

PROLOGUE

NANCY

Oxford, 1975

We didn't talk about it afterwards. Not to loved ones, or to neighbours who stared at us from across the street, or to the newspaper men who were curious to know more about these lost children, returned from the war in the East like ghosts come back from the dead. We quietly packed it all away in our battered suitcases and stepped awkwardly back into the lives we'd once known. Eventually, everyone stopped asking; stopped staring and wondering. Like our suitcases gathering dust in the attic, we were forgotten.

But we didn't forget.

Those years clung to us like a midday shadow, waiting to trip us up when we least expected it: a remembered song, a familiar scent, a name overheard in a shop, and there we were in an instant, wilting in the stifling heat during roll-call, kept awake at night by the ache of unimaginable hunger. I suppose it was inevitable that we would talk about it in the end; that we would tell the story of our war.

I'm still surprised by how much I have to say; how much I remember. I'd assumed I would only recall odd scraps and incoherent fragments, but it has all become clearer despite being ignored; the memories sharpened by distance and time. Now, when I talk about my school years in China, people only want to hear the parts about occupation and internment. That's the story everyone wants me to tell; how terrible it was and how frightened we were. But I also remember the smaller, simpler moments of a young girl's school days: smudged ink on fingertips, disinfectant in the corridors, hopscotch squares and skipping games, the iridescent wings of a butterfly that danced through the classroom window one autumn morning and settled on the back of my hand. I want to tell that side of my story, too.

Perhaps part of me wishes I could go back to the time before; that I could appreciate those quiet, inconsequential days before everything changed: giggling into our hands when Miss Kent's back was turned, grumbling to Sprout about lumpy porridge, turning cartwheels with Mouse on the golden sands of the bay, exchanging secret whispers in the pitch dark of the dorm. Oblivious to what lay ahead, we clattered thoughtlessly on through the careful precision of school routine – breakfast and prayers, assembly and lessons, tiffin and supper,

Sibling Saturday and Empire Day – wildly ignorant of our privileges; unaware of the things we were about to lose, and the things we had already lost.

Our war arrived quietly, two weeks before Christmas, settling over the terracotta roof tiles of Chefoo School with the first of the season's snow. Safe in our beds, over one hundred boys and girls slept soundly, oblivious to the events happening at Pearl Harbor over five thousand miles away; unaware that the ripples of conflict were racing across the Pacific toward us.

I was only ten years old that winter. Brownie Guides was my favourite part of the school week, and my feet still couldn't quite reach the floor when I sat on the edge of my bed.

PART ONE: OCCUPATION

Chefoo, Shantung Province, China

1941–1943

THE GUIDE LAW: A GUIDE IS LOYAL

This does not mean that she thinks her friends and family and school are perfect; far from it. But there is a way of standing up for what is dear to you, even though you admit that it has its faults.

NANCY

China Inland Mission School, Chefoo, December 1941

“We’ve been contacted by your parents, Nancy,” Miss Kent said, arms folded across her rose-pink cardigan as she stood beside the window. “I’m afraid you won’t be spending the Christmas holidays with them after all.”

Her words seemed to echo off the wood-panelled walls of the principal’s office – a small suffocating room that smelled of linseed oil and bad news – so that I heard them again and again. *You won’t be spending the Christmas holidays with them after all.* I wanted to cover my ears. I didn’t want it to be true.

I stood in the middle of an Oriental rug, the pattern worn away by years of children coming and going to receive bad news, or the sharp end of the principal’s tongue. I looked up at my teacher, and couldn’t think of one word to say.

“Your mother sent a letter each for you and Edward,” Miss Kent continued. She held out an envelope, addressed to me in my mother’s elegant handwriting. I stared at it. “Well?” she prompted. “It won’t read itself.”

Reluctantly, I took the envelope, opened it, and removed the letter. The scent of English lavender bloomed around me as I read.

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[HW]*I’m so desperately sorry to disappoint you again, Nonny, but your father insists it’s too dangerous for us to travel with the Chinese and Japanese armies still fighting. Besides, the roads are in a desperate state after the recent landslides. You should have seen the rain! I’m sure you’ll have wonderful fun with your friends. I can’t wait to see you, darling. How you must have grown!*[/HW]

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I imagined Mummy at her writing desk, the sun on her face, her pen poised in mid-air as she composed the next sentence. I imagined her more often than I saw her.

