

'Dazzling . . . A dark comedy, moving between drollery,  
pathos, farce and harrowing moments of tragic insight'  
Stevie Davies, *Guardian*

'Crisp, clear and full of vivid images that add  
to the period flavour . . . In this touching novel,  
Evans makes you care about a sulky, jug-eared  
boy, and a woman who only took him in for the  
ten shillings and sixpence a week'  
Christina Patterson, *Sunday Times*

'Evans has a delightful tone, airy and bouncy, but with  
a perceptive irony and a spattering of caustic details.  
[*Crooked Heart*] recalls carefully constructed, deceptively  
light comic novels by the likes of Stella Gibbons and  
Nancy Mitford . . . And while the horror of war is tilted  
at, it's also often a source of laughter in the dark. It's a  
refreshingly crisp approach that allows moments of  
genuine pathos to be all the more resonant'  
Holly Williams, *Independent on Sunday*

'What will become of this fragile pair? It's a mark  
of how charming this novel is that you worry . . .  
And the ending, the killer last line? Even  
hard-bitten book reviewers occasionally feel  
a moisture around the eyes. I did'  
Jennifer Selway, *Daily Express*

— | ⊕ | —  
‘Wonderfully vivid and eccentric . . . there’s a good dash  
of sharp comedy to offset the heart-warming stuff’  
Kate Saunders, *The Times*

‘Unmissable . . . Why is Lissa Evans not one of our  
best-known and best-loved authors? . . . The great joy  
of Evans’s writing lies in her spirited, quirky characters  
and, as befits a former producer of *Father Ted* and  
director of *Have I Got News For You*, a devilish wit’  
*Sunday Express*

⊕ | ‘I loved this book – Lissa Evans is a wonderful writer;  
Vee and Noel are utter originals, and their journey  
made me laugh and cry’  
JoJo Moyes | ⊕

‘Another quietly heroic orphan joins the canon . . .  
This is a wonderfully old-fashioned Dickensian  
novel, both darkly funny and deeply touching’  
*New York Times Book Review*

‘The best novel I have read in the last five years . . . I  
couldn’t love it more’  
India Knight

‘Cleverly written, with shades of light and dark that  
manipulate the emotions, this easy-to-read novel is  
deceptively complex and utterly charming’  
Deidre O’Brien, *Sunday Mirror*  
— | ⊕ | —

⊕

‘As sparky and funny as *Cold Comfort Farm* and as charming and touching as *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, but then every now and again comes the vertiginous feeling of peering into something unutterably, dangerously sad’

Louisa Young

‘I haven’t read Evans before but after this wittily observed, touching story of Noel, a young orphan evacuee who, with his struggling foster mother, turns the war to his advantage, I’m off to find her others’

*Woman & Home*

⊕

‘Quite wonderful – beautifully written, so authentic too, and evocative of the wartime spirit, moving, funny – just perfect. I don’t usually like novels about the war – the true stories are so good – but this one – and Evelyn Waugh – are way up in a class of their own – superb’

⊕

Juliet Gardiner

‘Evans has written an old-fashioned comedy of manners, which is heartwarming, without being mawkish, and extremely funny’

Carla McKay, *Daily Mail*

‘Tender, humane, funny, comforting, touching. Escapism in the best possible way. I loved it’

Marian Keyes

⊕

Acclaim for Lissa Evans'

*Their*  
**FINEST  
HOUR**  
*and a Half*

'A beautifully written, minutely observed and researched,  
evocative and very funny tale'

Michele Hanson, *Guardian*

'Her tale of artistes attempting a morale-boosting low-  
budget British film in 1941 is a joy . . . Evans knows  
exactly when to play scenes for their wry comedy and  
when to play things straight. This is the truest and most  
enjoyable novel about home-front life I've read; it's  
touching and hilarious'

Christopher Fowler, *Independent on Sunday*

'This is a comic novel, but far warmer in tone and  
broader in scope than that label would  
suggest . . . Gloriously observed . . . Hilliard is a  
wonderful creation – and Evans's recreated propaganda  
scripts are a total joy. Delicious'

Kate Saunders, *The Times*

'The characters and their dialogue and the author's quiet  
humour are what make this really sing'

*Daily Telegraph*

'Evans's evocation of Britain at war is richly observed,  
poignant and very witty. It's a terrific read, packed with  
memorable characters'

*Mail on Sunday*

**LISSA EVANS** produced comedy for radio and television before becoming a writer. A life-long obsession with the home front, combined with her behind-the-camera experiences, led to the Orange longlisted novel *Their Finest Hour and a Half* about the making of a feature film during World War Two, and she followed this with the Baileys longlisted *Crooked Heart* set during the same era. She has also written books for children, including *Small Change for Stuart* which was shortlisted for many awards including the Carnegie Medal and the Costa Book Awards.



