
Opening Extract from...

Mrs Sinclair's Suitcase

Written by Louise Walters

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 77742 0
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 77743 7
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 77744 4

Typeset in Plantin by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

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8th February 1941

My dear Dorothea,

In wartime, people become desperate. We step outside ourselves. The truth is, I love you and I am sorry that only now do I own it. You love me. I will not forget the touch of your hand on my head and on my neck when you thought I slept. The touch of love, no longer imagined. Nobody will touch me like that again. This I know. This is my loss.

Forgive me, Dorothea, for I cannot forgive you. What you do, to this child, to this child's mother, it is wrong. It is misplaced, like me, forced out of my homeland, perhaps never to return. You too will never return, if you persist in this scheme. You will persist. Yet even now it can be undone. But I know you will not undo. Your soul will not return from this that you do. Please believe me. In welcoming the one into your arms, you must lose another. I cannot withstand. You know why.

I do not enjoy writing these words to you. Actually, I cry. Once this war is finished – and it must finish – we could have made a life together. To spend my life with you has become my only great dream and desire. After our first meeting, as I rode away on my bicycle, I knew you were as important to me as water. I knew you were for all time,

even as there is no time. I thought of marriage within minutes of meeting you. But it cannot be. You are an honourable woman, but this thing that you do is beyond honour. You do so much to be good, yet you go back on yourself, you invite dishonour. I cannot write clearly, but you will understand. My truly beautiful Dorothea, despite everything, our friendship must here end. I wish you all joy of this world.

Yours,
Jan Pietrykowski

(I found this letter in a 1910 edition of *The Infant's Progress: From the Valley of Destruction to Everlasting Glory*. I placed the book on Philip's desk for pricing, and it went into the antiquarian books cabinet, priced at a modest £15.)

I clean books. I dust their spines, their pages, sometimes one at a time; painstaking, throat-catching work. I find things hidden in books: dried flowers, locks of hair, tickets, labels, receipts, invoices, photographs, postcards, all manner of cards. I find letters, unpublished works by the ordinary, the anguished, the illiterate. Clumsily written or eloquent, they are love letters, everyday letters, secret letters and mundane letters talking about fruit and babies and tennis matches, from people signing themselves as Marjorie or Jean. My boss, Philip, long used to such finds, is blasé and whatever he finds, he places aside for me to look at. You can't keep everything, he reminds me. And, of course, he is right. But I can't bring myself to dispose of these snippets and snapshots of lives that once meant (or still do mean) so much.

I walked into the Old and New Bookshop as a customer eleven years ago, and returned the following day as its first

employee. Quietly impetuous, owner-manager Philip asked me to work with him. As he said, we were soon to enter a new millennium, so it was time to change; time to take stock, literally. He appreciated my way of loving books and my ability to get on with others. He claimed he found people 'difficult'.

'They're generally pretty rotten, aren't they?' he said, and I half agreed.

He also once declared, 'Books tell many stories besides those printed on the pages.'

Did I know that? I did. Books smell, they creak, they talk. You hold in your hand now a living, breathing, whispering thing, a book.

Philip told me, on the day I started work in his bookshop, 'Study books, smell them, hear them. You will be rewarded.'

I tidy shelves. I make sure they are not too tightly packed. I take stock each year, in May, with the blossom trees discarding their petals, the sun shining through the French windows in the large room at the back of the shop, where we keep the second-hand non-fiction and hardback fiction, the sun's vernal warmth thrown over my back like a huge comforting arm and the swallows swooping over the garden, shrieking and feasting on flies. I make coffee in the mornings, tea in the afternoons. I help interview new staff: eighteen-year-old gap year student Sophie, who is still with us, enjoying a gap of indeterminate length; and more recently Jenna, who became Philip's lover within two weeks of starting her job. Jenna was never exactly interviewed. Like me, she walked into the Old and New as a customer; like me, she was engaged in conversation, and offered a job.

There is nobody more passionate about books, the printed word, than my boss, Philip Old. He is driven by his love of

books, of the book for its own sake, its smell, feel, age, its provenance. His shop is large, with high ceilings, tip-tappy flagstone floors and a warren of rooms – six in total, plus storage on the first floor. All is spacious and light. We sell new books, old books, antiquarian books, children's books, shelf upon shelf upon shelf of books, lining the numerous walls of this large, luminous cathedral. The building is set back from the busy Market Square, with a neat, pretty garden, lavender and rosemary bordering the stone path that leads to the large oak door at the front of the shop. In the summer we have strings of bunting along the wrought-iron fence, kindly made for us by a customer, and a small hand-painted sign that reads:

Welcome to
The Old and New Bookshop
Open today from 9 until 5
You are warmly invited to browse

As a business, the Old and New cannot be making a profit. We have a band of loyal customers, of course – such establishments always do – but a small band. So there must be money somewhere, keeping this business afloat, kitting out Philip's flat on the second floor so tastefully. I have not enquired. Philip never talks about money, as he never talks about his private life.