Since starting my first term at the school two years earlier, my parents’ missionary work had taken them from the China Inland Mission compound at the International Settlement in Shanghai all the way to Ch’ing-hai Province on the other side of the country. Hard winters, landslides and the Sino-Japanese war had, in turns, prevented them from travelling back to Chefoo; back to me.

Seeing my eyes fill with tears, Miss Kent offered an encouraging, “Come along now. Chin up.” She studied me through her round wire spectacles. The grey eyes that peered at me,

often so serious, carried a hint of an apology, as if she somehow felt it were her fault that I would spend another Christmas away from my parents. “Better to be safe than sorry,” she concluded. “And think about all the displaced Chinese children and refugees who are benefitting from your parents’ missionary work.” She gave a little smile. “And at least Dorothy and Joan – or should I say, ‘Sprout and Mouse’ – are staying, too, so that’s something, isn’t it?”

She hadn’t used my friends’ nicknames before. I suppose she did it to make me feel better.

I held the sheet of writing paper to my nose. “It smells of her,” I whispered. “Of lavender. Her favourite.” I tucked the letter into my pinafore pocket and wiped a tear from my cheek. “She likes the smell of sweet peas, too. And roses. She doesn’t care for lily-of-the-valley though. It makes her sneeze.” My mother had become a collection of such memories; scraps and fragments I rummaged through. “I really did want to see her, Miss. Ever so much.” I pushed my hands into my pockets. “It isn’t fair.”

I hadn’t meant to say the words out loud. Self-pity was not a trait to be admired, and homesickness was considered “sentimental nonsense”. We were often reminded how disappointed our parents would be to learn that we were thinking only of ourselves, but still, it *was* unfair that I couldn’t see Mummy, and I didn’t care that I’d said so.

Miss Kent asked me to join her at the window. We stood for a moment, side by side in silence. I wondered if she might place a comforting arm around my shoulder, but she kept her arms folded and looked straight ahead.

“What do you see outside?” she asked.

I reached up onto my tiptoes. Beyond the window, several school servants, dressed in their uniforms of cropped black trousers and a white blouse with knotted buttons, were busy with various tasks. “I can see Shu Lan carrying a basket of laundry. And Wei Huan, with a rake and broom . . .” I trailed off as we watched them work.

Wei Huan, one of the school gardeners, had helped us with our Gardener badge for Brownies that summer. He called us his “Little Flowers”. Shu Lan was less friendly and wasn’t very popular among the girls as a result. If we interrupted her before she’d finished tidying our dorm, she would shoo us away with her hands, and mutter things at us in Chinese.

“Perhaps it isn’t fair that Shu Lan has to carry that heavy basket, full of our dirty bedsheets,” Miss Kent said. “Or perhaps it isn’t fair for Wei Huan to sweep up the leaves that we walk over and kick into the air, for fun.”

I thought about my amah, one of many “little mothers” at the Mission compound in Shanghai, who’d helped with domestic chores while our parents carried out their missionary work. Having our own servant had been a novelty when we’d first arrived from England, but I hardly noticed them now. I certainly didn’t think about all the work they did to make our lives more comfortable.

“We might see them as the school’s servants, but that’s just their job,” Miss Kent continued. “They’re also somebody’s daughters and sons, and no doubt they also receive disappointing news from time to time, and wish they could see their mothers more often. Life isn’t always fair for them, either.”

When she was cross, Miss Kent spoke in a way that reminded me of brittle twigs snapping underfoot on autumn walks. I pressed the toe of my shoe against the skirting board and felt my cheeks go red. Without giving me a ticking-off, she’d done exactly that.

“We all have to make the best of the circumstances we are given, Nancy,” she continued, as she turned to face me, her expression softening a little. “All things considered, I’d say we have plenty to be grateful for. Don’t you?”

I nodded, and bit my lip. “Yes, Miss.”

