# Divided Kingdom

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Extract

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It was as if a curtain had fallen,
hiding everything I had ever known.

– Jean Rhys

# ONE

There were men in my room, and it was bright, too bright, and I was being lifted out of bed. I didn't struggle or cry out; I didn't make a sound. The uniforms they wore felt cold, as if they had just been taken from the fridge.

I was told to wait on the road outside our house. Rain drifted past the street lamp, rain so fine that I could hardly feel it. I watched as a soldier fastened a strip of cloth around my upper arm. My shadow bent where it fell across the kerbstone, like a piece of cardboard folded in two places.

They put me in the back of a lorry, along with people of every age, all of whom wore armbands, none of whom I recognised. No one spoke, or even moved. I remember no violence, only the silence and the constant, weightless rain.

From where I was standing, by the tailgate, I could see my parents. They hadn't had time to dress properly. My father wore pyjamas, a suit jacket and a pair of slippers, and his face had lines and creases on it, as though sleep had crushed him in its fist. My mother's feet were bare.

My mother's feet . . .

And her blonde hair flattened slightly on one side where it had rested against the pillow. She was calling my name in a high, strained voice, and reaching out to me, her fingers clutching at the air. Embarrassed, I turned away, pretending I didn't know her. I smiled apologetically at the people all around me.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

That's how my memory begins.
No, not my memory. My life.

When dawn came, I was standing on a railway platform. The sky had clouded over, a swirl of white and grey above the rooftops, and there were puddles everywhere. A goods train rumbled through the station without stopping, its trucks heaped with coils of barbed wire. I was handed tea in a plastic cup and a slice of bread that was thinly spread with margarine. Now it had got light, I could see that the cloth band round my upper arm was red. I didn't feel homesick, only cold and tired, and I seemed to understand that I shouldn't think too deeply, as someone who swims in a river might stay close to the bank for fear of treacherous currents.

That same day, after a journey of many hours, we arrived at a large, dilapidated house in the country. There were only eight of us left by then, all boys. Thorpe Hall crouched in a depression in the land, a kind of shallow, marshy bowl, and the property was surrounded by woods, the massed oaks and chestnuts flecked with silver birches, like a head of hair beginning to turn grey. A moat encircled the house on three sides, the surface of the water cloaked in slime, the banks fenced off by reeds. Ancient, stately fish glided through the stagnant depths, the gold of their scales spotted and stained, as if with ink. The lack of elevation and the narrow lead-paned windows gave the house a prying yet short-sighted look. I had the feeling it was aware of me. If I ever ran away, it would somehow know that I had gone.

By the end of my first week our numbers had swollen to more than seventy, the oldest boy being fourteen, the youngest five. In charge of us were two grown-ups, Mr Reek and Miss Groves, and they issued us with grey blazers, each of which had a scarlet peacock stitched on to the breast pocket. I counted eighteen bedrooms altogether, but conditions were cramped and primitive, and some boys, myself included, had to sleep on horsehair pallets in the upstairs corridors.

Winter had set in, and none of the radiators seemed to work. In certain rooms the chill stood so thick and solid that I

couldn't believe it wasn't visible; if I walked through a room like that, my hair would feel cold for minutes afterwards. I scratched my initials in the ice that formed on the inside of the windows, not knowing that my name would soon be taken from me. There was no laughter in the house during those first few days, no grief either, just a curious vacant calm – a sort of vacuum.

In the small hours vixens tore the air with their shrill cries.

One boy hung himself in an upstairs lavatory. His body was removed the same evening in an ambulance. I saw no blue lights flashing on the drive. I heard no siren. Nothing disturbed the darkness and silence that surrounded us. Two days later, a service of remembrance was held in the chapel. In his sermon the vicar described the boy's death as a tragic accident, though everybody knew the truth lay elsewhere. Another boy was found striking his head repeatedly against a wall. He, too, was removed from the house, and no one ever saw him again. These were the early casualties of the Rearrangement, as it was called, and they were seldom spoken about, and then only in hushed tones in some distant corner of the garden, or in bed at night once all the lights had been switched off.

