

DINEY COSTELOE

The
Throwaway
Children



Chapter 1

Belcaster 1948

Raised voices again. Rita could hear them through the floor; her mother's, a querulous wail, the man's an angry roar. For a moment she lay still in bed, listening. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but it was clear that they were arguing.

Rosie, her sister, was peacefully asleep at the other end of their shared single bed, the stray cat, Felix, curled against her. She never seemed to wake up however loud the shouting downstairs. Rita slid out from under the bedclothes and tip-toeing across the room, crept out onto the landing. Limpid green light from a street lamp shone through the small landing window, lighting the narrow staircase. A shaft of dull yellow light, shining through the half-open kitchen door, lit the cracked brown lino and cast shadows in the hall. The voices came from the kitchen, still loud, still angry. Rita crouched against the banister, her face pressed to its bars. From here she could actually hear some of what was being said.

'... my children from me.' Her mother's voice.

'... another man's brats!' His voice.

Rita shivered at the sound of his voice. Uncle Jimmy, Mum's new friend. Then Mum began to cry, a pitiful wailing that echoed into the hall.

'For Christ's sake!' His voice again. 'Cut the caterwauling, woman... or I'll leave right now.'

A chair crashed over, and the shaft of light broadened as the kitchen door was pushed wider. Rita dived back into her bedroom,

making the door creak loudly. She leaped into bed, kicking a protesting Felix off the covers and pulling the sheet up over her head. She tried to calm her breathing so that it matched Rosie's, the peaceful breathing of undisturbed sleep, but her heart was pounding, the blood hammering in her ears as she heard the heavy tread of feet on the stairs. *He* was coming up.

'Rita! Was you out of bed?' His voice was harsh. He had not put on the landing light, and as he reached the top stair, Felix materialized at his feet, almost tripping him over.

'Bloody cat!' snarled the man, aiming a kick at him, but Felix had already streaked downstairs.

Jimmy Randall paused on the landing, listening. All was quiet in the girls' room. Softly he crossed to the half-open door and peered in, but it was too dark to see anything, and all he could hear was the steady breathing of two little girls asleep.

Must have been the damned cat, he thought. Don't know why Mavis gives it houseroom, dirty stray. If it was my house...

It wasn't. Not yet. But it would be, Jimmy was determined about that. A neat little house in Ship Street, a terrace of other neat little houses; well, not so neat most of them, unrepaired from the bombing, cracked windows, scarred paintwork, rubble in the tiny gardens, but basically sound enough. Jimmy wouldn't mind doing a bit of repair work himself, provided the house was his at the end of it. His and Mavis's, but not full of squalling kids. All he had to do was get his name on the rent book, then he'd be laughing.

Rita heard him close the door but lay quite still in case it was a trick, in case he was standing silently inside the room waiting to catch her out. It was a full two minutes before she allowed herself to open her eyes into the darkness of her room. She could see nothing. Straining her ears she heard his voice again, not so loud this time, and definitely downstairs.

For a while she lay in the dark, thinking about Uncle Jimmy. He had come into their lives about two months ago, visiting occasionally at first, smiling a lot, once bringing chocolate. It was for Mum really, but she'd let Rita and Rosie have one piece

every day until it had gone. But Rita was afraid of him all the same. He had a loud voice and got cross easily.

Rita wasn't used to having a man in her life. She hardly remembered her daddy. Mum said he had gone to the war and hadn't come home. He had gone before Rosie was even born, fighting the Germans. Rita knew he had been in the air force, flying in a plane high over Germany, and that one night his plane hadn't come back. There was a picture of her daddy in a silver-coloured frame on the kitchen shelf. He was wearing his uniform and smiling. Wherever you moved in the kitchen, his eyes followed you, so that wherever she sat, Rita knew he was smiling at her. She loved his face, his smile making crinkles round his eyes and his curly fair hair half-covered with his air force cap. Rosie had the same sort of hair, thick and fair, curling round her face. Rita's own hair was like Mum's, dark, thin and straight, and she always wished she had hair like Rosie's... and Daddy's.

Then, a while ago, the photo had disappeared.

'Where's Daddy?' Rita demanded one morning when she sat down and noticed the photo had gone. 'Where's Daddy gone?'

Without looking up Mum said, 'Oh, I took him down for now. I need to clean the frame.'

Daddy had not reappeared on the shelf, and Rita missed him. 'I could clean the frame,' she offered. 'I'm good at cleaning.'