*Also by Lissa Evans*

Spencer's List  
Odd One Out  
Their Finest Hour and a Half

*For children*

Small Change for Stuart  
Big Change for Stuart



# CROOKED HEART

*Lissa Evans*



BLACK SWAN

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS  
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA  
www.transworldbooks.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Doubleday  
an imprint of Transworld Publishers  
Black Swan edition published 2015

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN  
9780552774789

Typeset in 11/14.5 Giovanni by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable  
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made  
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



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To Kate Anthony and Gaby Chiappe







# PROLOGUE





⊕

— | ⊕ | —

She was losing words. At first it was quite funny. ‘The box of things,’ Mattie would say, waving her mauve-veined hands vaguely around the kitchen.

⊕

‘The box of things for making flames. It’s a song, Noel!’

⊕

*‘The box of things for making flames  
I can’t recall their bloody names.’*

Or ‘that church’, she’d say, standing at the top of Hampstead Heath, gazing down at the scribble of blue and grey that was London. ‘The one with the dome – remind me of what it’s called.’

‘St Paul’s Cathedral.’

‘Of course it is. The architect has a bird’s name. Owl . . . Ostrich . . .’

‘Wren.’

‘Right again, young Noel, though I can’t help thinking



LISSA EVANS

"Sir Christopher Ostrich" has a tremendous ring to it . . .'

After a while, it stopped being funny. 'Where's my . . . my . . . His godmother would teeter around the drawing room, slippered feet not quite keeping up with her heavy body. 'Where's that damn thing, the blue thing, goes round my shoulders, the *blue* thing . . .'

Some words would resurface after a few days; others would sink for ever. Noel started writing labels: 'SHAWL', 'WIRELESS', 'GAS MASK', 'CUTLERY DRAWER'.

'Helpful little man,' Mattie said, bending to kiss his forehead. 'Be sure to take them down before Geoffrey comes to check on me,' she added, suddenly shrewd again.



Uncle Geoffrey and Auntie Margery lived a mile away, in Kentish Town. Once a month, Uncle Geoffrey came for Sunday tea, and once a year he dropped by for Mattie's birthday, always bringing a gift that had been made either by himself or by Auntie Margery.



'There are times,' said Mattie, examining yet another cross-stitched antimacassar, 'when it's very useful to have an open fire. What is the one thing that is more important than money, Noel?'

'Taste.'

'Which is something that Geoffrey and . . . ' she paused, ' . . . bosoms . . . '

'Margery.'

' . . . will never have.'

At the monthly teas, Uncle Geoffrey smiled all the



CROOKED HEART

time and talked about his job in rate-collection, the marquetry picture frames he made in his spare time, and Auntie Margery's delicate health, which prevented her from ever leaving the house. His teeth were regular and well spaced, like battlements. Noel liked to imagine tiny soldiers popping up between them, firing arrows across the room or pouring molten lead down Uncle Geoffrey's chin.

'And what have you been up to, young Noel?' his uncle would ask. 'Keeping busy with hobbies? Model aircraft? Stamp collecting?'

'Hobbies are for people who don't read books,' said Noel; it was one of Mattie's sayings.

After tea, Uncle Geoffrey would ask whether there was anything he could do around the house, and Mattie always found something awkward or messy – shifting furniture, oiling a door. When the blackout regulations were published, Uncle Geoffrey was set to work sticking brown paper on the door-panes and checking every shutter for soundness.

'After all,' as Mattie said, 'you are our war expert.' He had enrolled as an air-raid warden the day after Mr Chamberlain came back from Munich. He had a hat, a whistle and an armband.

'So all you need now is an air-raid!' said Mattie.

She didn't believe that there would be a war.

Mattie's house was a spacious brick box, with a fancy iron-work verandah and a garden full of azaleas. 'A Victorian gentleman's residence,' she said. 'Or, more likely, the

LISSA EVANS

place where a Victorian gentleman secreted his mistress. Family in Mayfair, lady friend in Hampstead. It would have been considered frightfully out of town.'

The road ran along a little crease in the fabric of the Heath, coming to a dead end at a bolt of rabbit-cropped turf; from the rear windows of the house you could see only trees.

'Who would know we were in London?' said Mattie, nearly every day.