We no longer had to wear the strips of red cloth on our arms, but I would sometimes feel a slight constriction, a tightness around the muscle, and I would find myself glancing down to make sure it wasn't still there.

Christmas came.

On Christmas Eve we watched a carol concert on TV. Mr Reek tried to encourage us to join in with the singing, but we had no hymn books and very few of us knew all the words. In the middle of a carol I saw my parents at the far end of the room. They were smartly dressed, my father in an overcoat, my mother in a knitted shawl and knee-length boots. They would be on their way to midnight mass, I thought, and I rose to go with them. By the time I reached the door, though, they had gone. I called for my mother and felt someone take my hand, but when I looked up it was just Miss Groves. I managed not to cry until I was upstairs, in my bed.

The next morning I stood by the tree with all the other boys. We got one present each. Mine was a pair of socks, powder-blue, with a pattern of brown puppies up the side. I remember thinking that there must have been some kind of mix-up. I remember, also, that there was nobody to thank.

It didn't snow.

Early in the new year an official from the government paid us a visit. At breakfast that day we were told that he was a highly distinguished man and that we should all be on our best behaviour. I watched from a window on the first-floor landing as the limousine slid down the drive on wide, fat tyres, its black roof gleaming in the winter sun. I would have given anything to have had a ride in it. Later, we assembled in the main hall. With his sparse, chaotic hair and his drab raincoat, the government official came as something of a disappointment to us – I suppose we had been expecting him to be glamorous, like his car – but then he began to speak.

'Children of the Red Quarter,' he said, and a thrill went through every one of us. We didn't know what the man meant exactly, but clearly he was referring to us. Children of the Red Quarter was what we were. What we had become.

In his speech he told us we should be proud of ourselves. 'You're to be admired,' he said, 'because you're rare. Although there are only a few of you, your significance cannot be overestimated. The future depends on the example you set to others. One might even say that the fate of the entire nation rests in your hands.'

Afterwards we ran down the corridors and out on to the drive, all holding imaginary steering-wheels and making engine sounds. We had, each one of us, become the chauffeur of that shiny night-black limousine. *Children of the Red Quarter*, we were shouting. *Children of the Red Quarter*. We still had no idea what it meant. We were excited without knowing why. It was the effect of flattery – instantaneous and powerful, but strangely hollow too.

That night we ate pork that had been roasted on a spit, and we drank juice made from crushed apples, and we were allowed to

go to bed an hour later than usual, on account of it being such an important occasion.

On the following Monday classes began in the old ballroom. Along one edge of the room four windows stretched from floor to ceiling. Through their watery, distorting glass I could see the formal garden with its lawn, its box hedges and its gravel paths. The other side of the ballroom had been panelled in wood and painted a delicate shade of green. Set into the panels, and echoing the windows in their dimensions, were four mirrors in which the light that flowed in from outside seemed to deepen and shimmer. At the far end of the room stood a low stage where string quartets or dance bands would once have played. Sometimes I would catch a glimpse of a trombone in the shadows, or the curve of a French horn, the brass perfectly smooth and glowing, like honey poured over the back of a spoon, and sometimes the air would rustle at my elbow, a flurry of movement that only lasted a second, as if a girl in an evening gown had just whirled by. I never felt the room was haunted. I simply thought it had seen happier days, livelier days, and that traces of that time remained, as the smell of toast or bacon will linger in a kitchen long after breakfast is over.