“Then we won’t need to discuss things being fair or not again, shall we?”

I shook my head and took Miss Kent’s handkerchief from my pocket to wipe my tears. The embroidered letters EK and HE had started to fray a little, but the fabric still carried the scent of roses and kindness, just as it had when Miss Kent had first given it to me.

She let out a funny little gasp. “Gosh! So that’s where it went.”

“You gave it to me on the boat, remember? When we left Shanghai.” I thought about the promise she’d made to Mummy, to keep a special eye on me during the journey to Chefoo. Miss Kent had given me the handkerchief to dry my tears as I stood beside her at the railings. I’d waved madly to Mummy until she’d eventually disappeared beneath a sea of colourful rice-paper parasols held by elegant ladies sheltering their faces from the sun. “I’m sorry, Miss,” I said as I held the handkerchief out to her now. “I should have given it back.”

She hesitated before closing my fingers around it. “It’s yours now. Let it be a reminder that there’s always somebody worse off, no matter how rotten things might seem.” She let her hand rest on mine for just a moment before folding her arms again. “Now, run along.”

I forced a smile as I left the office and set off down the corridor.

“And pull your socks up, Nancy Plummer,” she called after me. “It’s impossible to feel cheerful with socks sagging around your ankles like bread dough.”

I added the letter to the collection I kept in the tea caddy beneath my bed. It was almost full of letters and other special things that reminded me of Mummy: a button from her coat, a photograph of us standing outside our house in England, the eye of a peacock feather I'd found in the Pleasure Gardens in Shanghai. Simple mementoes of time spent with her; precious treasures while we were apart .

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Even my best friend, Sprout, couldn't cheer me up.

"It's not the end of the world, Plum," she said, using my nickname. She tucked a strand of wispy blonde hair behind her sticky-out ear and made herself go cross-eyed to make me laugh. "We'll have plenty of fun. And you'll see her in the spring."

Sprout – given her nickname for being skinny as a bamboo stalk, and much taller than the rest of us – was from Connecticut, in America, which made her fascinating to me, a freckled English girl who'd grown up in the Sussex countryside and enunciated everything in Received Pronunciation. Sprout spoke with a lovely loose confidence that I envied and admired. Out of nearly two hundred children who attended the school – mostly British nationals, a dozen or so Americans, and a handful of Canadians, Australians and Dutch – Dorothy "Sprout" Hinshaw was the funniest, and most interesting person I'd ever met. She was also very good at getting herself into trouble. I often wished I could be more like her: more American and carefree.

For once, I wasn't in the mood for Brownies that evening. I tried not to let it show as we stood in our Fairy Ring and recited the Brownie Promise because, as Sixer of Pixies, I had to set a good example to the rest of the girls. As we recited the familiar words, I really did promise to do my best and serve my king and country and help other people, but a flush of shame rushed to my cheeks when I promised to love my God. I wanted to, very much, but I had an awful lot of questions about Him that nobody could ever answer, mostly about why He never answered my prayers to see Mummy. To make up for it, I squeezed my eyes shut extra tight as we said the Amen.

I'd been a Pixie since joining the 2nd Chefoo Brownies in my first term. We were one of two Brownie Guide packs, and several Girl Guide and Boy Scout groups at the school. I'd worked hard for Golden Bar, and the interest badges I'd sewn onto the sleeve of my tunic – Booklover, Thrift, Musician, Gardener, Collector and, most recently, First Aider. Every badge earned was a source of immense pride, each one a step towards becoming a Girl Guide. I was especially proud of the second yellow stripe I'd been awarded recently to signify my appointment as Sixer.

Our Guide leaders, Miss Kent and Miss Butterworth, were known as Brown Owl and Tawny Owl during our meetings. They were different at Brownies. Less strict. It was part of the reason we all enjoyed it so much.

“We’ll be doing Christmas paper craft this evening,” Brown Owl announced when we’d all sung our Six Songs and she’d finished inspecting our hands, nails and hair. “I’ve asked Shu Lan to help. I’m sure you will all make her feel very welcome.”