It was a hot, slow summer. In the early morning, when it was still cool, they walked the mile to Parliament Hill and back, leaving dark tracks through the wet grass, singing songs of protest to the skylarks:

*As we come marching, marching,  
We bring the greater days.  
The rising of the women  
Means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler,  
Ten that toil while one reposes,  
But a sharing of life's glories:  
Bread and Roses!  
Bread and Roses!  
Our lives shall not be sweated  
From birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies;  
Give us bread, but give us roses!*

On the final chorus repeats, Mattie would simultaneously hum and whistle. 'A rare and underrated

CROOKED HEART

skill,' she'd remark, 'and one that, sadly, has never brought me the acclaim it deserves.'

During the afternoon heat, she slept in a deckchair and Noel lay on the lawn and read detective stories, noting down clues as he went along. Wood pigeons crooned in the trees.

'Who'd know,' sighed Mattie, 'who'd know we were in ... in ...'

In the silence that followed, Noel rolled over and looked at her. Her square, sure face was suddenly unfamiliar; her expression one he'd never seen before. It was panic, he realized. Somewhere inside herself she was teetering on a ledge.

'London,' he said, 'it's *London*.'

'Ah yes, London,' she repeated, inching back.

The mechanical digger arrived one day when they were at the library. By the time they came home, the first lorry was already roaring back past their house, leaving a frill of sand along the verges behind it.

'What are you doing?' called Mattie to the driver, but he ignored her.

They followed the gritty trail to the end of the road, and there stood the great red digger. It had already scalped the grass from fifty yards of heath, and was taking savage bites out of the sandy slope. Another lorry was waiting for a load.

'No!' shouted Mattie.

Three neighbours arrived, sweating and gesticulating, and then a fourth, grim with knowledge.

LISSA EVANS

'It's official,' he said. 'I've been talking to the council. It's for sandbags, they say they're going to need thousands if bombing starts. They're grubbing up Hyde Park, too . . .'

Within the week, there were four diggers, not one, and a constant stream of lorries rattling up past the house and then grinding down again. The hole in the Heath grew daily, the cut edge a palette of yellows: ochre, mustard, butter, gold. When the wind blew, Mattie's front garden was more beach than grass. Every floor in the house crunched underfoot. Mrs Harley, the char, said the extra work was too much for her, and left.

A man came to the door, offering filled sandbags at £5 for a hundred, or empty ones for 3d each. 'And then you can do them yourself,' he said. 'Lucky for you, you're right on the spot.' Mattie closed the door in his face.

Their morning walk was changing. The detour they took to avoid the hole at the end of the road added another mile to the round trip; it was just too far for Noel, with his gammy leg, to manage comfortably, and meant he was always limping by the time they arrived home. There was a gun emplacement behind Parliament Hill now, and shelters being dug along the fields by the railway line. Mattie would stand and stare at the horizon, at the silver blimps motionless on invisible wires, and shake her head in disbelief. 'Isn't it strange,' she said, 'that there's always enough money in the coffers for war?'

During his August teatime visit, Uncle Geoffrey talked about the international situation before patting Noel on

CROOKED HEART

the head. 'And I wonder where this young shaver will be off to?' he said, smiling as usual.

'What d'you mean, "off to"?' asked Mattie, very sharply.

The smile wavered. 'You'll have registered him, I suppose, for evacuation?'

'No, why would I have done that?'

Geoffrey looked flustered. 'I didn't mean to annoy you, Mattie dear,' he said, advancing a hand as if to pat one of Mattie's, and then wisely withdrawing it again. 'It's just that the government . . .' With an effort, he hoisted the smile back on to his face, where it hung a little crookedly, ' . . . the government considers that the best place for children, in the event of a war, is away from the areas of likely bombardment.'

'There is no war.'

'Not yet, perhaps, but I think the likelihood is—'

'And since when have I ever taken any notice of what the government says?' asked Mattie.

There was no possible reply to this. She had been gaoled five times as a suffragette; she still had the scars of handcuffs on her wrists.

'Do you want to be evacuated?' Mattie asked Noel, afterwards.

'No,' he said.

'I'm sure Roberta would have you to stay in . . . where is it that Roberta lives? Ipswich? I'm sure you'd be safe there.'

'I don't want to go anywhere,' he said. He was a little



LISSA EVANS

bit worried by the thought of bombs. He was far, far more worried by the fact that Mattie seemed to have forgotten that her best friend Roberta was dead. The funeral had been eighteen months ago. Mattie had worn her old sash, and a white, green and purple rosette.

