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Opening extract from

Little Foxes

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

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CHAPTER ONE

BILLY BUNCH CAME IN A BOX ONE WINTRY night ten years ago. It was a large box with these words stencilled across it: 'Handle with care. This side up. Perishable.'

For Police Constable William Fazackerly this was a night never to be forgotten. He had pounded the streets all night checking shop doors and windows, but it was too cold a night even for burglars. As he came round the corner and saw the welcome blue light above the door of the Police Station, he was thinking only of the mug of sweet hot tea waiting for him in the

became pensive and silent, and this did nothing to endear him to the nurses who, try as they did, could find little to love in the child. Neither was he an attractive boy. Once he had lost the chubby charm of his infancy, his ears were seen to stick out more than they should and they could find no parting for his hair which would never lie down.

He did not walk when it was expected of him, for he saw no need to. He remained obstinately impervious to either bribes or threats and was quite content to shuffle around on his bottom for the first two and a half years of his life, one leg curled underneath him acting as his rudder, thumb deep in his mouth and forefinger planted resolutely up his left nostril.

And speech did not come easily to him as it did with other children in the home. Even the few words he spoke refused to leave his mouth

without his having to contort his lips and spit them out. This stutter made him all the more reluctant to communicate and he turned to pictures and eventually, when he could read, to books for comfort.

No foster family, it seemed, wanted to keep him for long; and each time his case was packed again to return to the children's home, it simply confirmed that he was indeed alone and unwanted in this world.

School made it worse if anything. The frequent changes from one foster home to another spoiled any chances he might have had of making firm friends in those early years. And certainly he was not proving to be a favourite with the teachers. He was not bright in the classroom, but most of the teachers could forgive him that. The trouble was that he seemed completely uninterested and made little attempt to disguise it. All he wanted to do

was to read, but he would never read what they wanted him to read.

And with his fellows he was no more popular, for he was neither strong nor agile and had little stomach for competitive games of any kind. At play time he would wander alone, hands deep in his pockets, his brows furrowed. The other children were no more beastly to him than they were to each other, in fact they paid him scant attention. Were it not for his stutter he would have gone through each day at school almost unnoticed.

Mrs Simpson, or Aunty May as she liked to be called, was the latest in the long line of foster mothers. She had thin lips, Billy noticed, that she made up bright scarlet to look like a kiss, and she wore curlers every Sunday night in her fuzzy purple hair. She was a widow with grown-up children who lived away. She kept a clean enough house on the tenth floor of a


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block of flats that dominated that wind-swept estate on the outskirts of the city. The estate had been built after the War to accommodate the workers needed for the nearby motor factory, and accommodate was all it did. It was tidily organised with rank upon rank of identical box houses, detached and semi-detached, spread out like a giant spider's web around the central block of flats where Billy now lived. There was little grass to play on and what there was was forbidden to him because he might get muddy, and Aunty May did not like that. 'After all, you know,' she was continually reminding him, 'they only give me so much to keep you each week, Billy, and I can't be for ever spending on extra washing just because you go out and get yourself in a state. I can't think why you don't go and play in the adventure playground with the other children. It's all concrete there, and much

better for you. It's not fair on me, Billy, not fair at all. I've told you before, Billy, if you can't do as you're told, you'll have to go.'

That was always the final threat, and not one to which Billy was usually susceptible, for most of his foster homes had meant little more to him than a roof over his head and three meals a day. Seen like that, one such home was much like any other. But this home was the only one that had ever been special to him. This one he wanted very much to stay in, not on account of Aunty May who nagged him incessantly, and certainly not on account of the school where he lived in dread of the daily torture Mr Brownlow, his frog-eyed teacher, inflicted upon him. 'Stand up, Billy,' he would say. 'Your turn now. Stand up and read out the next page, aloud. And don't take five minutes about it, lad. Just do it.' And so he did it, but the inevitable sniggers as he stuttered his way

through added yet more tissue to the scar of hurt and humiliation he tried so hard to disguise. No, he endured all that and Aunty May only because he had his Wilderness down by the canal to which he could escape and be at last amongst friends.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHAPEL OF ST CUTHBERT, OR WHAT was left of it, lay in the remotest corner of the estate, a gaunt ancient ruin that was crumbling slowly into oblivion. Like everything else standing on the site it would have been bulldozed when the estate was built, but a preservation order had ensured its survival – no one was quite sure why. So they erected a chain-link fence around the graveyard that surrounded the ruins and put up a warning sign: 'Keep out. Danger of falling masonry.' And, for the most part, the children on the estate did

keep out, not because of the sign – few of them knew what masonry was anyway – but rather because it was common knowledge that there were ghosts roaming around the graveyard. And the few who had ventured through the wire and into the Wilderness beyond





returned with stories of strange rustlings in the undergrowth, footsteps that followed them relentlessly, and head-high whispering nettles that lashed at intruders as they tried to escape. This was enough to discourage all but the most adventurous children.

