamed, 'You're Elsie. You're the one Mr Duke and your dad rescued from that flood.'

Elsie felt herself redden. 'Yeah. I got trapped on the bombsite on the other side of the river.'

'From what I 'eard, they only found you just in time. It was your other brother what give the alarm, weren't it?'

'Yeah. Harry saved me life.' She could feel her heart thumping. Thinking of Harry reminded her of why she was here.

'Well, Elsie, I'm afraid Ralph went out looking for a tent for *Desert Highway.* He might not be back for some time. Why don't you drop all 'em bags and stay for a cuppa. You might see him when he comes back. If not, I can pass on your message myself. You look done in. Dump 'em over there. Then they won't be in anyone's way.'

Elsie did so and gazed up at a cast list for *Madame Louise.* She spotted Ralph's name.

'He's got a part next week!'

'Oh yeah? You'll know before he does. Leave your blazer and straw hat on the skip too. You look roastin'.'

The old man pointed to a stool and handed her a mug of tea. It tasted sweet, and to Elsie's surprise it started to make her feel better. With her knees perched up on the stool, her capacious summer dress now covered her feet entirely.

'That the Winford Grammar uniform?'

Elsie nodded.

'You must be bright to get in there.'

'So they say, but I'm only a few places from the bottom. My report says if I listened more and day-dreamed less my work would improve.'

'Oh dear. They never used to let us read our school reports.'

'Oh, I looked at mine. I like to be prepared for the worst.'

'But won't your parents notice the envelope's been opened?'

'I'll take it out and make out that it wasn't in one. I've got away with it before.' Her mother would be so disappointed. It had taken her months to persuade her dad to let her stay on.

There was a sudden silence and Elsie felt awkward.

'Could you tell me about the next play?'

'Plays. This week they'll be rehearsing two. Are you up for the part of Eva?'

She stared blankly at him.

'You don't look more than nine to me, but if you're at the grammar you must be eleven at least.'

'Twelve,' said Elsie.

'So? Are you auditioning? The girl. In *Pink String and Sealing Wax*.'

Elsie nearly choked on her tea. 'Me? I don't have elocution lessons. Only girls who have elocution lessons get to be in plays.'

'But with a bit of coachin'.'

'No. I'm not posh enough.'

'You could copy your brother's accent.'

'He learned it when he was evacuated. It took him years! Anyway I'm not brave enough. This is the first time I've ever been backstage.'

'So how come you decided to stay for a cuppa?'

' 'Cause you're not as fierce as I thought you'd be.'

'Oh no. You're thinking of Mr Neville.'

'You must be Wilfred!'

'That's right. Ralph told you about me, did he?'

Elsie nodded. 'Nice things,' she added hurriedly.

'Mr Neville's the one who's producing *Pink String and Sealing Wax*. He's the one you'd have to see.'

From what Elsie had heard, Mr Neville had a temper which would make a lion whimper.

'He's going to London to see some girls from stage schools this Sunday to audition them.'

'There you are then, Mr . . .' she stopped. 'I'm sorry, I don't know what your surname is.'

'Everyone calls me Wilfred.'

'I wouldn't stand a chance. Thanks for the tea, Wilfred,' she added awkwardly. She caught sight of a clock, and a rush of nausea so intense and so sudden nearly caught her off balance.

'You all right? You've gone an awful colour.'

Elsie nodded and forced herself to smile.

It was when she reached the pavement that he called after her. 'You forgot to leave your message.'

'I'll tell him at teatime.'

She dragged herself to the bus stop, where she caught the bus to the end of their street. She willed Harry to be waiting for her there. She pulled off her hat and carefully placed her spectacles in the inside pocket of her blazer. She glanced round quickly to make

sure there wasn't a prefect. Satisfied, she tried to find a bag for her hat to go into. And then it was her stop. Clumsily she stepped out, looking round frantically for Harry, but there was no sign of him. It was while she was attempting to stuff her hat into her shoe bag that she heard the voice.

'No one to guard you today, Elsie?'

Elsie swung round. She shaded her eyes from the glare of the sun behind the girl's back. She could see Marjorie was flanked by the usual half-dozen assorted boys and girls. She was huge compared to Elsie, but then most people were. Stocky with legs and arms like a docker's, Marjorie Bush stood, legs apart, her hands on her hips, a sneer on her face.

'What a lot of bags you've got,' she commented in a sickly singsong voice. 'Shall we help you carry them?'

Elsie by now had managed to hang her satchel and shoe bag crossways across her chest. Her tennis racquet jammed under one arm, she picked up the string bag and headed for the road.

'Get her!' screamed Marjorie.

Elsie felt herself sinking under the weight of flailing fists and scratching fingernails, conscious of trying to

protect her spectacles from being smashed. As her blazer was dragged down and hands groped into the pockets, she suddenly remembered she had to look smart that evening, and then there was an awful sound. A tearing seam. And she was aware of the skin of her shoulder being exposed to the air.

Three

'Leave her be!'

Elsie heard the sound of feet running away, but before she could gather breath Marjorie Bush yanked at her hair and pushed her face towards the ground. This was followed by a great roar which she knew was Harry. As he dragged Marjorie Bush off her, Elsie sat sprawled across the pavement.

'I'll get you!' Marjorie shrieked. 'I've got all the holidays to get you. You won't have *him* around next week, will you?'

Elsie stared up at her demented, distorted face.

'Thought I didn't know, eh? Well, your precious brother'll be at the paper-mill and there'll be just you and me and this,' she said, presenting her fist. 'Sprat!' she added with venom. And she ran off.

'My dress is torn,' Elsie said lamely.

'I'm sorry, Elsie. They kept the ones that were leaving longer 'cause it was our last day. They gave us