Poland was being invaded and the summer holidays were almost over. On the Saturday before the start of the Michaelmas term, Noel went to the library. He had read every Lord Peter Wimsey on the shelves, and every Albert Campion. The tall librarian with the moustache suggested he tried a thriller instead of a detective story. 'You'll find Eric Ambler very good,' she said. Noel was brooding over the choice of titles when he received a blow between the shoulder blades.

'Hello, Lugs,' said Peter Wills, loudly.

Noel nodded at him, in a polite but dismissive way. Peter was in the form below him at St Cyprian's Prep – only-just-nine to Noel's nearly-ten – but Peter tended towards condescension because his father was in the army reserve. And because he had a father.

'Ready for the off?' asked Peter. 'My mother bumped into Cleggo and he says we'll be heading for Wales, worst luck. But it's near the sea, he says.'

'I've decided not to go,' said Noel. 'I'm staying in London.'

'Crikey.' Peter looked envious. 'You'll get to see all the fun then.'

\*



CROOKED HEART

*'You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me—'* the Prime Minister was saying, as Mattie swatted the 'off' switch. 'Bugger,' she said. 'Bugger and bugger. Bloody *men*. Everything has to be solved by firing guns at each other. Bang bang you're . . . you're . . .' She paced around the dining room, pushing her hands through her hair so that it stood up in a wild crown. 'How did it come to this?' she demanded, looking at Noel.

Uncle Geoffrey, who never telephoned, rang to inform them that war had been declared, and to ask whether they needed help with the blackouts. 'Thank you, but we can manage,' said Mattie. It took them an hour, and the light was fading before they finished.

'Don't like a room without windows,' said Mattie, who rarely closed the curtains in the evening. 'Airless. Reminds me of those places. The ones with locks and so on.'

In the night, Noel woke suddenly. He lay in the stifling darkness, and listened to Mattie walking from room to room, flinging open the shutters.

The day after that, all the children disappeared, as if London had shrugged and the small people had fallen off the edge. Noel, running an errand, was stared at in the street. The baker asked why he hadn't gone with the others. 'I think you'll find that evacuation is not compulsory,' replied Noel, loftily. It was what Mattie had said to an interfering neighbour.

He took a walk up the hill to his school, and looked at the padlock and chain around the gates. 'Closed until

LISSA EVANS

further notice' read a sign. It hadn't occurred to him that this would happen; he'd seen himself as the sole pupil, attending exclusive lessons. The council school on Fletcher Road was shut as well, the windows boarded up.

Noel sat on a wall for a while, before going home; Mattie hated the government but she was very keen on education.

For two weeks he left the house at eight, wearing his school uniform and carrying his satchel and gas mask. After calling at the library, he took the bus to the top of Hampstead Heath, and walked to the Climbing Tree. It was an oak that had been struck by lightning three years before, and lay full length across a clearing. It was usually infested with children, but now he had the great sprawled form to himself, and he sat in the crook of a branch and read all of Eric Ambler, and then all of Sherlock Holmes. Early in the third week, he looked up to see Mattie staring at him.

'I was listening for woodpeckers,' she said, 'but instead I found a lesser-spotted truant.'

'The school's all locked up.'

'Then we shall turn our house into a school.'

For three days, she gave him proper lessons (Great Women of History, the Causes of the French Revolution) and set him essays ('Would You Rather Be Blind or Deaf?', 'What Is Freedom?', 'Should People Keep Pets?', "'All Things Are Difficult Before They Are Easy": Discuss Fuller's Aphorism'), marking his work with red ink and rolling sentences: *A splendid attempt. Your argument was presented with considerable éclat.* On the fourth morning,

CROOKED HEART

there was a knock at the door. It was a short man in a boiler suit and a white helmet – the Chief Warden, he said, from the East Hampstead Branch of the ARP. There had been reports of breaches of blackout regulations.

‘Reports from whom?’ asked Mattie, booming out the last syllable, so that it sounded like a dinner gong.

‘Neighbours,’ said the warden. ‘Shutters open, shutters closed, lights on and off. They said it looked like signalling. Not that it was, I’m sure,’ he added, hastily, seeing Mattie’s expression, ‘but people are entitled to be a bit anxious at the moment, aren’t they, madam?’

‘Miss,’ corrected Mattie. ‘I am not a brothel-keeper.’

‘I have to warn you that the next step is a summons,’ said the warden.

‘D’you hear that?’ asked Mattie, turning to Noel. ‘This little man is threatening me with court.’

The warden flushed a dark red. ‘There’s no need for rudeness,’ he said. ‘I’m enforcing government rules. And while I’m here, I’d like to ask whether the following have been carried out. Taping of windows. Readiness of buckets containing sand and water. Insulation of a room to be used as refuge in the event of a gas attack.’