'It's being mended,' explained her mother. 'When I came to clean it I found it was broken, so I've took it to be mended.'

Rita didn't ask again, but she somehow knew that the photo wasn't coming back and that this had something to do with the arrival of Jimmy Randall.

Jimmy Randall had changed everything. He was often there when Rita and Rosie came home from school. Mum used to meet them at the school gate, but since Uncle Jimmy, as they were to call him, had become part of their lives, Mum was too busy, and it became Rita's job to bring Rosie home safely.

'You must hold her hand all the way,' Mum said, 'and come straight home.'

So every school day, except Thursdays, Rita took Rosie's

hand and crossing the street very carefully, walked them home; almost every day when they got home, Uncle Jimmy would already be in the kitchen with Mum.

On Thursdays Gran met them at the school gate and gave them tea. Sometimes she let them play in the park they passed on the way.

‘I don’t like Uncle Jimmy,’ Rita confided to her grandmother one Thursday when they were having tea. ‘He shouts. I dropped a cup yesterday, and he sent me upstairs with no tea. It didn’t even break, Gran. It’s not fair.’

Gran gave her a hug. ‘Never mind, love,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he won’t be around for long.’ But Lily didn’t like him either.

Lily Sharples was Mavis’s mother. A widow herself, she still lived in the small brick house in Hampton Road, where she had lived all her married life. It had been spared by the Luftwaffe, when others in the vicinity had been flattened, and despite further raids, Lily remained, stubbornly, in occupation.

‘It’s been my home for nigh on thirty years,’ Lily told Mavis, ‘and when I leave it’ll be feet first.’

Lily was worried about Mavis and her family. Mavis had been on her own for five years now, and Lily wasn’t surprised that she had found herself another man, it was only natural, and anyway, the girls needed a father. It was just that she wished that the man wasn’t Jimmy Randall. She could see why Rita was afraid of him. He wasn’t used to children and his temper was short. On one occasion, Lily had seen him slap Rita across the face. The child had run to her, burying her burning cheek against her grandmother, and, holding her close, Lily turned on him, saying, ‘There was no need for that!’

Jimmy glowered at her and snarled, ‘They need a bit of discipline. They’ve got to learn their place.’

‘This is their place,’ Lily had snapped. ‘It’s not yours!’ But Lily was increasingly afraid that it was going to be. She decided to speak to Mavis. ‘You know the girls are scared stiff of that Jimmy, don’t you?’ she said. ‘It’s not right that they should be afraid in their own home.’

‘What about me?’ complained Mavis. ‘I need someone. Now Don’s gone, have I got to stay on my own for the rest of my life?’

‘No, of course you ain’t,’ replied her mother, ‘but you do have to think about yer kids. If they’re scared of Jimmy, is he really the right bloke for you?’

‘It’s only ’cos he makes them do what they’re told,’ Mavis said defensively. ‘It’s only ’cos they ain’t used to having a dad around. They’ll get used to him. He’s just got a short temper, that’s all.’

‘He don’t love ’em,’ said Lily mildly.

‘Course he don’t,’ Mavis said. ‘They ain’t ’is. But he’ll look after them, same as he looks after me.’

‘Are you going to marry him?’

Mavis shrugged. ‘Don’t know. Maybe.’

Lily gave her daughter a long look and then said, ‘He stays here, don’t he? He sleeps here, when the girls is in the house. It ain’t decent, Mavis. Your dad wouldn’t ’ave stood for it.’

‘Things is different now, Mum,’ Mavis replied. ‘The war’s changed everything. Too many men didn’t come home. Jimmy did and I’m going to hang on to him.’

‘He ain’t even got a job,’ Lily pointed out. ‘How’s he going to look after you?’

‘He’s getting a job,’ answered Mavis. ‘He’s out looking for work now. He’s heard they’re looking for people on the building sites. His mate, Charlie, says he can get him a job where he works. You’ll see.’

The day after Rita had heard the row downstairs, she and Rosie went to school as usual. Uncle Jimmy had not been there at breakfast but poor Mum had a bruise on her face.

‘So silly of me,’ Mum had said when Rita had reached up and touched the bruise. ‘I turned round too quickly and bumped into the door. Silly Mummy!’

