ONE PUZZLING AFTERNOON

By Emily Critchley

ZAFFRE

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Prologue

I STAND ON THE EMPTY PLATFORM under the heat of the mid-morning sun. The station is on the edge of a small town and the surrounding fields are full of golden wheat waiting to be harvested. The huge sky stretches wide and cloudless, a clear, hard blue above the patchwork of green and yellow fields. From the station bridge, a few cows can be seen grazing, flicking away flies with their tails. A hand-printed sign advertises PICK YOUR OWN STRAWBERRIES. High above me, a starling spins his chatty song.

Very soon these familiar fields and lanes will be combed by police and volunteers. Bodies beating back the wheat, peering under the hedgerows, crawling across the land with their maps and torches, hoping to be the ones who can shed light on the local girl's disappearance, yet dreading what they may discover. Hundreds of statements will be taken, residents' questionnaires studied and analysed, and of course the missing girl will be seen everywhere: riding a bus in Manchester, buying a packet of cigarettes in Norwich, working in a shoe shop in Hampshire. Local people will dream of her and wonder if their dreams have meaning. Committees will be formed, money raised, fingers pointed, hopes dashed again and again.

Of course it isn't me they'll be looking for. It's Lucy.

Right now, there is little breeze, and I can feel beads of perspiration forming on my forehead. My knee throbs under the blood-soaked handkerchief. I adjust the brim of my straw hat and glance up at the station clock. The anxiety curls itself into a tight ball in my chest, almost causing me to forget my grazed hands, my bloody knee and scraped shin. 'I'll be back before you know it,' she'd said. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. She'll be here. She has to be.

The station is empty. The stationmaster is probably further along the track in the signal box.

He is not only stationmaster but porter, clerk, ticket inspector and signalman. The station is used far less frequently than it was when my father was a young man and only the wealthy could own a motor car. These days, there is no need for station staff; only a handful of trains pass through in a day and, unbeknownst to me now, in twelve years' time the station will close completely. The station house will be converted into a private residence, the signal box left derelict, the track either lifted or forgotten, the long grass and tangled weeds making it difficult to see where it was once laid. But this is all far off in the future, a future I am unable to envisage, a future I don't know will be forever changed by this day.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, willing Lucy to hurry. The platform shimmers in the heat. Using my hand as a visor I squint into the sun, looking at the long, narrow road that leads to the station. I expect to see her there, pedalling furiously, her hair tied back with her scarf, her skirt flapping around her knees. But there is nothing, just the empty road.

Come on.

My tweed skirt makes my bare legs itch and my feet feel hot inside my brown lace-ups, but I needed to bring them; they are the best things I own and better to wear them than to carry them. My small

brown suitcase is at my feet. I packed as much as I could, but I know it won't be enough. Never mind, we'll manage. As long as we're together. As long as we're far away from here.

The hands of the clock are edging towards five to eleven and I can feel a sickness rising in my throat. She has to be here. She has to come back.

An awful thought dawns on me: what if she's changed her mind? Decided she wants to stay? But she was here, I remind myself. She was here and now she isn't, and it's all my fault.

She said it wouldn't take long. She promised she'd be back.

I reach into my pocket, checking for our tickets, the smooth paper slipping through my fingers. Then I see it: a black speck on the horizon growing steadily larger. A cloud of white steam.

I can hear it now too, the train's panting approach, the gentle chug chug as the familiar scent of the sweet oily smoke fills my nostrils. I watch as the small hand of the station clock shifts over to eleven and the train whistles its arrival. My chest hitches and I make no attempt to wipe my eyes, pricking with tears.

Where is she?

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2018

I first see Lucy Theddle standing outside the post office on Tuesday afternoon. Looking exactly the same as she did in nineteen fifty-one.

I am on my way in when a young man accosts me, carrying a tray and wearing a paper hat.

'Free sweets,' he says, pushing the tray under my nose.

'Free sweets?'

'It's our open day,' he explains, gesturing to the small shop squashed between the post office and Sandy's Shoes. The shop used to be a key cutting place. Before that, it sold sports equipment and school uniforms. The sign over the door now reads: *RETRO SWEETS. ALL YOUR CHILDHOOD FAVOURITES*.

'No, thank you.'

'Oh, go on. One won't hurt.' He nudges the tray towards me.

I peer down and there they are: Parma Violets. I reach for them. I can't help myself. 'These used to be my favourites,' I murmur, but the man isn't listening. He has spotted another customer and dashed off. '*Free sweets!*'

I unwrap the tube and pop one of the tiny discs in my mouth. The taste is sweet and soapy. They remind me of spring flowers

and warm days, of cycling down to the sea with the sun on my face, of secret whispers and kept promises.

That's when I see Lucy. She's standing next to the postbox wearing white ankle socks and the school uniform we used to wear: a green pleated tunic over a blouse. Her hair is in two neat plaits; she's carrying her satchel and her violin case.

'Oh, hello, Lucy,' I say.