‘Are those, too, legally enforceable?’ asked Mattie.

The warden shook his head.

‘Then no,’ said Mattie. ‘Go away, little man, and interfere with someone else.’

‘You do realize,’ said the warden, his voice hardening, ‘that the courts take blackout infringement very seriously indeed. We’re not just talking about fines here; there could be a prison term.’



LISSA EVANS

He left, crunching along the sandy path to the front gate. Mattie gave a little grunt and Noel looked up at her. Her face was puffy and skewed, as if the warden's last sentence had been a blow with a boxing-glove. 'Those places . . .' she said, and gripped Noel's hand. 'Never,' she said.

In the weeks that followed, Noel found himself thinking about Dr Long, who taught algebra and physics at St Cyprian's, and who presented each new law or principle to the class as if he were lifting a jewel out of a casket. Dr Long expected interest and asked for wonder, unlike Mr Clegg, whose Geography lessons were like a series of punishments. Thirty strokes with the principal exports of the Malay Peninsula.

'Imagine,' Dr Long had said to Noel's form last term, 'imagine Archimedes' lever. Imagine it stretching from star to star, one end nudging the base of our planet, the centre of it propped on a titanic fulcrum, and at the other end, standing on a cloud of galactic dust, a small man in a toga. He extends a hand, he places a finger on the end of the plank, he presses down . . . and our Earth goes bowling across the universe.'

One nudge and the world was changed. The warden's visit had done it; it had flicked Mattie out of her orbit and now she was spinning off on a course of her own.

She drew up a list of neighbours who might have reported her to the warden. It started off with Mr Arnott,





## CROOKED HEART

who lived in the next villa, but then she kept adding names until everyone was on it. 'We shall no longer speak to them,' she said to Noel. 'In fact,' she added, 'I should prefer not to see them at all.'

Now, when they went out for their morning walk, Noel had to go to the front gate and check that the road was empty before Mattie would leave the house. Though they weren't really 'morning walks' any more; Mattie wasn't sleeping well, and woke late, so it was almost lunchtime before they were cresting Parliament Hill. The lessons were replaced by occasional questions: thirty-five multiplied by fifteen, the Roman invasion, the life-cycle of the honey bee. Once Mattie woke him at dawn, and asked him to name three British scientists. 'Newton, Boyle, Darwin,' he said, yawning, while a wren shouted in the ivy outside.

The days became untethered. Mealtimes slid around or disappeared altogether. Noel ate mainly biscuits for three days, and then found a cookery book. The recipes were wonderfully satisfying; it was like doing an equation, in which the correct answer was edible.

'Very good indeed,' said Mattie, of the blackberry pie that he made with fruit picked on the Heath, but she ate only a mouthful or two. For the whole of Noel's life with her, she had been quite large – stout and solid, like a tree-stump, but now she was dwindling. Her stockings drooped. She had no time to eat, she said; there were too many things she needed to do.

One morning, he came downstairs to find that all the helpful labels he'd written had been crossed out. He was



LISSA EVANS

standing with '~~CUTLERY DRAWER~~' in his hand when Mattie came into the kitchen.

'Someone's been breaking in and writing messages,' she said. 'I shall have to have a new lock installed on the . . . the object for opening.'

When Uncle Geoffrey rang the doorbell on the following Sunday, Mattie stayed seated, finger marking a place in her book. Noel stood up, and she shook her head at him.

The bell jangled twice more, and then they heard the gate creak.

'There,' said Mattie, looking pleased.

'I just need the WC,' said Noel, and ran upstairs. He peered out through the round spyhole window on the landing and saw Uncle Geoffrey still standing in the lane, looking unhappily back at the house. Noel ducked down, counted to a hundred and looked again. Geoffrey had gone.

'Why didn't we want him to come in?' he asked Mattie, that evening.

'Who?'

'Uncle Geoffrey.'

'They all know each other,' she said. 'Wardens. All authority is linked, Angus, that's how the world is run. Independence is one's only hope. You must promise me one thing.'

'What?'

'To never tell anybody anything.'

'All right,' he said. 'You called me Angus,' he added, after a moment.

CROOKED HEART

'I did not.' She spoke with absolute certainty.

That was the first time he really felt afraid; soon, he began to carry the feeling around with him, a cold scarf wrapped around his neck, a stomach full of tadpoles.