Desks had been arranged in rows on the parquet floor, and we were seated alphabetically. My name being Micklewright, I found myself between Maclean and Abdul Nazir. Nazir was always crying, or on the point of crying, the dark sweep of his eyelashes permanently clogged with tears. I hadn't cried at all except for once, on Christmas Eve, after the carols, but I'd had no sightings of my parents since that night. There was something in me, perhaps, that couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand to be reminded. I often had the feeling, looking at Nazir, that he had taken on the burden of my sadness, and that he was crying not just for himself but for me too. As for Maclean, he didn't seem remotely upset. If I caught his eye, he would flick paper pellets at me. He had long bony wrists, and both his ears stuck out like the handles on a sporting trophy. Our teacher was the stout but enthusiastic Miss Groves. Sitting beneath crystal chandeliers,

frowned down upon by several gilt-framed portraits of men in armour, we were to learn about the new political system that had come into being, and why the government official thought we were so special.

On our first morning Miss Groves taught us about our country's recent history. It had become a troubled place, she said, obsessed with acquisition and celebrity, a place defined by envy, misery and greed. Crime was rampant: the courts were swamped, the prisons overflowing. Divorce followed marriage as quickly and predictably as teenage pregnancies followed puberty. Homeless people slept in every doorway, ditch and underpass. Racism was more widespread and more firmly rooted than ever before. Violence lurked round every corner. It wasn't just a matter of grown-ups killing grown-ups. Children were killing children. With the police force woefully undermanned, people had started taking the law into their own hands. If you didn't like the way somebody drove, you smashed his headlights with a jack. If you had a suspected child molester living in your neighbourhood, you lynched him. If a burglar broke into your house, you shot him dead. For decades, if not for centuries, the country had employed a complicated web of manners and convention to draw a veil over its true nature, but now, finally, it had thrown off all pretence to be anything other than it was – northern, inward-looking, fundamentally barbaric.

It had been a time for extreme measures, Miss Groves went on, two smudges of pink colouring her cheeks, and the government had not flinched from its responsibility. The Prime Minister and the members of his cabinet had met in secret chambers, far from the eyes and ears of the electorate. Down there – for the chambers were underground, relics of a war that had been fought roughly half a century before – they talked, they argued, they even wept, and in the end they reached a decision: they were going to do something bold, something extraordinary . . . In our makeshift classroom, we were breathless with anticipation. Miss Groves told the story so well, with such a gripping command of atmosphere and detail, that we

could hardly wait to find out what happened next. At this point, however, she stepped back.

'See you here at nine o'clock tomorrow,' she said.

We were there, of course. We were even early. We were going to school, we were being taught history, of all things, but at the same time we were learning about ourselves, what had happened in the recent past and what would happen in the near future. Our lives had become books that we couldn't put down.

What the government had decided to do, Miss Groves told us on that second morning, was to reorganise the country's population – the entire population, from the royal family down. She paused. It was a lot to take in. We had probably heard the word 'rearrangement', she went on. Well, that was the name they had given their initiative. They divided the population into four distinct groups, not according to economic status or social position, not according to colour, race or creed, but according to *psychology*, according to *type*. How had they defined types of people? Miss Groves turned to the blackboard and wrote THE HUMOURS in block capitals. She asked whether any of us knew what the words meant. No one did.

For almost two millennia, she said, from Hippocrates onwards, medicine had been based on the idea that there were four bodily fluids or humours – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. I glanced at Maclean. We both wrinkled our noses. But Miss Groves had already faced the blackboard again, and she was drawing a large circle, which she proceeded to divide into four equal sections. She wrote BLACK BILE in one section, YELLOW BILE in another, and so on, until each section contained a humour. It was then that a boy called Cody interrupted her.

'What about piss, Miss Groves?'

Laughter skittered through the ballroom, a brittle, breathy sound, like leaves being blown across a floor. Leaves that were dead, though. Miss Groves swung round. Her face was stiff, and all the colour had drained from her lips and cheeks.

'Who was that?'

Cody put his hand up. 'It was me, Miss. I wanted to ask about urine. Isn't urine a bodily fluid?'