A woman in a blue coat is coming out of Sandy's Shoes. She gives me a sympathetic smile. It's a look I am familiar with, one I don't like. When I glance back at the postbox, Lucy has vanished. I blink then crunch the sweet down, swallowing hard. A chill runs through me and I shake my head, trying to push the image of her from my mind; she's nothing to do with me anymore.

I quickly shove the rest of the Parma Violets into the pocket of my mackintosh and enter the post office, shuffling forward past the stationery and up to the counter.

'Ah, good morning, Edie.'

'Hello, Sanjeev.' I am pleased to have remembered Sanjeev's name, pleased it had been there for me instead of that awful void that exists, more often now, where a familiar word should sit.

'And what can we do for you?' Sanjeev smiles whilst behind him his good-sized wife is busy pasting labels onto packages.

What was it I came in for?

'I'll have twelve stamps, please.'

Perhaps I came for stamps. Everyone can always use a few extra stamps.

'Keeping well, are we, Edie?'

Sanjeev speaks loudly, probably because of the glass partition. I can tell by the way he leans forward that he wants his voice to carry.

'Very well indeed,' I reply, trying to match his loudness.

'Autumn now,' he says.

'Leaves everywhere,' I offer.

He slides the stamps to me under the glass and I pay for them. I notice the collection box and the tray of red paper poppies with their green plastic stems. It must be that time of year again, the time for remembering. I slide a pound into the collection box then fix a poppy to my buttonhole.

'Take care now, Edie,' Sanjeev says cheerfully.

When I exit the post office, the boy with the sweet tray is offering a drumstick lolly to a man on a mobility scooter. I look around cautiously but can see no further sign of Lucy. Above me, the clouds are gathering; there is a gust of wind and I shiver, pulling at my coat.

As I pass the newsagents and the rack of papers outside, a headline catches my eye: *Local School to Close*. The words mean something to me, only I can't think what. I lean in, peering at the photograph of a grey, opposing building. Then I remember – it's Daniel's school. The secondary school where he works as the deputy headmaster. Daniel says the school isn't closing but *merging*. Another school is getting a big development and all the children from Daniel's school are joining that one. Daniel could work there, but he doesn't want to. I frown, unable to remember why.

At home, I pick a bill up from the doormat, edge my coat off and place my shoes on the rack Josie recently insisted I buy. When you reach my age, everything becomes a trip hazard.

I go straight through to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Ordinarily I'd wait for Josie, but the events of the morning, seeing Lucy, require a cup of tea before Josie's arrival. Whatever

happened to her? I feel I should remember but I can't. I roll her name around in my mind. *Lucy Theddle, Lucy Theddle*. It feels strange, forbidden, and I bite my lip trying to quell the unease that squirms in my stomach.

Josie finds me, fifteen minutes later, sitting in my chair in the living room sipping from the mug Daniel bought me last Christmas. It has a sketch of a cityscape and the words *Stockholm* written in a delicate script. A gift from his latest city break.

'Hello, Edie,' Josie bellows at me from the hallway. 'Have you been out?' She pokes her head round the living room door and peers in at me.

'The post office,' I say.

'What for?'

'Stamps.'

Josie frowns whilst shaking her coat off. She's holding a tiny collapsed umbrella and it gets caught in her sleeve. 'I could have done that when I go to the shops tomorrow.'

I attempt a shrug but find my shoulders don't obey. My joints, nowadays, often ignore my instructions.

'Not got the telly on?' she asks, looking at me suspiciously. Josie cannot understand how anybody would want to sit in a living room and not have the television on.

'No,' I say. 'I was thinking.'

'Thinking?' Josie repeats the word with some wonderment. 'Well, that would be nice, wouldn't it?'

Not waiting for my reply, she scoots off to the kitchen then returns wearing my apron. 'I'll just do this bit of washing-up, Edie, take the rubbish out for you. Then I'll make us a cuppa. Oh. I see you've already made one.'

'I'll have another.'

She nods, disappears. I can hear her rattling around, turning on the tap, the sound of the cupboard door opening and closing. She's probably looking for the marigolds.

Josie comes for two hours, four days a week. Expensive. But worth it. It was Daniel's idea, and I was most against it at first but I've got used to her now. I enjoy the way she bustles around, making sure she earns her nine pounds an hour – a perfectly reasonable rate, Daniel tells me. She isn't my carer, just to clarify. She helps out with the household chores. Daniel insisted on hiring her and I went along with it. Of course, I'd never let Josie go now I have her. She's a single mother, you see. She needs the extra income.

Josie was reluctant, at first, to sit down and have a cup of tea with me, during *working hours* as she calls them. She soon changed her mind when I persisted, although she often stands, leaning against the door frame, or else she perches on the sofa arm, as if she isn't really stopping, only pausing. People don't like to take breaks anymore, I've noticed. They have to keep busy, as if something terrible will happen to them if they stop.

I push myself up from the chair and move unsteadily into the hallway. My kitchen, these days, is very beige and very clean (Josie is fond of bleach).

She's at the sink with her back to me, her shoulders slightly rounded, her dark hair tied with a thin red band.

