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Opening extract from

Everyone a Stranger

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1

A long winding street leads from the centre of Great Deeping to the railway line. There are doorways and corners where someone can hide.

Not in daylight, of course. But after nightfall there are deep recesses, each with its extra shadowed double-darkness. Especially during a blackout.

A stranger standing quietly in one of these places could stretch out his arm to passersby. He could touch them. He would be so close that he would smell their tobacco smoke, or perfume. And he'd hear small scraps of private talk. *She'd be taking a risk! Have you got the key? Oh, it's in my bag! You'd think after the last time . . .*

In the winter of 1945 Molly Barnes and Abigail Murfitt – best friends – hurried that way every evening. Carelessly, trustingly.

There had been rumours about someone lurking in the hiding places. But the rumours were as elusive as the lurker. They came and went.

It's still there today, that street.

When Molly thought about Abigail, the word that came

to mind was *faithful*. She never put you down; she never wrapped herself in impenetrable moods; she never sulked; and she never froze you out with chilly silences.

But that year Abigail headed off in some unpredictable directions where Molly found it hard to follow. It started on a cold Friday afternoon in January.

They were on their way home from the school bus. It was almost dark. In their blue school uniforms and with satchels over their shoulders, they felt weightless and happy. They had no homework to do that night. So there would be tea at Abigail's house, then back to Molly's to spend the rest of the evening together.

That's what they always did on Fridays.

There was a handcart in the street, with *GAS BOARD* painted on its side. A ladder was propped against a streetlight and an old man stood on the ladder, cleaning the glass of the lamp.

'Mr Wayne! How can you see what you're doing?' Abigail knew him. He went to her chapel.

He came slowly down the ladder and turned to the girls. 'I've done now, anyway,' he said. 'I'm getting them all ready. As soon as the War's over they can all be turned on again.'

Molly could remember when the street-lights had all been turned off. There was one outside her bedroom. She could remember herself – much younger, in pyjamas, on tiptoe at her window – staring at the softly-lit glass lantern, so close that she could almost touch it.

That was in 1939. But now the War was almost over

and the blackout would end soon. Already, some people were careless about it – a bright window left with the blinds undrawn; a door left open, streaming light across the garden. The air raid wardens would have been onto them like a shot, once. But now no one minded.

The bombing raids had stopped. There hadn't been a German plane over Great Deeping for months. There were the flying-bombs, of course. Buzzbombs, people called them. But lights would make no difference to *them* – they were pilotless, and they exploded wherever they happened to fall. Besides, it was London that was getting the worst of them. And the southern counties.

The War in Europe was coming to an end. The allied armies were closing in on Berlin. Soon, Hitler would be captured, or killed, and Germany would surrender.

Then Molly's dad would come home. He was in Italy, where the War was already over. Everyone else would come home too.

Well, no, *not* everyone. Abigail's father was *missing, feared killed*. Her mum had heard no more about him since the day she'd received that telegram. He was not expected.

When they arrived at Abigail's house, there was the usual smell of cooking. But in the living room they found Mrs Murfitt seated at the table with her head on her folded arms. She looked smaller than usual; crumpled.

'*Mum!* Aren't you feeling well?'

'Sit down, Abigail. I've something to tell you.' Mrs Murfitt was not a person who wasted words.

Abigail gripped Molly's arm. 'Dad?' she whispered. For five years they had lived with the knowledge that they might hear about him at any time.

But Mrs Murfitt shook her head. 'No, it's not about your father.'

'I'd better go,' Molly said. She could see this was a family matter.

But they ignored her. So she stayed.

'It *really* isn't about Dad?' Abigail said quietly.

Mrs Murfitt shook her head. 'It's about your Auntie Sheila.'

Abigail frowned. For years Auntie Sheila had been just a name on Christmas cards and birthday cards. What had faraway Auntie Sheila got to do with them now?

Mrs Murfitt took a deep breath. 'It was a V-1, one of those buzzbombs. It landed on their street. Everyone was killed – except your cousin Ivy. She was at work.'

There was nothing that could be said to news like this, no words for this kind of blank shock.

Abigail slid into a chair beside her mother at the table.

'The thing is, Abigail – Ivy's coming to live with us. Next week.'

'What? Why has she got to come here?' It seemed so bizarre. Impossible!

'She's homeless – and she has no other family.' Mrs Murfitt spoke in a dead flat tone, defeated and bitter.

'Surely she can go somewhere else?' Abigail whispered.

Molly stared at Abigail in surprise.

Mrs Murfitt looked thoughtfully at her daughter. 'Well, she's coming whether you want her or not. She's only eighteen and she has no other relatives.'

Molly, forgetting it was none of her business, asked a question. 'But does she *have* to come? I mean, if she's eighteen?'

