

Lines and Shadows

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**Story
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1

The stiff envelope had the hue of clotted cream against the pale green everyday Poole pottery. The Ministry of Defence seal gleamed like anthracite. Ginny's father had his Daily Mail up to his face as usual, in a way which somehow created the optical illusion that it was the paper eating his toast rather than him. Her mother fussed unnecessarily with the kettle, hummed, turned up the Home Service News, turned it down again. Ginny set the envelope aside, lifted the cosy off her egg cup and began to slice the top off her egg.

'Well,' said her mother eventually, 'aren't you going to open it?' Ginny's mother wasn't patient; pressure built up in her as if she were a small, volatile volcano and had to find instant release.

'In a minute, mum.' Ginny wasn't being unkind, but she hadn't expected the letter to arrive so soon and she needed a few minutes to make herself ready for whatever

it might have to say. She was more like her dad, she supposed, whose rhythmic biting and chewing had suffered no interruption, although she did notice a slight tremor running through the front page, making Mr. MacMillan's moustache twitch. She stared into her egg, assessing the thickness of the white and the number of degrees off a circle of the circumference of the yoke. She didn't exactly know she was doing this, just that the progress of the calculations through her mind calmed her so her hands were hardly shaking at all when she picked up the letter and opened it.

It was a short letter, and she read it twice before saying anything, just to be absolutely certain she hadn't made a mistake. She hadn't.

'I got it,' she said quietly. 'I got the job.'

2

As her train steamed eastwards the rain gave way to a quilt of white cloud, cities to small, poor-looking hamlets, the Pennine crags to the Lincolnshire Wolds to a landscape so flat you could almost imagine God's hand smoothing it the way her mother smoothed a bedspread. If you believed in God. The previous summer, Ginny had graduated from the Manchester College of Science and Technology with a first class honours degree in applied mathematics and she knew perfectly well the flatness of the land was to do with the measurable density of rock, with wind speeds and the work of gravity upon water. There was no mystery, merely that which had yet to be discovered.

She disliked the countryside. All of it. When she was two, she and her mother had been evacuated to a village in Wales where everything smelt of dung and damp plaster and her mother, who was expecting her brother, Joe,

cried as endlessly as it rained outside so she came to believe her dad was actually dead. She was five when he came to collect them at the end of the war, and she ran away because she was sure he was an escaped POW come to murder them. She'd been hoping so much for a posting in London, or Cyprus or Germany, any of those places mentioned on Two Way Family Favourites. If she'd been to a proper university, she would probably have got one, but she had had to make do, her father explained, because they needed to save money for Joe's future. A boy had to have a proper future. So she had to content herself with the college, and a degree awarded by the Victoria University up the nice end of Oxford Road, and was posted to Aldeford. It had taken her some time to find it on a map.

After changing at Birmingham and Ipswich, the final leg of her journey took her on a two carriage train full of Easter holidaymakers to Felixstowe. She had to share her compartment with a gang of tipsy Teddy Boys and was sure she must reek of beer and Brylcreem by the time she dragged her case on to the platform at Felixstowe where she had been told a car would meet her. Dusk was falling and she hunted in vain among the throng on the station forecourt for anyone who looked as if they might have come from Aldeford Air Force Base. She failed to spot a scrap of RAF blue among the optimistic summer colours of her fellow travellers. As the station emptied and darkness deepened, she became certain she had been forgotten. Had she got the date of travel wrong? Not possible. The MoD had sent her tickets. Well, she thought, if it came to it she could always take a taxi; the local cabbies must be familiar with the base. She just hoped it wasn't too far and she would have enough money to cover her fare.

'Are you the new computer? I was expecting a guy

but you seem to be all that's left. I thought it was ... intriguing they'd got us rooming together.' The voice was a sophisticated-sounding drawl, a hybrid of American and upper-class English, the girl to whom it belonged an even more surprising encounter in an old-fashioned English seaside town. Despite the fact that it was almost dark, she wore oversize sunglasses with tortoiseshell frames, a boilersuit cinched tight at the waist with a heavy leather belt and workmen's boots. Her flame red hair was bound up landgirl style in an expensive-looking silk scarf. She held out a hand and Ginny took it; she had a firm, boyish grip and bright scarlet nails.

'Yes,' said Ginny eventually, 'I suppose I am.' The girl responded with a decidedly unladylike whistle between her teeth; she was wearing, Ginny noticed, the sort of lipstick her mother would describe as 'tarty', a dusk-defying match for her nails. 'You're a first, then. God knows what they'll make of you on the Island. I'm Frank, by the way.'

'Virginia Matlock. Ginny.'