‘Silly Mummy,’ echoed Rosie, beaming at her. ‘*Silly Mummy!*’

All day the raised voices rang in Rita’s ears. Uncle Jimmy shouting, Mum crying, the sound of the overturned chair. Rita

thought of little else and was scolded for wool-gathering, but by the end of school she'd made up her mind what to do. She'd go and see Gran. She didn't live far and there were no roads to cross; she would hold Rosie's hand all the way.

When school was dismissed she collected Rosie from the yard and led her out of the gate, turning away from home. Rosie trotted happily along beside her. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Round Gran's,' answered Rita, keeping a firm grip on her sister's hand.

'Oh goody,' said Rosie. 'Do you think she'll give us our tea?'

'Expect so,' said Rita, and moments later they were knocking on Gran's door.

When Gran opened the door she was surprised to see them. It wasn't Thursday. 'Hallo,' she said. 'What are you two doing here?'

'We don't want to go home,' began Rita.

'We want some tea!' broke in Rosie, grabbing at her grandmother's hand. 'Can we have some tea, Gran?'

Lily opened a tin and gave them each a biscuit. Then she turned to Rita. 'Now what's all this about not going home? Course you must go home. Your poor mum will be wondering where you are.'

'I don't want to go home,' repeated Rita. 'Uncle Jimmy might be there.'

'So what if he is?' said Lily. 'He's Mum's friend.'

'They was fighting,' Rita said. 'Uncle Jimmy was shouting and Mum was crying, and I didn't like it.'

Lily put her arms round the little girl. 'No, I'm sure you didn't, pet. But even so you have to go home, you know, or Mum'll be very worried about you. Wait while I get my coat and I'll come with you.'

They walked back to Ship Street, Rosie skipping along holding Gran's hand on one side and Rita walking silently on the other. Lily knew that Rita thought that she, Lily, had let her down. She had come to her for refuge and she was being taken back home.

But what else could she do? Mavis would be out of her mind with worry when the girls didn't come home. She had to get them back as quickly as possible.

When they reached the house and opened the door, Mavis was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a pot of tea in front of her. She looked up as they came in and her eyes widened with surprise when she saw her mother was with the girls.

'Hallo, Mum,' she said. 'What you doing here?'

'I've brought the girls home,' replied her mother.

'Oh.' Mavis looked vaguely at the kitchen clock. 'Did you meet them in the street?'

'They came to see me,' said Lily carefully. 'Look, Mavis, we need to talk. Why don't you give them their tea and then we can have a chat.'

Mavis shrugged. 'It ain't ready yet. You two go and play out.' She nodded at the door. 'I'll call you when tea's ready.'

Rita grabbed Rosie's hand. 'Come on, Rosie. I saw Maggie outside.'

When the girls had gone, Lily pulled out a chair and sat down. 'What have you done to your face?' she asked as she noticed the darkening bruise on Mavis's cheek for the first time.

Mavis coloured. 'Bumped into the door.'

Lily gave her a long look but then decided to let it go. 'Reet brought them round to me, after school. She didn't want to come home. She said you and Jimmy was fighting.'

'Not fighting, no!' snapped Mavis. 'We was arguing a bit last night, that's all. Nothing in that!'

'Rita heard you,' said Lily. 'It upset her.'

'She don't have to be upset. It was only an argument.'

'Like the one you had with the door.'

'Look, Mum,' Mavis exploded, 'you ain't got no right to come round here, interfering in my life. What I do is my business. Who I see is my business and how I look after my kids is my business.'

'Mavis, they're scared of Jimmy,' Lily persisted.

'Well, they'll just have to get over it,' snapped Mavis. 'He's here

to stay, and they'll have to get used to him.' She looked across at her mother and all of a sudden her face crumpled. 'I've been to the doctor today, Mum. Oh, no, not about the bruise. Jimmy's already said he's sorry for doing that. It won't happen again, he's not like that really. No, I went 'cos, well, 'cos I'm in the family way.' She pressed her hands against her stomach. 'About four months.'

'And it's Jimmy's?'

'Course it's Jimmy's! What do you take me for?'

'Is he pleased?' asked Lily, wondering if this had caused last night's row.

'He don't know yet,' admitted Mavis. 'I only went to the doctor today... though I knew really. Haven't had the curse for five months, and I'm beginning to show.'

'So, when are you going to tell him?'

'Don't know. Maybe tonight. Have to pick my moment.'

'And the girls? You'll have to tell them.'