'Until she's twenty-one she's a minor. She's underage. What does it *matter*? The point is that she's homeless and we're her only relatives. I am responsible.'

Abigail stared for a moment, then leapt to her feet and made for the kitchen. 'I'm going to start the meal,' she said savagely.

Molly was embarrassed and uncertain what to do. Mrs Murfitt flapped her hand in a way that seemed to mean: *I've* done my best – Molly, *you* try!

So Molly followed Abigail into the kitchen. Two saucepans of prepared vegetables stood on the oven-top and Abigail was trying to light a match. But she struck the match so hard against the box that it broke. She threw the pieces angrily on the floor and tried another. Three more matches were struck, broken and thrown away before Molly said, 'For heaven's sake, Abigail, give them to me!'

She lit the gas rings. 'I don't think your mum's got much choice,' she said.

Abigail glared. 'Don't you understand?' she said passionately. 'She's not coming here just to *visit*! She's coming here to *live*. For always. She'll spoil everything!'

'What will she spoil? Is she some kind of monster?'

'*Us!* She'll spoil *us*!'

Molly was bewildered, and showed it in her face.

But Abigail persisted. 'You and me – we've been like this since we were *born*! And you and me and Adam since we were ten!'

To Abigail, this newcomer meant the end of everything. But Molly, only dimly understanding, said, 'Why should she spoil everything? She might be a really nice person.'

'That would be worse!' Abigail snapped. 'If she's horrible, at least we can hate her!'

But she was growing calmer, a little. She pulled open a drawer and began sorting out some cutlery. 'Oh, why did my stupid aunt have to go and get herself bombed!'

She stared at Molly across the kitchen table. 'I don't want her here!' she said quietly. 'And where will she sleep?'

Then Molly began to understand the gravity of this new situation. The railway house had large generous rooms. But there were only two bedrooms.

2

Adam Swales was their friend. He had lived with Molly since the start of the War, when he'd arrived from London as an evacuee.

He drew pictures – *good* pictures. Everybody said so.

But, back in 1942, at the start of his second year at the grammar school, he'd discovered that there were to be no art classes in his timetable. The boys in 2B could choose art, but Adam's class was to have Latin instead.

Adam hadn't hesitated. He asked to see the headmaster and explained the problem. He remembered to say *sir* in all the right places, and he was polite.

'In this school,' Mr Ricks explained, 'boys in the A stream take Latin, boys in the B stream take art. You are now in 2A. So I'm afraid it's impossible.'

'Why, sir?'

This response surprised Mr Ricks. 'Because I see no reason why a special exception should be made for you.'

'But I'm going to be an artist,' Adam explained.

'Half the boys in your year want to be engine drivers,' the head said. 'Does that mean we should offer classes on trains?'

Adam had with him a fat brown envelope. He tipped the contents onto Mr Ricks' desk – fifty or sixty loose pages, all with drawings on them.

Mr Ricks sent Adam back to his class and looked through the drawings. Then he rang for his secretary. 'Send for Mr Fraser, please.'

Mr Fraser was the art master – a rather rugged old man, but still working because of the shortage of teachers.

One by one, Mr Fraser studied Adam's work. Whole drawings, sketches, fragments, done in pencil, pen-and-ink, charcoal, and coloured chalks.

'In the first year he showed promise, but I had no idea . . . No idea at all!'

'He wants to go on doing art. Of course, you know, he's in 2A.'

'He *should* take art,' Mr Fraser said. 'Definitely.'

The next day the headmaster sent for Adam. 'I cannot change the timetable,' he announced. 'So the only way that you can take art would be to move into 2B – which I am sure you wouldn't want to do.'

'Yes I would,' Adam said.

'Then you may,' Mr Ricks announced grandly.

From that time, Adam had studied art with Mr Fraser. One Saturday he took Adam to his home to spend the day in his workshop. There was an old printing press there, and Adam learned about etching and engraving.

He made linocuts in class, but in Mr Fraser's workshop he made a small wood engraving and printed it.

These Saturday visits became frequent.

Mr Fraser's wife was young. She came quietly in and out of the workshop, bringing tea, cakes, and doing some artwork of her own. Adam found it hard to take his eyes off her. All over the place there were paintings of her, and drawings. He couldn't take his eyes off them either.

Mr Fraser lent Adam several books. Adam sometimes kept them for months – but the teacher didn't mind. He always got them back eventually. 'Have you heard of an artist called Picasso?' he asked Adam one day.

Adam shook his head.

'Pablo Picasso,' Mr Fraser said thoughtfully. 'Not very well known to the general public here – not yet, anyway. But people who know about art find his work very exciting.'

He handed Adam three books. 'I picked these up in Paris, before the War. They're books of poems, and a novel, illustrated by Picasso. Why don't you have a look at them?'