He had something of the fox about him, I'd always thought, his brown hair tinged with red, the cast of his features alert, sardonic, sly.

'Leave the room, Cody. I'll deal with you later.'

All eyes followed Cody as he stood up and walked to the door.

'Any other questions?' Miss Groves said.

I stared at the scarred lid of my desk, my heart beating hard, my throat dry. I felt Miss Groves's gaze pass over my head like a searchlight's penetrating beam.

'I want you to imagine,' she said carefully, her voice still drawn tight, 'that the circle is your body. Imagine your good health depends on the correct, the *judicious*, balance of all the humours. Once you've imagined that, then let the idea expand. Imagine the circle is the whole country – the body politic, as it's sometimes called.

'You see' – and she stepped towards us, enthusiasm rising in her once again – 'the theory of the humours is built on notions of harmony and equilibrium, and these were the very qualities that were lacking in the country prior to the Rearrangement. In the deep and distant past doctors used humoral theory to address all kinds of human ailments, everything from physical infirmity to moral imperfection. All of a sudden, though, it was the body politic that needed treatment.'

The wind lifted and hurled itself against the tall windows. Above our heads the chandeliers shuddered and shook like glass birds ruffling their feathers. I thought of Cody waiting in the draughty corridor outside and wondered whether he was beginning to wish that he had held his tongue.

There were four humours, Miss Groves explained, and each humour could be matched to a different personality or character. She drifted towards the blackboard again. Under YELLOW BILE she wrote CHOLERIC, under BLACK BILE she wrote MELANCHOLIC, under PHLEGM, PHLEGMATIC, and under BLOOD, SANGUINE. Difficult words, she said, turning

back to us, but not so difficult to understand. Choleric people were known for their aggressive qualities. They led lives packed with action and excess. Melancholic people, by contrast, were morbid and introspective. What interested them was the life of the mind. Phlegmatic people were swayed by feeling. Empathy came naturally to them, as did a certain spirituality, but they tended to be passive, a little sluggish. As for sanguine people, they were optimistic, good-humoured and well-meaning. They were often held up as an inspiration to others. Miss Groves's eyes swept over our faces. 'Do you see where this is going?' she said. 'No, not yet, perhaps. But you will – you will.' And she smiled knowingly.

That night, in the bathroom, Cody showed us the backs of his thighs. The skin was striped with livid weals where Miss Grove's cane had landed, but he had no regrets. Rather, he seemed to view the punishment as the price he had paid for some valuable information, which he was now in a position to pass on.

'When she beats you she sort of grunts,' he said, 'just like a sow.'

During the next few days Miss Groves gave us the rest of the story. Everyone in the country had been secretly examined, assessed and classified, all in strict accordance with the humours. As categories, they were only approximate at best, and there had been injustices, of course there had, but that could not be helped. At this point she had stepped forwards again, her eyes seemingly lit from the inside, like lamps. In times of crisis, she said, the good of the many always outweighed the misfortunes of a few, especially when the health of an entire nation was at stake.

Once the population had been split into four groups, the land was divided to accommodate them. What had been until then a united kingdom was broken down into four separate and autonomous republics. New borders were created. New infrastructures too. New loyalties.

'All this is going on,' Miss Groves said, 'even as we speak,' and

turning to the nearest window, her face took on a kind of radiance.

In her opinion, symbolism would play a crucial role during this transitional phase. People's lives, both public and private, had been disrupted. They had to be given something fresh, something clear and powerful, with which they could identify. It had been decided that the countries would be colour-coded. The territory assigned to those with a choleric personality would be known as the Yellow Quarter, choler being associated both with yellow bile and with fire. Since phlegm was allied to water, the home of the phlegmatics was to be the Blue Quarter. Although melancholia originated in black bile, the authorities rejected black as a defining colour. It had too many negative connotations. They drew on the earth instead, which was the melancholy element, and which was generally personified in ancient iconography as a woman in green garments; it was to the Green Quarter, therefore, that melancholic people would belong. As for sanguinity, it derived from blood. The region set aside for those of a sanguine disposition became the Red Quarter.