The autumn was warm and dry. Noel raked and burned leaves while Mattie did other things. He wasn't sure what. The two of them had started to revolve in different directions, moving into alignment only three or four times a day, at meals, or in the drawing room where Mattie would delve around in the desk, rearranging papers, while Noel sat in the window seat and read all of Edgar Wallace and then all of Dashiell Hammett. Sometimes he sat and watched the lorries lurching along the track.

They had no more visitors, apart from delivery boys, and the postman, and once a woman who was collecting for the North West London Branch of the Army Comforts Fund. Noel watched from the drawing-room window as she sprinted away up the lane, Mattie shouting after her. Uncle Geoffrey made no further appearances, and neither did the local warden. Noel would walk round the outside of the house every evening, making sure that no chinks of light were visible.

Winter seemed to start suddenly. He woke one morning, and saw his own breath. The scuttle in the kitchen was empty, and he went outside to the bunker and raised the heavy sliding door. A cascade of small coals tumbled out, and then a slither of paper. Letters, open and crumpled.

LISSA EVANS

A thick sheaf of forms, torn in half. He crouched and fingered them, and saw his own name under the smears of black. Gathering the whole lot up, he took them to the summerhouse.

It was in a corner of the garden: a fretwork chalet, built on a turntable so that it could revolve to chase the sun. At some point it had rusted and stuck, facing east, and then ivy had crept across the roof so that now it was just a green hillock, rarely used. The wood of the front rail was silky with age. Noel knelt on the cold boards of the porch, and spread out the papers:

A letter from Mr Clegg, the headmaster of St Cyprian's, suggesting that Noel should join them in Llandeilo:

*. . . unless, of course, you have made other arrangements for his education, in which case perhaps you would be kind enough to let our bursar know as soon as possible, and to settle your outstanding account accordingly. Places at St Cyprian's are greatly sought after, especially in light of the current international situation, and I think you may find that your godson's capricious approach to study, coupled with his reluctance to participate in team activities, may not be catered for with the same degree of tolerance at other educational establishments . . .*

National registration forms, dated 7th September:

*There is a legal requirement for you to furnish such details as are requested on the following pages. Without this information, we will be unable to issue the ration book that*

CROOKED HEART

*you will need for basic food purchases, or the national identity card, which it will be necessary for you to present whenever requested by authority. Please use black ink. Erroneous or deliberately misleading information will result in prosecution.*

Two letters from Uncle Geoffrey and Auntie Margery:

*25th September 1939*

*Dear Mattie,*

*Geoffrey called on Sunday, as per usual, but perhaps you were out. On the other hand, perhaps you were feeling 'under the weather' and had rather not receive visitors.*

*Geoffrey thought he saw Noel, but perhaps he was mistaken.*

*Should he call next Sunday instead?*

*Yours affectionately,*

*Geoffrey and Margery Overs*

*9th October 1939*

*Dear Mattie,*

*Just a little note. We tried to telephone you, but there must have been some fault on the line since you were unable to hear our voices.*

*Is all well with you and young Noel? Shall Geoffrey call on the usual Sunday this month? We imagine there may be some little jobs around your house needing attention, and it's always Geoffrey's pleasure to help out.*

*Yours affectionately,*

*Geoffrey and Margery Overs*

LISSA EVANS

Geoffrey and Margery always said 'we' for everything, as if fused together like Chang and Eng. He imagined their ears jointly pressed to the telephone. He had witnessed that call, he realized – Mattie listening silently for a few seconds before replacing the receiver.

His hands were black. He filled the scuttle and dragged it back to the kitchen and when the range was lit, he burned the papers one by one, keeping only the letter from the National Registration Office. He would write to the office, he decided, asking for another set of forms, and when those arrived he could fill them in himself.

He washed his hands, and made some porridge. Mattie was awake; he could hear her talking to herself. She'd been doing that, off and on, for days now – odd, chipped remarks, without obvious context, as if she were reading a newspaper article, and throwing out comments. 'Never asked permission,' he heard her say, from halfway down the stairs, 'just went full speed ahead. It's a bit thick, if you ask me.' He heard her slippers slapping down another three steps, and then pausing. 'I *told* you it damned well wasn't,' she said. The footsteps began again, but this time heading back up towards her bedroom.

Noel looked at the spoonful of porridge he was holding. It was wobbling, and he realized that his hand was shaking. He put the spoon down and knitted his fingers together. It must be awfully cold, he thought, to make him shiver like that.

He found a pair of mittens and a scarf in the boot-room, and then, because it seemed silly to dress so

CROOKED HEART

warmly and stay in, he went out. He had an urge to go somewhere quite far away, and he hopped on the 136, going down Pond Street, and stayed on it until it rounded the corner at the North Side of Regent's Park. As soon as he got off, he could hear the gibbons hooting.