We always admired the intricate “window flowers” Shu Lan made and hung at the dormitory windows every spring as symbols of good fortune and happiness for the new season. She called them chuanguhua. We watched in awe as she started to make delicate paper snowflakes with the same skill and precision.

We did our best with our scissors, but our snowflakes were simple and clumsy, while Shu Lan’s were as beautiful as the real thing. Only Mouse managed to make anything half decent.

“That’s ever so good,” I said, offering her an encouraging smile.

Joan “Mouse” Nuttall – nicknamed because she was always so quiet – muttered a “Thank you.” I felt a little sorry for her, although I’d never admitted it to anyone. Like a doll you’ve grown tired of playing with, most of the time I forgot she was there.

“You make many folds, and then, very carefully cutting,” Shu Lan explained as we all started again with a fresh piece of paper.

Sprout’s sister Connie (who was ever so grown up, and styled her hair just like Princess Elizabeth) had once told us that Shu Lan, and some of the other servants, had come to Chefoo as refugees from the city of Nanking, where something terrible had happened a few years ago. She wouldn’t say what the terrible thing was, only that it was something to do with the Japanese Imperial Army, and that lots of Chinese people had died rather horribly. I tried not to think about it as I watched Shu Lan make her paper snowflakes. I found her fascinating. She was so beautiful I had to force myself not to stare, because that was rude.

Apart from the local fishermen we often saw at the bay, and the occasional rickshaw puller rushing past the school gates, the school servants were the only Chinese people we saw regularly. When the wind blew in the right direction, we could hear the bells from the Buddhist temples, and from the upstairs dormitory windows we sometimes watched the little hongtou sampans on the bay, and the graceful junks with their bamboo sails spread wide like enormous wings. At harvest time, we liked to watch the farmers and their water buffalo working in the fields, bamboo hats shading the farmers from the baking sun, the women pulling the ripe plants from the ground, often while carrying their babies on their backs. That

was the China I'd imagined when I'd looked in Edward's atlas before we'd left England; the China I'd been so excited to visit. Part of me wanted to climb over the school walls and run through the rice fields; to know what life was like for a ten-year-old Chinese girl.

While we worked, Miss Kent asked Shu Lan to tell us about her great-great-grandfather, an imperial metalsmith who'd made beautiful jewellery using feathers from kingfisher wings.

"The feathers are placed close together, to look like enamel," she explained. "The jewellery is very delicate." She described the elegant aristocrats – wives and daughters of emperors – who'd worn the treasured pieces. I enjoyed the story until we learned that the kingfishers were captured in nets, their feathers taken from them while they were still alive in order to preserve their beautiful blue colour.

"But that's cruel," I said.

"And yet it is a Chinese tradition, and a highly valued skill," Miss Kent countered. "We can't simply dismiss things that are unfamiliar to us as cruel, Nancy. We must learn to understand, and respect."

Even so, I was relieved when Shu Lan explained that the activity was now illegal.

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That night, I dreamed of lost things and of kingfishers trapped in a metalsmith's net.

I was still dreaming when I was woken by the sound of an aeroplane. The dormitory was dark as I crept out of bed and tiptoed to the window. The floorboards were cold. They creaked beneath my bare feet.

As I opened the shutter, a Japanese plane flew low over the school chapel and headed out across the bay. In the distance, a line of soldiers marched toward a truck. The Japanese army had occupied the city of Chefoo a year before I'd arrived at the school, so I was used to seeing the soldiers coming and going on operations against their enemy. We understood that Britain wasn't at war with Japan, so although it was unusual for one of their planes to fly so close to the school, I hardly gave it a moment's thought and turned my attention instead to the fat snowflakes tumbling from the sky. I pressed my forehead to the glass, delighted by the spectacle.

I watched until I began to shiver from the cold and climbed back into bed. I pulled the sheets up to my nose, wrapped my arms around myself, and listened to the soft patter of snow at the window. I imagined Mummy lying awake somewhere too, remembering a time when we'd watched the snow together, missing me so much that her bones ached. I wished, more

than anything, that I was with her and not stuck at school, and hoped I would see her in the spring.

But wishes and hopes are fragile things easily crushed by the marching boots of enemy soldiers.