To strengthen the identity of the four new countries, each had been provided with its own flag. In one of her lighter, more creative moments, Miss Groves invited us to come up with our own versions, based on what we had already learned. A fair-haired boy called Jones won first prize. His design – a flag for the Red Quarter – made use of a magnified photograph of blood, which he'd found in a magazine. The pattern of red and white corpuscles looked industrious and poetic, and it was wonderfully clever too: all sanguine people would carry their national flag inside themselves, whether they liked it or not (so would everybody else, of course, but as Jones quietly pointed out, for them it would be something to aspire to, a goal, a dream).

After the prize-giving, Miss Groves produced examples of the real thing. The choleric flag had a yellow background on which there stood a salamander. According to Aristotle and several other early naturalists, the salamander was believed to live in fire. On the phlegmatics' flag a sea horse floated on a cobalt

ground, the sea horse suggestive of the diffident, the indeterminate, while the melancholic flag showed a rabbit crouching on a field of green, the rabbit being one of the animals used in iconological representations of the earth. The flag that would fly in sanguine territory was a peacock resplendent on a scarlet ground. Those of sanguine temperament were held to be ruled by the air, and Juno, its goddess, was often portrayed in a chariot drawn by peacocks. Though the use of animals appealed to me, especially the mythical salamander, I still thought Jones's effort outshone everything I'd seen, and I told him so, which made him blush and look away.

In Miss Groves's final lesson, she returned to her point of departure. A chill wind blew that morning, and the chandeliers shivered and chattered overhead. Untidy scraps of grey cloud flew past the windows. The desk to my immediate right stood empty. Poor Abdul Nazir had been removed from the house some days before.

'The reason why you are special,' she said, 'as I'm sure you will have realised by now, is because you have all been classified as sanguine.' She raised her voice a little, to combat the moaning of the wind. 'If you will bear with me, I would just like to read you a short passage from a work that was written more than four hundred years ago.' Producing a small thick book with a cover of worn brown leather, she cleared her throat and began:

> If there were a monarch or prince to be constituted over all temperatures, this sanguine complection should, no doubts, aspire to that hie preheminence of bearing rule; for this is the ornament of the body, the pride of humours, the paragon of complections, the prince of all temperatures. For blood is the oile of the lampe of our life.

Even when she had fallen silent, Miss Groves continued to stare at the page from which she'd read, then she slowly closed the book and let her eyes pass solemnly across our faces. 'You have been wonderful pupils,' she said, her voice trembling now, 'and I have nothing left to teach you. Go out into the world and do

your best. I wish you all every success.' With that, she turned and hurried from the room.

Maclean nudged me, and I looked round. The light shone through his big, translucent ears. 'A little too much phlegm this morning,' he said, 'don't you think?'

He had learned his lessons well.

Among other things, Miss Groves had taught us that the family had been in serious decline for years, decades even, and it was a measure of people's conservatism, their fear of change, that the idea had lasted as long as it had. How could people with little or nothing in common be expected to live together? How could they achieve stability, let alone happiness? Anyone with an ounce of common sense could see that it was a recipe for disaster. In short, the family could be held responsible for society's disintegration, and the politicians who masterminded the Rearrangement had felt compelled to acknowledge the fact. But how to act on it? They soon realised that the answer was already lying on the table in front of them. If they rearranged the population according to the humours, then they would automatically be dismantling one concept of family and establishing another in its place. The new family would be a group of people who shared a psychological affinity – people who got on, in other words. Blood ties would be set aside in favour of simple compatibility, and if that wasn't a propitious unit on which to base an efficient and harmonious society, Miss Groves had argued, then she would like to know what was.