'They don't need to know,' muttered Mavis, 'not for ages yet... and you're not to tell them, Mum. Right? I got to get on with the girls' tea so's they're done before Jimmy comes home.' Mavis went on, and cutting two slices of bread began to spread them with marga. 'You want to go and call them in?'

Lily went to the front door and looked out. She saw the girls further down the street playing hopscotch on the pavement. She watched them for several moments, smiling as she saw Rita flailing her arms as she balanced on one leg, trying to pick up her stone, but her smile faded as she thought about what Mavis had just told her. The lives of her two granddaughters were certainly going to change, but even in her wildest dreams Lily could not have guessed just how much.

Jimmy did not come back to Ship Street that evening until well after the children were in bed, though Mavis had made his tea in the expectation that he would be home by about six as usual. Jimmy actually lived with his widower father, but came round for most of his meals and expected them to be ready on the table when he arrived. Today, however, he had been out drinking with his mate, Charlie, celebrating the fact that he

now had a job labouring on a building site. It was not the sort of work Jimmy would have chosen, but at least it brought in some money, cash in hand, and he was short of cash. There was plenty of labouring work about, what with all the bombsites to be cleared and the rebuilding. Then there was stuff you could pick up there, too, if you were careful and didn't let the foreman see you. Clearing the rubble from the bombed-out houses, Charlie told him, you never knew what you might find. On sites reclaimed by weeds and other vegetation, you could often find something worth having, something you could sell on, down the pub. Celebration was in order, so Jimmy and Charlie celebrated.

It was late when he finally staggered into Mavis's kitchen. Mavis was sitting at the table doing her mending, but she did not put down the jersey she was darning; she simply looked up and smiled. That made Jimmy suddenly angry. She ought to jump up to welcome him home and put his tea on the table, especially as he'd got the job, especially as he'd have money in his pocket now, especially as the stupid woman would expect him to contribute to the food bills. Things were definitely going to change around here.

He dropped down onto a chair. 'Where's my tea?' he growled.

'In the oven,' Mavis said, hastily laying aside her darning and getting up. 'I'll get it for you. It may be a little bit dry... I was expecting you a bit earlier than this.' She reached into the oven and brought out a plate of sausage and mash. There had been onion gravy, too, but it had dried into a brown mass on the side of the plate.

Jimmy looked at the food she set in front of him and then turned furious eyes on her. 'What d'yer call this?' he demanded. 'Looks like a plate of shit!' He swept the plate aside and it crashed on the floor. Mavis took a step back as Jimmy got unsteadily to his feet, and glowered at her across the table. 'Get that mess cleared up,' he shouted, 'and get me something to eat!'

As she knelt down to pick up the broken plate and to scrape the food off the floor, she felt him towering over her. Instinctively

she cringed away from him, squeaking as she did so, 'Don't hit me, Jimmy! I'm pregnant. I'm expecting your child.'

It made him pause, made him grip the table to steady himself. 'Fucking hell! That's all I need,' he said, and slumped back down onto the chair. Then he put his head onto the table and went to sleep.

Somehow Mavis had managed to rouse him and get him upstairs. Somehow she manoeuvred him onto the bed. She pulled off his shoes and, throwing a blanket over him, left him to sleep it off. She crept out of the bedroom and peeped in at her daughters, asleep in their room. At least, she supposed they were asleep. There was no sign of either of them being awake, but you never knew with Reet. She was a deceitful kid; she must have heard them the previous night and sneaked off to her gran's to tell tales and bring Gran round to interfere. She stood for a long minute outside the door, but nothing stirred.

Mavis went back downstairs, cleared up the mess on the floor and making herself a cup of tea, sat down, exhausted. Would Jimmy remember in the morning? she wondered. It wasn't how she'd meant to tell him about the baby, not blurt it out like that, but the words had burst out all by themselves. Would he remember? Would he react better when he'd thought about it, or would he walk out on her, leaving her to cope with three children?

He'd like the idea of being a dad, wouldn't he? Especially if it was a boy. Surely he'd want a son; all men wanted a son, didn't they?

For a moment she thought of Don. He hadn't minded what they had. 'As long as it's got all its bits, love,' he'd said, patting the bulge of her belly, 'that's all right with me!' And it had been. He'd adored Rita, and would surely have felt the same about Rosie, if he'd been around when she was born.

Surely Jimmy would love his own child, once he got used to the idea he was going to be a father. Then they could get married quickly, so that the baby wasn't a bastard.

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