Billy was by no means adventurous, but he no longer believed in ghosts and like most children he had always been intrigued by anything that was forbidden. He was on one of his solitary evening wanderings shortly after he came to live with Aunty May when he saw a great white owl fly over his head and into the vaulted ruins. It passed so close to him that he could feel the wind of its wings in his hair. He saw it settle on one of the

arched windows high up in the ruins. It was because he wanted a closer look that he pulled up the rusty wire and clambered into the Wilderness.

Since that first evening Billy had returned every day to his Wilderness; skulking along the wire until he was sure no one would see him go in, for the magic of this place would be instantly shattered by any intrusion on his privacy. He would dive under the wire, never forgetting to straighten it up behind him so that no one would ever discover his way in, and would fight his way through the undergrowth of laurels and yew out into the open graveyard. Hidden now from the estate, and with the world wild about him, Billy at last found peace. Here he could lie back on the springy grass the rabbits had cropped short and soft, and watch the larks rising into the sky until they vanished into the sun. Here he

could keep a lookout for his owls high in the stone wall of the chapel itself, he could laugh out loud at the sparrows' noisy warfare, call back at the insistent call of the greenfinch and applaud silently the delicate dance of the wagtails on the gravestones.

In the evenings, if he lay quite still for long enough, the rabbits would emerge tentative from their burrows and sniff for danger, and how his heart leapt with the compliment they paid him by ignoring him. No need ever to bring his books here. It was enough for him to be a part of this paradise. He did not need to know the name of a red admiral butterfly or a green woodpecker in order to enjoy their beauty. He came to know every bird, every creature, that frequented his Wilderness and looked upon them as his own. In spring he took it upon himself to guard the fledglings against the invasion of predatory cats from the

estate. A stinging shot from his catapult was usually sufficient to deter them from a return visit. He was lord of his Wilderness, its guardian and its keeper.

Beyond the chapel was the canal. The ruin itself and the graveyard were screened on that side by a jungle of willows and alder trees, and nearer the canal by a bank of hogweed and foxgloves. Hidden here, Billy could watch unobserved as the moorhens and coots jerked their way through the still water, their young scooting after them.

But his greatest joy was the pair of brilliant kingfishers that flashed by so fast and so straight that at first Billy thought he had imagined them. All that summer he watched them come and go. He was there when the two young were learning to fish. He was there when the four of them sat side by side no more than a few feet from him, their blazing orange

and blue unreal against the greens and browns of the canal banks. Only the dragonflies and damselflies gave them any competition; but for Billy the kingfishers would always be the jewels of his Wilderness.

One summer's evening he was kingfisher-watching by the canal when he heard the sound of approaching voices and the bark of a dog on the far side of the canal, and this was why he was lying hidden, face down in the long grass when the cygnet emerged from the bullrushes. She cruised towards him, surveying the world about her with a look of mild interest and some disdain. Every now and then she would browse through the water, lowering her bill so that the water lapped gently over it, then her head would disappear completely until it re-emerged, dripping. Although a dark blue-grey, the bill tinged with green, she looked already a swan

in the making. No other bird Billy knew of swam with such easy power. No other bird could curve its neck with such supreme elegance. Billy hardly dared to breathe as the cygnet moved effortlessly towards him. She was only a few feet away now and he could see the black glint of her eye. He was wondering why such a young bird would be on its own and was waiting for the rest of the family to appear when the question was unequivocally answered.

'That's one of 'em,' came a voice from the opposite bank of the canal. 'You remember? We shelled them four swans, made 'em fly, didn't we? 'S got to be one of 'em. Let's see if we can sink him this time. Let's get him.' In the bombardment of stones that followed Billy put his hands over his head to protect himself. He heard most of the stones falling in the water but one hit him on the arm and another landed

limply on his back. Outrage drove away his fear and he looked up to see five youths hurling a continuous barrage of stones at the cygnet who beat her wings in a frantic effort to take off, but the bombardment was on the mark and she was struck several times leaving her stunned, bobbing up and down helpless in the turbulent water. The dog they launched into the river was fast approaching, its black nose ploughing through the water towards the cygnet, and Billy knew at once what had to be done. He picked up a dead branch and leapt out into the water between the dog and cygnet. Crying with fury he lashed out at the dog's head and drove it back until it clambered whimpering up the bank to join its masters. With abuse ringing in his ears and the stones falling all around him Billy gathered up the battered cygnet in his arms and made for the safety of the Wilderness. The bird struggled against him but Billy had