As the weeks went by, I noticed that the number of boys being billeted at Thorpe Hall was gradually decreasing. By the end of February only thirty-six of us remained. Slowly but surely the authorities were finding us new families, new places to live. You never knew who was going to be taken next, though, or whether you would ever see each other again. In this uncertain climate, our friendships deepened and became invested with an air of desperation and romance. We started making rash promises, secret pacts. *We'll remain in contact, no matter what. We'll seek each other out. We'll never forget.* Some boys cut the palms of their hands

or the tips of their fingers and then mixed their blood together, swearing that they would be brothers for fifty years, a century – for all eternity. Others went further.

In early March Cody and Maclean got married. The wedding was held in a bathroom on the top floor after lights-out. Cody improvised a bridal veil out of a pair of net curtains which he had pilfered from a little-used passageway behind the kitchen. Maclean wore a crocus in the top buttonhole of his pyjama jacket. Their rings were identical – chunky, dull-silver, hexagonal in shape (Maclean had crept out of the house one evening and unscrewed two nuts from the back wheel of Mr Reek's car). I can still see Cody's eyes glittering behind his veil as he walked along the moonlit landing, the rest of us singing 'Here Comes the Bride' in a harsh whisper, and I can see Maclean too, waiting patiently beside the bath with his hands clasped in front of him and his chin almost touching his collarbone. After the ceremony the happy couple slept in the same bed, arms wrapped around each other, rings wedged firmly on to the middle fingers of their left hands. A few days later Mr Reek had a crash. I imagined one of his wheels bowling away along the road, merry, almost carefree, like a race-horse that has unseated its rider, while the car slewed sideways, the exposed hub and axle spitting sparks.

It was during this time that I became friends with Jones, the boy who had won first prize in the flag-drawing competition. He was one of those who felt threatened by the idea of being moved, of being placed once again among people he didn't know, and there came a point in our friendship when he would talk of nothing else.

'But what if I don't like them?' he would say. 'What if they're cruel to me?'

'You'll be all right,' I would tell him.

'I don't know. I can't sleep.'

'Stop worrying so much,' I would say. 'You'll be fine.'

He would shake his head and stare at the ground, his eyes watery and anxious.

One day I found him in a shabby, cheerless corridor towards

the rear of the house. He was standing on one leg, like a stork. Thinking he was playing a trick on me, I laughed and pushed him on the shoulder. He hopped sideways, but managed to steady himself by putting a hand against the wall, and once he had regained his balance he continued to stand on one leg, as before. He didn't speak at all. Behind him, at the far end of the passage, the door had been left half-open, revealing an upright section of the garden – sun falling across a gravel path, a canopy of leaves. I walked round and stood in front of him.

'Jones?' I said. 'What are you doing?'

The look in his eyes was so blank that I couldn't think of anything else to say. I had never seen such an absence of expression, such utter emptiness. My first impression was that he was staring at an object or a surface only inches from his face but there was nothing there, of course. Later, I thought it was more as if some vital component had gone missing, the part of him that made him who he was. The thin strip of illuminated gravel at the end of the corridor had the brightness of another world, a world that lay beyond this one – a world Jones might already have entered. I think I shivered as I stood in front of him that morning. He didn't seem to see me, though. He didn't even appear to be aware of me.

At first nobody noticed, but Jones carried on, day after day. He would stand on one leg for hours at a time, and always in that same gloomy passageway. Other boys jeered at him and called him names, but he never once reacted. If they pushed him over, he simply picked himself up again and went on standing as before. His expression never altered. After a while the boys lost interest and more or less ignored him. 'There's Pegleg,' they would say. Or, 'Hello, Stork.'

In the end, someone must have alerted the authorities, I suppose, because Jones was removed. I had been sent out to the vegetable patch that day to plant onions with Maclean and several others, and I didn't realise Jones had left until we sat down to supper in the evening. I assumed a home had been found for him, and I hoped his new parents would treat him well. I was sorry not to have been able to say goodbye.