It was at least six months since he'd last been to the zoo, and it was a shrunken, toothless version of its old self. The pandas and elephants had been moved outside London, the aquariums closed, the reptile house emptied of poisonous snakes. He asked a keeper what had happened to them, and the man – the sort who thought himself funny – took out a handkerchief, placed it over his own nose and mouth, and feigned death throes. 'Had to do it,' said the man. 'Once Hitler starts, it'll only take the one bomb and Camden High Street'll be crawling with rattlers.'

The remaining insects in the insect house were mostly ants and beetles. Noel stood in front of the glass box that had once held black widow spiders. 'My tutor at Somerville looked just like that,' Mattie had remarked, when they'd been here in early spring. 'Spindly little arms and legs, and a great round body. Devoured her husband directly after the wedding, apparently.'

He went to the café and ate a teacake, and then spent a quarter of an hour tailing a group of Canadian airmen, marvelling at how many times they swore and then calculating an average per minute (twenty-three).

'Hey, kid,' said one of them, eventually, 'fuck off or we'll throw you in with the fucking chimps. You've got the ears for it.'

LISSA EVANS

There was no bus coming. He started to walk back across Primrose Hill, and rapidly wished that he hadn't. At the zoo, the only children had been toddlers with nursemaids, but out here there were packs of boys, dangling from trees, playing football, jeering at the ladies digging allotments on the south slope. One group was engaged in a spitting competition, with a woman's bottom as the target. As Noel passed by, one of the spitters detached himself, and swung into step beside him.

'Hello,' said the boy. He had a scab on his lip; the greeting was not a friendly one. 'Where are you going?' asked the boy.

'Home,' said Noel.

'Where's that, then?'

'Relatively nearby,' said Noel. If he walked any faster, he would begin to limp. He kept his pace steady.

'Why aren't you evacuated?' asked the boy.

'Why aren't you?' asked Noel, bravely.

'Went. Came back,' said the boy, laconically. 'Stinks in the country. No flicks, no chippie and they shit in a hole in the ground. Give us a bob or I'll kill you.'

'No,' said Noel.

'Tanner.'

'No. I don't have any money.'

'Liar.' Almost casually, the boy extended a foot and tripped him up. 'Two bob, now, for lying,' he said.

Noel dug around in his pocket and found three sixpences. 'There,' he said, throwing them over his shoulder, and then trying to scramble up quickly. The



## CROOKED HEART

boy stamped a plimsoll on Noel's hand, and strolled over to pick up the money. He examined the coins carefully. 'Go on, then,' he said, glancing back, 'get off home to Mummy.'

There were still three halfpennies left in the other pocket – enough for the bus – but Noel somehow found himself in the Woolworth's at Camden Town, buying a bag of cinder toffee and a skein of liquorice laces. He ate a whole lace and two lumps of toffee at the same time, and felt his mouth fill up with sweet glue.

On the way home, he happened to pass along Mafeking Road where Uncle Geoffrey and Auntie Margery lived in the basement flat of number 23. He had only been there a couple of times. 'A rabbit hutch,' Mattie had commented, after one of the visits, 'and far too tidy. One should have *large, light* rooms with comfortable clutter. Remember that, Noel.' He peered down through the railings at the whitened step, and the china rabbit beside the front door.

They weren't really his aunt and uncle; Geoffrey was Mattie's nearest relative, a first cousin once removed, and no relation at all to Noel. 'A recent literary analogy,' Mattie had remarked, not all that long ago, 'compared one's family to an octopus – a *dear* octopus, from whose tentacles we never quite escape, but I'd say Geoffrey and Margery are more like a couple of barnacles, welded to the hull of the ancestral vessel. Whereas you, Noel, are my cabin boy, and shall some day replace me as captain.' He'd loved that image: Mattie and Noel, on a little wooden ship like the *Santa Maria*





LISSA EVANS

– a carved nutshell, intricate and rounded, scudding across the ocean with pennants fluttering. Though with such a small crew, you'd have to hope for fine weather.

He loitered by the railings until the sweets were finished, tipping his head back and eating the liquorice laces as if they were spaghetti. Then he crumpled the bag and threw it down into the area, so that it no longer looked quite so neat. It took him an hour to walk the rest of the way.

The house was frozen, the road outside filled with growling lorries. Mattie's bedroom door was closed, but when he pressed his ear against it, he thought he could hear snoring.