'I saw Lucy Theddle today.'

Josie jumps and turns around. 'Oh, Edie. I thought you were in the living room.' She recovers herself and continues on rinsing a fork under the tap. 'Who's Lucy Theddle then?'

'She disappeared in nineteen fifty-one.' As I say the words aloud I feel surprised that this is something I know, and by my certainty.

'Mm.' Josie puts a plate in the drying rack. 'Perhaps she moved away? Did you eat an egg last night?' She holds up my blue and white striped egg cup.

Did I eat an egg last night? Perhaps I did. My mother always used to overdo them, cook them until they were dry and rubbery.

I can see my mother now, sitting at the kitchen table, her rollers in, cigarette in hand, the toast still warm in the rack, looking at the front page of the *Ludthorpe Leader*. She's got the wireless on and Eddie Fisher sings 'Anytime You're Feeling Lonely'. It must be a Saturday because the BBC Light Programme doesn't usually start until I'm at school. I've got a boiled egg on my plate – a real one, which means the weather is warm. We mostly have powdered egg in winter, although my mother swaps tinned egg for nylons, not strictly legal but many people swap rations. *You wouldn't think we actually won the war*, my mother is fond of saying. The egg is probably supposed to be a treat, although it's overdone and I don't want it. My mother doesn't eat much as she worries about her figure. She blows her cigarette smoke out of the side of her mouth so it avoids me, glances down at the front page of the paper, at Lucy's picture: *I do hope they're doing all they can to find her*.

Of course, my mother knows all about Lucy. Lucy is in my year at school. Not only that, she's the mayor's daughter. Our town has talked of nothing else all week.

I'm looking at the paper, at the grainy photograph of Lucy standing in her back garden, rose bushes behind her. Her younger brother has been cut from the picture but I can see his small fingers curled around hers. They'd been dressed in their Sunday best, told to stand still for the photograph. Lucy is wearing a white dress with a lace collar.

'Edie, are you okay?'

Josie is staring at me. Eddie Fisher's voice fades.

'Yes. I'm fine.'

She peels off the marigolds and drapes them over the sink. 'Well, go and sit down. I'll bring some biscuits through, shall I?'

'We don't have any. I've run out.'

'Nonsense.' Josie opens the cupboard. She waves a packet of custard creams at me. 'I told you I bought these last Tuesday and put them in here for you.'

'Oh, *those* biscuits,' I say, pretending I hadn't forgotten about them. 'Yes, let's have *those* biscuits then.'

I pause next to my calendar. It's *National Geographic*. I'm in October – the Taj Mahal – although I'll be able to change it to November next week. Daniel is coming over on Friday; I've written *Daniel 5pm. Fish and Chips*.

I take a pen and write in today's square: *Saw Lucy Theddle outside Post Office*.

In the living room, I pick up the crossword, intending to give it another go. I'm not very adept at them but I like to try. Daniel tells me they are good for my brain, like oily fish and walnuts, neither of which I am fond of. I usually end up getting stuck on the crossword and asking someone else if they have any ideas. Sometimes I just can't think quickly

enough. It was much easier with Arthur. Arthur was always good at the crossword.

Josie finally appears with the mugs, the custard creams tucked under her arm. The tea is too hot but she takes quick, tiny sips. No doubt there is somewhere else she needs to be before she collects her small, scabby-kneed son from school. I always forget his name. It's something silly like 'Tree' or 'Sky'.

'So who's Lucy Theddle?'

Josie is talking to me but looking at the screen of her phone, perhaps thinking about something she needs to do. She's trying to be in two places at once. I know how she feels, although I never *try* to be in two places at once, it just happens. The problem is, when you've got so much past behind you, it creeps into the present.

I realise Josie is no longer looking at her phone. She's watching me, waiting for an answer. I put the crossword down on the coffee table.

'Lucy was in my year at school.'

'Well, you're bound to bump into people, Edie. You've lived here your whole life.' She takes a final gulp of tea, slips her coat on. 'Gosh, it's almost three. I've got to get off. I need to nip to the shop before I collect Ocean. I don't know where the afternoons go. I'll see you tomorrow, Edie, get you a few bits from the Co-op.'

'I'll make a list,' I say.

Josie looks doubtful. 'Well, all right then.'

After she's gone, I stand by the window, lift the net curtain and look out over the street. The sun is slowly moving around to the front of the house. Soon it will be spilling its light across the carpet where I stand now. The kitchen gets the sun in the

morning. My mother's kitchen got it in the morning, too. She'd stand at the sink, washing the dishes in a shaft of sunlight, dust particles drifting in the air. She scrubbed the dishes until they sparkled. She scrubbed them as if they could never be clean enough.

I drop the curtain. I can hear the clock ticking on my mantelpiece, the rustling of the browning leaves belonging to the horse chestnut across the road. You wouldn't know it had rained earlier; the sky is as blue as a button, the clouds as fluffy as freshly whipped egg whites. I decide to take a walk.

I need to speak to Lucy.