'Ah, so that's what the "V" stands for. I'd decided you were Vincent.' Frank picked up Ginny's suitcase and swung it effortlessly as she led the way to an American jeep, flamboyantly parked with one wheel up on the kerb and its rear end stuck out half way across the road. 'Climb in,' she said, flinging the suitcase into a well behind the seats. In her straight skirt, Ginny couldn't emulate Frank and leap into the jeep without opening the door, and felt Frank's gaze upon her as she settled herself primly, feet and knees together, hands folded over her handbag in her lap. Frank made her uncomfortable; her scrutiny was too intent, too – well – frank. And they were to share a room? She was glad when the other girl turned her attention to the road and Ginny could try to set her impressions in order. She had more questions than answers but for now

it was a relief to have nothing more to concentrate on than not being thrown out of the vehicle as it rattled and lurched along potholed lanes with high hedgerows looming either side. She tried not to think about what would happen if they encountered anything coming the other way. She wished Frank would remove the dark glasses.

The hedgerows gave way to dunes, strange sculpted shapes that glimmered palely into view and were gone as the headlights passed over them. Frank made an abrupt right turn and, after a few hundred yards, halted the jeep in the middle of an unlit space whose borders were vaguely demarcated by the silhouettes of buildings and buttery squares and oblongs of lit windows. From the largest of these spilled voices and piano music as well as light, and a sign above it proclaimed The Merman Inn. An unusual name, Ginny thought.

‘Here we are,’ said Frank. The jeep was the only motor vehicle parked in the square, whose surface was beaten earth rather than tarmac, though a horse and cart were tethered outside the pub. Frank heaved Ginny’s suitcase out of the jeep and set off past the pub, which stood at one corner of the square. The dimly illuminated sign displayed a crude and shocking image of the merman, suspended by his tail over a fire basket, curls of hair and fire entwined in the sign painter’s fancy.

Momentarily distracted by the pub sign, Ginny had to move smartly to catch up with Frank’s long, swinging stride. As they rounded the end of the pub, the ground sloped away and Ginny found herself in a narrow lane, bordered on one side by a row of terraced cottages and on the other by a ruined tower. Entirely in darkness, it formed a dense, crenelated silhouette against a sky which now shimmered with wintry starlight. A chilly breeze had got up, bearing the scent of salt and seaweed, rustling the

ivy which shrouded the tower. Ginny shivered; she hoped there wasn't much further to go. You'll be making a vital contribution to our Cold War effort, Brigadier Bough-Mantle had told her at her interview, absolutely essential work to keep the country safe. In the godforsaken wilds of Suffolk, on a cold spring night of knifing, ghostly wind, she felt utterly unequal to the task, unequal to anything, in fact, other than a hot bath, a mug of cocoa and a night's sleep.

'I won't be living on the base, then?' she asked, as Frank stopped in front of a cottage, rummaging in one of her voluminous pockets for a key which she thrust into the lock of a Brunswick green-painted door. A matching boot scraper sat to one side of it and on the other a plant pot containing a very dead geranium.

'Oh no, only the military live on the base, the rest of us are billeted in the village. You'll be sharing with me and Alicia. This is home. Briar Cottage. Alicia's the sleeping beauty.' She laughed, opened the door and stood aside to let Ginny enter.

The door opened straight on to a shabby front parlour, the walls a nicotine beige in the patchy light from a standard lamp in one corner and an Anglepoise with a broken arm spring which lolled drunkenly over the edge of a deal table with four rush bottomed chairs tucked under it. A lugubrious sideboard stood beneath the window to the right of the door, and next to it a treadle sewing machine. A sagging sofa upholstered in dark brown chenille and an armchair of indeterminate hue made up the rest of the room's furnishings. It was at least warm, with a log fire crackling in a tiled fireplace. The rug in front of it, Ginny noticed, was blotched with scorch marks. The only object in the room which did not share the signs of long and impersonal use was a smart red and cream portable

Dansette balanced on top of a crate full of records in the space under the stairs.

Framed in the open doorway to the kitchen, from which clouds of steam and a smell of boiled potatoes emanated, was a remarkably tall, willowy girl wearing a blue silk kimono over a pair of denim cigarette pants and a white teeshirt. Large, lilac-grey eyes looked out from beneath strong brows and a tangle of loose, dark curls. Until she smiled, she had a mouth like a Victoria plum but when she smiled everything below her nose was large white teeth.

'I cooked,' she announced, in an accent which went with the aristocratic nose but was at odds with the wide and enthusiastic smile. 'Sausage and mash.'

'Hunky dory,' said Frank. 'This is Ginny. Ginny, Alicia.' Alicia stepped forward and offered Ginny a long, pale hand to shake. Her nails were bitten to the quick.