He went downstairs again and knelt to open the range, and the low sun poured in through the kitchen window. Suddenly every item was doused in orange light and it was as if he were seeing the room for the first time in weeks: the crusted dishes filling the sink and draining board, the hillocks of bric-a-brac on the table, chairs, dresser, sideboard and windowsill, the drifts of shoes and books, unwashed stockings, apple cores, hair grips, used matches and crumpled newspapers on a floor that was as sandy as Broadstairs beach. And through the open door, the slovenly tide flowing on into the drawing room, with a place for nothing and nothing in its place, a clutter no longer comfortable but choking.

'My idea,' said Mattie's voice, coming down the stairs. She was still in her striped dressing gown, but was wearing galoshes and holding a torch. 'And it was in the cupboard in the room there,' she said. 'They'd hidden



CROOKED HEART

it, of course. The bread is quite dreadful, they must be adding that particular dust, wood dust you know, I said to the boy, that was what happened in the Great War although I don't think he believed me. How was your day?'

'Oh,' said Noel, realizing belatedly that she'd lobbed him a question. 'I went to the zoo.'

'Splendid. Toast, I think.'

She cut a couple of slices from the loaf that had been delivered that afternoon, and then seemed to lose interest, leaving it unbuttered on the bread board. 'Can't see a bloody thing,' she said. 'O radiant dark, O darkly fostered ray.'

'I'd better do the blackouts,' said Noel.

When he came back downstairs, she'd gone. The front door was wide open, moving slightly in the wind.

He went outside and looked up and down the road. The light had dropped from the sky, leaving only a grey band along the western edge. A single lorry, the last of the day, was heading downhill towards Hampstead, its shaded lights smudging the ground as it bucked between the ruts. Noel waited till the sound had dwindled into the twilight, and then he called Mattie's name. There was no reply. Fear began to slide across his skin like a thin film of ice.

He walked along the road a hundred yards or so and then tripped on a bluish shadow, a ridge masquerading as a hole, and grazed his knee. He hobbled back to the house and spent fifteen minutes trying to find another torch, raking through drawers full of rubbish

LISSA EVANS

and dead moths, before snatching up the old garden lantern and a stub of candle. It was probably illegal, but he lit it anyway. By the time he left the house again, darkness had fallen.

Apart from the circle of candlelight, he could see nothing at all. London might as well have disappeared. He walked cautiously, swinging the lantern, half hoping that someone would notice and come rushing out to tell him off, but there was no noise apart from his own footsteps. Once he saw a fox, poised in the long grass; on the next swing of the light, it was gone.

Where the track met the tarmacadamed road down to Hampstead, he stopped. A motor car, barely visible, swished past. The lantern light began to flicker; it wouldn't be long before it went out altogether. He had no idea what to do. Should he ring the police? But Mattie hated the police, she would never forgive him. Should he knock on a neighbour's door? But then whoever it was would come round to the house, and see what it looked like and that would be the end of him and Mattie; he knew that people weren't supposed to live the way that they were living now; there would be letters written and decisions made.

He turned back. Perhaps he could just tidy downstairs, in the places that a visitor might see. Though in any case, even if he summoned help, how could anyone search for Mattie when you weren't allowed to use a torch unless it was covered with two layers of tissue paper and pointed only at your own feet? Perhaps a dog could find her; a bloodhound. Except he wasn't sure if any dogs were left



## CROOKED HEART

in London. He hadn't seen any for weeks; the Heath was full of rabbits now, the swathes of coarse grass cropped like a bowling green. And where had Mattie gone?

His body felt loose, unstrung, as if terror were cutting the cords that held it all together. He had never spent an evening without her, not since he was four. He could remember arriving at the house for the first time. 'Would you believe that I don't have a single toy?' she'd asked, and had given him a fossil of an ammonite to play with. It had looked like a large grey pebble, the size of a hot-cross bun, and then he had lifted the top half like a lid and seen the ridged and shining curl from ages past, a hundred million years ago.

The candle lasted until he reached the front gate, and then he walked to the door with arms outstretched, like a child playing blind man's buff. He had hoped that Mattie might be back, but she wasn't.

Her beaver-fur coat was hanging over the banister, and he put it on and sat halfway up the stairs, under the landing window. He could see the front door from there, and hear any noise from the back. After a while, he went and fetched the ammonite from his bedroom. At first it was like ice in his hands, but he tucked it under the fur and by the time he awoke it was quite warm.

His neck felt stiff, and pale yellow light was leaking around the shutters. He walked downstairs like an old man. Mattie wasn't home yet, and he opened the front door and went to look for her.