I have had my share of romance, if I can call it that. At least, offers of romance. One young man, younger than me, part of the regular geeky Saturday afternoon crowd (and seemingly living in a world at least a decade behind everybody else – he always wears a black and purple shell suit) has proffered me his fax number on more than one occasion. Another, recently (red-faced, not entirely unattractive) told me I was the 'best-looking' woman he had seen 'in months'.

Patently untrue, and the genuinely beautiful Jenna nearby, pretending to tidy shelves, giggling. I threw her a look. She threw it back. And a year ago, a head teacher at a local primary school (our town has three), a regular customer with a habit of putting all and sundry on the school account. Hovering after I had served him, after I had handed him his stylish Old and New paper carrier bag, lingering. Clearing his throat, asking me out for dinner on Thursday night, if I could make it. If I was available. He had a charming smile, and thick black hair I suspected was dyed.

My father brought in some books this morning, old books belonging to my babunia; my grandmother. She has been in a care home for two years now, but it's taken us a long time to sort through her belongings. There aren't even that many things. Babunia, thank goodness, is not a great hoarder. But my father cannot work quickly these days. I have already been through her books, of course, keeping back a few for myself that I recall from my childhood. When she agreed to live in the home, she said I must keep whatever of hers I wanted. She had no use for reading now, she said, no use for sewing. It was an inexpressibly sad moment. Yet there was no option for any of us. Dad just could not take care of her any more. I offered to cut my hours at the Old and New, but neither of them would hear of it.

I saw my father wandering along the path and I waved, but he didn't spot me. I ran to the heavy front door and pulled it open for him.

He explained he had around twenty books. He had packed them into a battered old suitcase.

'This was hers too,' said Dad. 'Keep it if you like, Roberta.'

I would keep it. I love old suitcases. And already I could think of a use for it.

'How are you feeling today?' I asked, searching his face for clues.

He had been, for some time, habitually pale, a ghastly creamy-grey colour. But he never let on how he was feeling. So he shrugged, his catch-all gesture, meaning, 'Well . . . you know.' He had been in remission a few weeks ago. Now, he wasn't. Quite a sudden change this time, and frightening for both of us.

Philip came through from his office and shook my father's hand. They had met before – twice – and both had confided in me that they found the other to be a 'gentleman'. Philip insisted on paying my father for the books; my father wanted to give them to him. In the end, Dad accepted twenty quid, a compromise sum. He stayed for a cup of tea, sitting out in the back garden in the pale spring sunshine. Then he shuffled away, his bold, rangy walk vanquished. I tried not to notice.

I emptied the suitcase. There was a tatty old label on the inside that read 'Mrs D. Sinclair'. Idly, as I sorted and cleaned the books, I wondered who she was. Dad said this was Babunia's suitcase, but it must have belonged to this Mrs Sinclair first. My grandmother has always had a thrifty, make-do-and-mend mentality, happy to utilise the second-hand, the new-to-you. Dad says she learned the habit during and after the war, 'because everyone did'. It wasn't just a fashionable notion in those days.

I cleaned the dust from *The Infant's Progress: From the Valley of Destruction to Everlasting Glory* (a book I didn't recall ever seeing in my grandmother's house) and two neatly folded sheets of paper fluttered out. A letter! There was no envelope, always a pity. I unfolded the sheets. The letter, addressed to Dorothea, my grandmother, was written in anaemic blue ink, the writing small and neat; the paper was

an even paler blue, brittle and dry as a long-dead insect's wing, yellowing around the edges, with little holes creeping along the fold. Of course, I wondered if I should read it. But my curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't not.

I have since read this letter again and again, and I still can't make sense of it. At first I experienced the strange sensation of needing to sit down. So I did, on the squeaky footstool, and my hand trembled as I read slowly, trying to take in every word.

Dorothea Pietrykowski is my grandmother. Jan Pietrykowski was my grandfather, never known to me, never even known to my father. These are incontrovertible facts.

But this letter makes no sense.

Firstly, my grandparents were happily, if briefly, married, but in this letter he seems to declare that he cannot marry her. Secondly, it is dated 1941. Polish Squadron Leader Jan Pietrykowski, my grandfather, died defending London in the Blitz, in November 1940.